

EXPLOSIVE

Scenes from Israel's Gay Occupation

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The perverse relationship between Israelis and Palestinians is a depressing B movie that the entire world daily watches. Many actors, spectators, and producers take part in the *mise-en-scène*: soldiers, civilians, international observers, humanitarian organizations, to name a few. Despite the attraction to the action, not many realize that the Israeli occupation is all about the body: sweat, heavy breathing, desire.

— Yael Berda, “The Erotics of Occupation”

A minor checkpoint, somewhere in the West Bank, under a blazing sun. Israeli soldiers are on patrol. A group of Palestinian men and women approach by bus and disembark as the Israeli officers bark instructions: “Quickly, we don’t have all day! Everybody get in two lines.” The men present their identification cards and lift their shirts to display their bare bodies, an army procedure designed to detect suicide bombers. A pregnant woman in line is forced to unbutton her jacket (“You with the belly, show me what you have there!”). The cost of such procedures is severe: the pregnant woman goes into premature labor, and the baby is lost. An Israeli documentary film crew, disobeying army orders by shooting footage in a closed military area, bears strident witness.

With these images, the Israeli director Eytan Fox begins his latest feature film, *The Bubble (Ha-Buah)*. Only in the scene’s aftermath are its queer valences apparent. In Fox’s rendition, the Israeli checkpoint also functions as an erotic contact zone, the interface between Jewish Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians carrying a sexual charge. Here, at this checkpoint, the film’s Jewish protagonist meets his future Palestinian lover, their eyes meeting briefly at the moment when

shirts are raised in an effort to sort civilian from terrorist. Queer desire and sociability can bridge the divide between Israelis and Palestinians, *The Bubble* seems to suggest, in ways that traditional political processes cannot.

Fox has been celebrated both in Israel and abroad for his attention to gay male life in contemporary Israel. Some activists have suggested that his films and television productions have not only represented gay Israeli communities to the Israeli public but also advanced both gay visibility and civil rights in Israel.¹ Many of Fox's previous works have meditated on the relationship between queer practices and nationalist institutions in Israel, a particularly bold initiative within a nation-state that has long articulated a linkage between nationalism and heterosexuality, one rooted both in the early Zionist ideology of the "new Jew" and in Israel's demographic war with its Arab neighbors.² Others have argued, however, that the popularity of Fox's work stems precisely from its commitment to Israeli state projects through the insertion of Israeli gay subjects into its primary institution—chiefly, the Israeli army.³ In this reading, Fox is aligned with the assimilationist politics of a mainstream gay movement that is largely composed of and caters to Ashkenazi male constituents, a movement that has long heralded its desire to move "out of the closet and into the state."⁴

This essay examines both *The Bubble* and another work of Fox's from the last decade—*Florentin*, a television serial—with attention to the very different ways they negotiate the interplay between queerness, the Israeli state, and the Israeli military occupation. The similarities between these works are strong: both are romantic comedies that chronicle cosmopolitan gay male life in twenty-something Tel Aviv. In large measure, one can read these works as iterations of the same socionational drama. Yet, produced nearly a decade apart, these works diverge considerably in their engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupied Palestinian population. *Florentin* pays little attention to this political terrain, save through its proxy figure of the Israeli citizen-soldier, depicting a Tel Aviv landscape from which most Palestinians and signs of occupation have been expunged. *The Bubble*, by contrast, takes this terrain as its chief concern, albeit by proxy, by placing a Palestinian man from the occupied West Bank at its romantic core. This romantic formulation was by no means new, given Israeli cinema's historic fascination with erotic connections between Israelis and Palestinians, a fascination that some scholars have traced to the early decades of Zionist cinema.⁵ While early Israeli cinema staged these relations in heterosexual terms, the first queer figurations can be traced to the early 1980s—a decade that, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the Israeli cultures of protest that it spawned, also marked the beginnings of Israeli cinema's sustained cinematic attention to the

Arab-Israeli conflict.⁶ Many of these queer-themed films adhered to a relatively standard orientalist template, whereby the allure of the Palestinian-Arab rested in a primitive or seemingly organic eroticism that displaced Arab history, politics, or geographic specificity.⁷ *The Bubble* stands in an ambivalent relationship to this cinematic tradition, at once echoing and rejecting its orientalist tenets.

Reading Fox's works symptomatically, I propose that *Florentin* and *The Bubble* can be understood as indexes of the changing Israeli political landscape of the last two decades—both the vacillating landscape of gay rights and visibility within the nation-state and the changing landscape of the Israeli occupation and Palestinian struggle against it.⁸ In keeping with the tradition of symptomatic reading, this analysis pays close attention to storylines and populations that Fox has excluded from these works, to the absences and silences that punctuate these productions.⁹ I contend that Fox's representations of gay Israeli life are intimately enmeshed with the fabric of Israel's military occupation, even at moments when this political context is disavowed.¹⁰

Political Intersections

I begin with a detour through Israeli politics of the 1990s, the decade in which the majority of Fox's oeuvre was produced, with a focus on two political spheres through which his work has been articulated: the gay rights struggle and the Israeli military occupation. In the 1990s most Israelis presumed these spheres to be discrete, to operate at a distance from one another with few points of contact. I consider the various ways in which they collide in Fox's work.

As many scholars and activists have suggested, the 1990s was a period of substantial advancement in gay rights that some have celebrated as Israel's "gay decade."¹¹ Such advancements included the 1992 parliamentary amendment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act to protect gays and lesbians from workplace discrimination; a 1994 Israeli Supreme Court ruling in favor of an airline steward who sued to obtain equal employment benefits for his same-sex partner; and a 1997 Supreme Court ruling that the Israeli Ministry of Education broadcast a televised program on gay Israeli youth, previously withheld on grounds of inappropriate content.¹² Only one decade after the 1988 decriminalization of sodomy, the civil rights of gays and lesbians were being acknowledged in unprecedented ways. All this, gay activists hailed as a "legal revolution" that owed its outcome to Israel's increasingly active and visible gay movement.

The decade also witnessed substantive changes in military policy regarding the status of "out soldiers." The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) never formally

barred gay soldiers from serving in its ranks because of its perpetual need for personnel. Yet in practice, the discovery or allegation of homosexuality typically resulted in dismissal of the offending party.¹³ This changed in 1983 when the IDF issued its first official policy statement on homosexuals; it stipulated that although out soldiers would not be discharged from service, such persons would henceforth be banned from the upper ranks of the military, and all “suspected homosexuals” would be subject to a mental health evaluation.¹⁴ This policy was revisited in 1993 when the Israeli parliament (Knesset) held its first hearings on the subject of gay service personnel. At its center was the confessional testimony of Uzi Even, a prominent professor at Tel Aviv University, who spoke in highly personal terms of having been stripped of his officer’s rank in the 1980s because of his sexual orientation. These parliamentary hearings, and their conversion into a public media spectacle, catalyzed a change in IDF policy toward recognition of the rights of homosexuals to serve and advance professionally within army channels. New procedures for evaluating “suspected homosexuals” were also put into place, whereby their viability as prospective soldiers was to be determined by the military’s security division rather than by its mental health authority, a shift away from medicalization of the perceived homosexual threat. IDF policy would be challenged again in 1994 when Adir Steiner, the former partner of a prominent IDF colonel, filed suit against the government and IDF for receipt of the monetary benefits to which family members of deceased army personnel are legally entitled.¹⁵ After a series of negotiations that involved several lawsuits and a legal appeal, Steiner was recognized as the legal beneficiary of his deceased partner and was granted both the monetary and the symbolic rights befitting this legal status.¹⁶ Both the Even and Steiner incidents illustrate something important about the struggles for gay rights of this period. Both were demanding greater inclusion within and recognition by the army, understanding that full membership in the nation-state in both material and symbolic terms depended on it.¹⁷

A very different set of changes were occurring concurrently within Israeli policy vis-à-vis the military occupation. In 1993, the same year that the Knesset held its first hearings on the subject of out gay soldiers, Israel and the Palestinians signed the Oslo Accords—an internationally recognized rapprochement that ostensibly set a timetable for a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For Israel, Oslo resulted in massive growth in the national economy and a period of political optimism and relative security within Israel proper.¹⁸ Yet for Palestinians in the occupied territories, Oslo generated progressively more poverty, unemployment, and decreased mobility thanks to a new network of militarized checkpoints, an escalation in the policy of military closure, and decreasing

numbers of work visas for Palestinian laborers working inside Israel—laborers whose presence in Israeli territory was now deemed both a security threat and a political liability.¹⁹ Prior to 1993 the Palestinian economy had depended on the export of blue-collar laborers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip into Israel.²⁰ Within Israel, this economic relationship had a powerful social corollary in the ubiquity of Palestinians from the territories in Israeli spaces, working on construction sites, in janitorial crews, in restaurant kitchens. After 1993 this workforce was incrementally replaced by the legal and illegal importation of so-called foreign workers.²¹ What resulted was a radical reconfiguration not only in the demographics of the Israeli blue-collar workforce but also in the human geography of many Israeli cities. In Tel Aviv, a mere thirty-five miles from the northern Gaza Strip, these shifts produced an urban landscape from which Palestinians, once a nearly ubiquitous urban presence, were increasingly absent.

How might one read these two political histories in concert—histories with seemingly few points of intersection? They represent a set of opposing social processes: during the 1990s Israel's gay communities were being recognized in unprecedented ways in Israeli legal spheres, while changing Israeli policies vis-à-vis the occupied territories were creating new forms of unrecognition for its Palestinian population; gay communities were enjoying new forms of social mobility within the nation-state while the literal mobility of Palestinians from the occupied territories was being increasingly curtailed.²² These opposing social processes took somewhat exaggerated form in Fox's 1990s work: gay men were ubiquitous, while both Palestinians and most traces of the military occupation were missing.

Imaginary Cities

Florentin takes its name from a Jewish neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv. Founded in 1929 by Zionist developers on land purchased from Palestinian Arabs, the neighborhood was originally home to European Jews who made their living as craftsmen.²³ Demographics shifted as Tel Aviv expanded in the decades after state formation in 1948; property values declined and working-class North African and Middle Eastern Jews moved in. In the 1990s, after a gentrification campaign sponsored by the municipality, the neighborhood was rediscovered by twenty-something artists, yuppies, and hipsters attracted by Florentin's relatively inexpensive lofts and prized Bauhaus architecture.²⁴ During the decade this bohemian population shared Florentin's residential blocks with poor and working-class Mizrahi Jews, foreign workers from Africa and Eastern Europe, and occasional Palestinian Israeli families. By the decade's end, discotheques and cafés were

competing for space with carpentry workshops and small factories. The new residents attempting to transform this light-industrial district into an artist's colony complained of ongoing municipal neglect—of broken streets and sidewalks, irregular garbage collection, and an insufficient police presence.²⁵ At the turn of the century, this neighborhood represented the millennial Israeli metropolis in microcosm: a diverse set of communities with discrepant histories in the nation-state and varying access to its material and symbolic resources.

Fox's *Florentin* first aired on Israeli television in 1997, attracting large Israeli audiences and rave reviews.²⁶ The show documented the exploits of attractive twenty-somethings living in bohemian Tel Aviv within a cosmopolitan landscape in which gay culture was out and ubiquitous—the primary locus of sociality, the central domain of politics. With its frequent use of documentary footage, the series was also imagined as a commentary on the contemporary Israeli scene, a portrait of everyday Israeli life as it intersected with the central political events of this decade (e.g., the 1995 assassination of the Israeli prime minister, the 1995–96 bus bombings, and the 1996 national election).²⁷ At the time of *Florentin*'s airing, Fox had already achieved prominence as an Israeli director of gay-themed work. *Time Off* (1990), his first feature film, had been among the earliest in Israel to explore gay life in the Israeli army. Fox built on this theme in *Gotta Have Heart* (1997), a campy portrait of rural gay life in Israel in which boys fall in love and join the army, and again with *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), a romantic tragedy about gay army life on the Lebanese border—a film that, unlike Fox's earlier ones, reached large Israeli and international audiences. What united these works, despite considerable divergences in genre, was their exploration of the interplay between foundational Zionist practices and their eager gay practitioners, between Israeli state institutions, chiefly the army, and gay subjects seeking enfranchisement within them.²⁸ In Fox's works, not only were gay subjects given license to explore their gayness in the army, but such explorations led to their greater embrace of the citizen-soldier paradigm. In keeping with the demographics and political agenda of the mainstream gay rights movement, lesbians were all but missing from these productions—an elision that can be read as yet another point of collusion with the state's (masculinist) platform.

This interplay between gayness and the state was in the series's most celebrated "coming out" scene (episode 6) featuring Tomer, an aspiring young filmmaker just returned to Israel from his postarmy trip to India.²⁹ The episode dramatizes his awkward confession to his family in the living room of their comfortable Jerusalem home. The timing is crucial. It occurs on the day after the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin (November 5, 1995) and is interspersed

with documentary footage from the moment in question, including images of the spontaneous candlelight vigils that swept the country, the neighborhood monuments, and the weeping Israeli youth.³⁰ Tomer comes out as his family gathers in mourning around the television set, joining the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who watched the live broadcast of Rabin's funeral. "I'm gay (*ani homo*)," he says, after several stumbling attempts, employing a term borrowed from a phobic English lexicon (*homo*) that has been retooled for affirmative gay uses in Hebrew. His father responds with anger and disbelief at both the substance and the timing of this announcement: "This is what you have to say? In the middle of the funeral?" The boldness of Fox's coupling of personal disclosure and state mourning cannot be overstated—particularly given that this episode aired in Israel two years, nearly to the day, after the assassination, at a time when the sense of national tragedy remained strong. Yet the scene is also an occasion to reiterate prevailing national ideologies: in keeping with mainstream Israeli memorial discourse, Fox depicts Israel mourning as a united front, save the rupture between the Jewish secular Left and Jewish religious Right, unified in patriotic sorrow across lines of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality—a fiction of national unity made possible, in part, by the elision of Palestinians with Israeli citizenship from both this scene and *Florentin* as a whole.

For those versed in the "gay legal revolution" of the 1990s, this scene resonated with concurrent courtroom battles over the status of gays in the military, particularly the battle mounted by Steiner in his appeal for mourner's benefits. While Steiner sought monetary compensation, the central issues were chiefly symbolic in nature, including the right to participate in state-sponsored grievance ceremonies, to inscribe an entry in the IDF memorial album, to receive an official letter of condolence from the state. Steiner's suit, in other words, was a struggle to conjoin state-sanctioned mourning practices with the gay male experience such that they could be enunciated in tandem. *Florentin* dramatizes the same struggle in even stronger terms. In Tomer's case, the state's official rituals of memorial are positioned as the grounds for queer self-narration.

As with the Steiner legal victory, the politics of this episode are variable. On the one hand, the coupling of queer practice with state commemoration boldly challenges a history of gay invisibility within the nation-state and, in so doing, gives queer enunciation to a foundational moment in Israeli history. On the other hand, the storyline folds queer Israeli identity back onto that of the Israeli citizen-soldier—suggesting that the nation-state and the rituals that sustain it are virtually required for the Israeli queer subject to emerge as such.

Absences and Inversions

At times, the intersections of queerness and state in *Florentin* adhered even more closely to advances in the so-called gay revolution of this period. Consider episode 8: Maor Noyman, *Florentin*'s straight sex symbol, has been called to perform his annual army reserve duty. The timing is terrible. He has just opened a café to take his mind off a painful breakup and fears that the six-week leave would severely damage his business. Maor is persuaded by friends to “play gay” to increase the likelihood of an army exemption and recruits his gay roommate as a coach in this performance.³¹ Yet when he stands before the army board to explain his request for exemption, his performance enhanced by a brightly colored backpack and tight T-shirt, Maor's dramatization falters:

Army Board Member: Sergeant Noyman, what's the problem?

Maor: [with limp wrist and feminized voice]: I . . . I . . .

Army Board Member: We haven't got all day

Maor: I . . . [here, gay performance is abandoned]. I can't do it. My girlfriend left me . . .

As his performance collapses, the army boardroom becomes a confessional in which Maor narrates the pain of his breakup, speaking in highly personal terms about the sorrow of lost love.

In the context of a drama with a robust gay theme, this scene offered viewers a comic inversion of the classic “passing” paradigm. Maor's schooling in gay affect echoed the experiences of young gay men and women in the Israeli army who had long performed heterosexuality to prevent social ostracism within army ranks and possible dismissal on the grounds of mental incompetence. When considered alongside episode 6, this scene suggests the extent to which acts of homosexual disclosure had become legible rites of passage within late-1990s Israel. Gay men of this era were coming out in courtrooms and on the floor of parliament (e.g., Uzi Even), and their testimonials were being recorded by the press and widely consumed by the public. This scene both inverts the gay legal revolution even as it borrows from its terms by positioning an army courtroom as a site of sexual confession. Unlike the confessions of Even and others, Maor's lacked a triumphant quality. Rather, his confession before the board culminated in the emasculation of the hypermasculine subject who reveals his heterosexual melancholy in plain

terms—a confession that simultaneously undercuts the queer performance even as, through emasculation, it delivers on its promise.

Other scenes of passing and confession shadow this one. Perhaps first and foremost are those of Israelis seeking exemption from the army on the grounds of political refusal to participate in the military occupation. Given that the IDF makes no allowance for conscientious objection, these efforts have relied on various forms of performance by the objector in question—primarily the performance of mental illness (a label that, while it might result in exemption, also disqualified the recipient from subsequent employment in many Israeli sectors).³² Yet these histories of passing are not referenced by *Florentin*—at least, not explicitly. Rather, the triangle of army boardroom, gay performance, and heterosexual sorrow entirely occludes mention of the Israeli occupation and its attendant violence. The only violence and pain thematized in this scene is that of lost love—a violence enacted on but not by the reserve soldier. The silences that haunt this scene also haunt the series as a whole. For despite its investment in social realism, signaled by frequent recourse to documentary footage, most traces of the military occupation have been expunged from *Florentin*, as have most traces of Palestinian life itself. Nor does the serial register the neighborhood's proximity to both Jaffa, a drive of several minutes by car, and the Gaza Strip, just over thirty miles south. These absences compete for prominence with others; Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, lesbians, and foreign workers are also missing from the urban landscape. As this suggests, Fox's geography of gay cosmopolitanism is made possible by its multiple exclusions.

To read *Florentin* symptomatically is to take seriously the import of these missing scenes, geographies, and populations and to consider the concurrent political conditions to which these absences might be attributed. In part, these exclusions might be understood as responses to both the political promises and subsequent failures of the Oslo process—a process whose initial popularity among Israeli Jewish populations was dependent on its ability to prevent Palestinian movement from the occupied territories into Israel, thereby securing the nation-state from terror, or so the state assured. Yet despite state efforts, this promise proved largely illusory. Palestinians from the West Bank continued to cross illegally into Israel on back roads, some seeking access to East Jerusalem hospitals or schools, or, amid growing unemployment in the occupied territories, endeavoring to find informal work inside Israel, while others stayed illicitly within Israel beyond the terms of their visas.³³ In this context, *Florentin*'s fantastical portrait of gay Tel Aviv, a city from which Palestinians had been removed, might be under-

stood as a labor of wish fulfillment. The serial did the work that the flawed Oslo process, unable to control porous checkpoints and back roads, could only partly achieve: it categorically removed Palestinians from Israeli space.

Explosions

For audiences familiar with Fox's work, it comes as little surprise that *The Bubble* (2006) would place a gay Israeli citizen-soldier at its romantic center or that it would be staged in the heart of bohemian Tel Aviv, with the famed Shenkin Street at its center, focusing on its attractive twenty-something youth culture. Yet the film diverges in interesting ways from prior narrative templates in Fox's gay-themed work by positioning a Palestinian man from the territories as the soldier's love interest.³⁴ *The Bubble* chronicles the unlikely romance between Noam of Tel Aviv and Ashraf of Nablus, who meet at a West Bank checkpoint where Noam is on routine patrol—their union made possible by the very territorial impediment that the Israeli state has put in place to regulate Palestinians and to keep them at a distance from the Jewish Israeli public. With Ashraf as initiator, they pursue a relationship in Tel Aviv, conducted in Hebrew. Much of the film explores Ashraf's tenuous place in the bohemian city: his encounters with Noam's phobic Jewish roommates, for whom the notion of a Palestinian lover-cum-roommate is initially implausible; his labored efforts to pass as Jewish to keep a waiter's job and prevent public suspicion; his incredulous consumption of Tel Aviv's out gay scene; his gentle schooling of Noam in the everyday violence of the occupation; his silent spectatorship of Tel Aviv's naive left-wing activist community, mercilessly spoofed by Fox, as it struggles to identify a single Palestinian with whom it might collaborate.³⁵ In keeping with the Romeo and Juliet template with which Fox was working, Ashraf and Noam's romance is doomed to tragic failure. When Ashraf's sister is killed by the stray bullet of a reckless Israeli soldier, Ashraf seeks violent retribution. In the film's dramatic conclusion, he and Noam are the lone victims of the bomb that he has imported into Tel Aviv's cosmopolitan center on his body.

The Bubble's portrait of gay life in Tel Aviv differs considerably from those in Fox's earlier work in ways that accord with advances in the gay rights struggle in Israel. By 2006 the normalization efforts of the 1990s had made considerable gains, reflected not only in further gay integration within the IDF but also in growing Israeli acceptance of gay teens and families.³⁶ *The Bubble* is a product of these gains, evidenced perhaps most clearly by its understated portrait of the gay soldier, a portrait on which there is no extended cinematic mediation and little by way of explanation (this film lacks a coming-out scene, for example, either in

word or in deed). In Fox's previous work, the character of the gay soldier was itself a radical intervention within the Israeli sociopolitical landscape. By 2006 this figure had become self-evident.

But it is *The Bubble's* Palestinian thematic and its proxy attention to the occupied Palestinian territories through the character of Ashraf that represent the most substantial shift in Fox's work. For many Israeli audiences, the figure of the gay Palestinian from the territories was already legible and indeed permissible within the terms of a popular Israeli discourse about the persecution of homosexuals within Palestinian society and their efforts to seek refuge within the tolerant context that Israel provides—a salvation discourse advanced by both state agencies and gay activist organizations alike. Within most variants of this narrative, little mention is made of the Israeli military occupation, a context obscured by the story of Israel-as-refuge.³⁷ While *The Bubble* can be read as an effort to advance this narrative, particularly in a conclusion that reiterates its central tenets, the film also highlights a central blind spot within many state-sponsored variants: namely, the forms of socially taboo mixing between Israelis and Palestinians that can result from the refuge scenario.³⁸ In Fox's rendering, mixing generates both humor and considerable erotic charge, but little in the way of politics. Consider, for example, the morning after Noam and Ashraf's first sexual encounter on the roof of Noam's Tel Aviv apartment—a liminal space, neither wholly public nor private, neither wholly interior nor exterior, in which this impossible romance is initially consigned:

Noam: We were explosive (*pitsuz*).

Ashraf: Explosive?

Noam: You don't know that word?

Ashraf: I know it. When you explode something, like a bomb.

Noam: It can mean "cool," too. "Explosive," "explosion," "explode." Good sex is "explosive."

Here, in a coupling of unlikely storylines, the legacy of Palestinian political violence is folded into conventionally laconic postsex dialogue. In this scene as in others, the parameters of the romantic comedy make little room for a persuasive portrait of either Israeli encounters with the military occupation or Palestinian life in its shadow, the opening checkpoint sequence notwithstanding. *The Bubble's* failure to elaborate on the coordinates of Ashraf's life—political, geographic, and

familial—implicates the film within an orientalist tradition that pays little attention to the specificity of Arab experience and identity. In the queer version of this orientalist template, Arab homosexuality is often represented as another instance of a pervasive “nature” that requires neither explanation nor specificity.³⁹ Fox attempts to address these narrative gaps in the film’s second half, but does so in scenes so heavily saturated with the local details of Ashraf’s life in the occupied West Bank that they resonate as melodrama rather than as a corrective to this orientalist tendency.

If one understands *The Bubble* as something of a reiteration of *Florentin* in terms of the queer social landscape at its core, then Fox’s shift to a Palestinian thematic raises some interesting questions. Why, after a history of absence in Fox’s prior works, is a Palestinian character, a romantic protagonist no less, introduced here? And why the (ostensible) inclusion of the occupied Palestinian territories within the film’s cinematic landscape—this after a body of works that actively skirted this geography?⁴⁰ To consider the film as something of a social biography of the Israeli present, and not merely a biography of its producer as did many reviewers, is to ask the question this way: what are the political conditions that enable Palestinian persons and spaces, no less scenes from the military occupation, to appear in this film after a history of cinematic invisibility in Fox’s work?⁴¹

I propose that this shift was partly an index of the profound political changes that occurred during the decade that intervened between *Florentin* and *The Bubble*—changes that occurred both within the nation-state and in the terms of Israel’s relationship to its occupied territories. In 2000, amid ever-worsening economic conditions in the occupied territories and following the collapse of peace negotiations at Camp David, the second Palestinian uprising broke out—an uprising that, as it grew more militarized in nature, produced a wave of Palestinian attacks on civilian targets within Israel’s borders.⁴² Although Israelis had witnessed such bombings before, these were more frequent and struck new kinds of targets, including middle-class venues for leisure and consumption in the heart of Israeli cities (cafés, a pizzeria, a hotel, a shopping mall). For many residents of Tel Aviv, these bombings dramatically altered the geography of the conflict by introducing violence into spaces previously understood as middle-class sanctuaries at a considerable remove from the military occupation.⁴³ For these residents, who were now negotiating daily life with new degrees of anxiety and trepidation, the city’s proximity to the Gaza Strip was perhaps never more palpably in evidence. It was in the context of this violence, and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Oslo process at Camp David, that the Jewish Israeli public experienced a marked

shift to the political right—a shift that both enabled the election of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2000 and gave the ensuing government the authority to crack down on Palestinian insurgency with virtually unprecedented force.

In the spring of 2002, in the midst of this shifting political landscape, Israel began constructing its so-called security barrier, a territorial divide supported by Jewish Israeli publics for its promise to protect physically the nation-state from Palestinian terror.⁴⁴ A secondary agenda was no less attractive: the fortification of Israel as a Jewish space, physically divided from its Palestinian enemy—an agenda articulated succinctly by Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's 1999 campaign slogan, "Us here, them there."⁴⁵ Indeed, the barrier was merely one component within a broader matrix of technologies of military occupation—including checkpoints, military closures, and a highly restrictive permit regime—by which the state was now endeavoring to curtail Palestinian movement across the occupied territories and into Israeli territory.⁴⁶ In many Israeli urban centers in the early part of the twenty-first century, this matrix produced downtowns that were largely emptied of Palestinians from the territories—and, indeed, of Palestinian citizens of Israel who increasingly avoided these ever more inhospitable spaces.⁴⁷ Most Jewish citizens celebrated the ways that the barrier had transformed Israeli landscapes, insisting that their homes and nation-state had finally been reclaimed.

How does one read *The Bubble* in this political context? At least two divergent readings are possible. The first applauds Fox for a set of bold representations at a time of mainstream Israeli backlash against a peace ethos; namely, representations of a romance that spans the Israeli-Palestinian divide and of a Palestinian whose turn to terror was born of rage against the conditions of occupation. In this context, Fox's work can be read as a powerful counternarrative. But another reading is also possible at this juncture—a reading invested in the film as a measure of the political moment of its production. I have argued that *Florentin's* absent Palestinians might be understood as a kind of political fantasy that did the work that the checkpoint/closure regime could only partly achieve: removing Palestinians from space. *The Bubble* was produced in a very different moment, one in which the political fantasies of the 1990s were closer to realization. By 2006, increasing numbers of Palestinians were missing from Israeli urban centers, their presence barred by the separation barrier, the expanding web of militarized checkpoints, and the restrictive permit regime. In Fox's work, in an ironic inversion of conditions on the ground, this is precisely the moment when the Palestinian population becomes possible as an object of cinematic inquiry.⁴⁸ It seems that the visibility of Palestinians depended on their invisibility within the Israeli landscape: they

are easier to represent in sympathetic, no less romantic, terms when their physical presence has been mitigated.

This shift within Fox's cinematic economy was, however, relatively short-lived. In *The Bubble's* climax, Ashraf takes both his life and Noam's in an act of suicide terrorism. In a formula foretold in the rooftop scene ("good sex is explosive"), the bombing is the consummate moment of a final kiss between the doomed lovers. In the scenes of both carnage and afterlife that follow, Fox invites an allegorical reading about the impossibility of a peaceful, let alone amorous, reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians save in an imaginary future after death. But if the possibility of a Palestinian protagonist depends on Israeli mechanisms for keeping Palestinians out of Israeli space, then the disappearance of this protagonist in the film's conclusion suggests something more. One wonders if Ashraf's exit from the cinematic stage might be understood as an index of enduring Israeli concern about the ability of the machinery of the military occupation to function as a technology of spatial containment. It should be remembered that the promise of the separation barrier was twofold: both physical protection against Palestinian terror and spatial protection against miscegenation by fortifying Jewish Israeli space ("Us here, them there"). Thus Ashraf's violent disappearance might also signal Israeli anxiety about the wall's ability to fortify the state's reigning ideology, to ensure the Jewishness of Israel.

Other Queer Landscapes

The absences that haunted Fox's work of the 1990s also haunted the gay rights movement of this decade. After the legal victories of the so-called gay revolution, many activists celebrated the opportunity for full and equal participation in the army, for professional advancement within its ranks, and state-sanctioned sorrow in its contexts. In turn, they lauded their ability to be recognized as full Israeli citizens, qua citizen-soldiers, in new ways—forms of recognition that promised fuller membership in both the Israeli nation and state in material and symbolic terms.⁴⁹ The fact that this membership necessitated greater collaboration with the violence of the military occupation was infrequently noted in the celebrations that attended these victories and in the popular culture that these celebrations spawned.

But the landscape of gay activism in Israel has been neither homogeneous nor static. At the turn of the twenty-first century, even as the Israeli political consensus was shifting to the right in the face of the second Palestinian uprising, other political voices were becoming audible, albeit from the Israeli margins. The

gay and lesbian activist organization Black Laundry was among them—a direct-action group that opposed the nationalist and assimilationist terms in which much gay activism of the previous decade had been conducted. Positioned at the political margins of the gay struggle, both for its feminism and for its anti-occupation stance, Black Laundry articulated a very different political vision: “The oppression of different minorities in the state of Israel feeds on the same racism, chauvinism, and militarism that causes the oppression and dispossession of the Palestinians to continue,” read a flyer distributed at the 2001 Tel Aviv pride parade, the year of their founding. “There is no pride in occupation.” Their queer paradigm, in which the history of homophobia is linked to that of military occupation, has yet to reach an Israeli multiplex.

Notes

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1. Kyle Buchanan, “The Boys in the Bubble,” *Advocate*, June 1, 2008, www.advocate.com/currentstory1_w_ektid48298.asp.
2. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
3. Raz Yosef proposes that Fox’s work has even gained the support of the mainstream Israeli establishment for precisely this reason (“The Politics of Normal: Gender and Nation in Gay Israeli Cinema” [in Hebrew], *Teoriyah u-vikoret* 30 [2007], 162).
4. Alisa Solomon, “Viva La Diva Citizenship: Post-Zionism and Gay Rights,” in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
5. Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalisms in Israeli Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), chap. 4.
6. Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 237–38.
7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). See also Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, for a path-breaking analysis of the ways that Arab others, both Jews and Palestinians, are represented in Israeli cinema.
8. I have elaborated on the relationship between popular culture and politics in the Israeli and Palestinian contexts in Rebecca L. Stein, “Introduction: Popular Culture, Transnationality, and Radical History,” in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–26.

9. On symptomatic reading, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Jameson suggests that the critic's task is to pay attention to "terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system which have, however, remained unrealized in the surface of the text" (48).
10. This essay is in dialogue with a growing literature on the relationship between sexuality and the nation-state in the context of Israel and Palestine. See Amal Amireh, "Between Complicity and Subversion: Body Politics in Palestinian National Narrative," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003): 747–72; Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Adi Kuntsman, "Between Gulags and Pride Parades: Sexuality, Nation, and Haunted Speech Acts," *GLQ* 14 (2008): 263–87; Yaron Peleg, "Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern, Jewish Masculinities," *Jewish Social Studies* 13 (2006): 31–58; Ted Swedenburg, "Sa'ida Sultan/Danna International: Transgender Pop and the Polysemiotics of Sex, Nation, and Ethnicity on the Israeli-Egyptian Border," *Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 81–108; Yosef, *Beyond Flesh*. For a more general consideration of this terrain, see Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
11. For discussion of gay rights in the 1990s, see Alon Harel, "The Rise and Fall of the Gay Legal Revolution," *Columbia Human Rights Legal Review* 31 (2000): 443–71; Lee Walzer, *Between Sodom and Eden: A Gay Journey through Today's Changing Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Aeyal Gross, "Challenges to Compulsory Heterosexuality: Recognition and Non-Recognition of Same-Sex Couples in Israeli Law," in *Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Partnerships: A Study of National, European, and International Law*, ed. Robert Wintemute and Mads Andenas (Oxford: Hart, 2001), 391–414.
12. Gross, "Challenges to Compulsory Heterosexuality."
13. Aaron Belkin and Melissa Levitt, "Homosexuality and the Israel Defense Forces: Did Lifting the Gay Ban Undermine Military Performance?" *Armed Forces and Society* 27 (2001): 543. Not all scholars agree with this assessment. Reuven Gal argues that the "1983 regulation prohibiting the assignment of homosexuals to 'sensitive' positions was never fully implemented" ("Gays in the Military: Policy and Practice in the Israeli Defense Forces," in *Gays and Lesbians in the Military: Issues, Concerns, and Contrasts*, ed. W. J. Scott and S. C. Stanley [New York: de Bruyter, 1994], 186).
14. Danny Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units* (New York: Harrington Park, 2003), 118. For an English translation of the 1993 amendments, see Walzer, *Between Sodom and Eden*, 118–19.
15. Alon Harel, "Gay Rights in Israel: A New Era?" *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 1 (1996): 261–78. The case was eventually heard in a Tel Aviv

- district court, acting as an IDF appeals committee. For more discussion of the case, see Walzer, *Between Sodom and Eden*, 136–40.
16. For further discussion, see Amit Kama, “From Terra Incognita to Terra Firma: The Logbook of the Voyage of Gay Men’s Community into the Israeli Public Sphere,” in *Gay Community Survival in the New Millennium*, ed. Michael R. Botnick (New York: Harrington Park, 2000), 133–62.
 17. On gay soldiers in the Israeli army, see Eyal Gross, “Sexuality, Masculinity, Military, and Citizenship: Gay Military Service in the I.D.F. in Comparative View” (in Hebrew), *Pelilim* (2000): 95–183. On the gendered conditions of citizenship within the context of army service, see Dafna Izraeli, “Gendering Military Service in the Israel Defense Forces,” in *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, ed. Gerard J. De Groot and C. M. Peniston-Bird (New York: Pearson, 2000), 256–74.
 18. Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *The New Israel: Peacemaking and Liberalization*, (Boulder: Westview, 2000), 265–78.
 19. Amila Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Seige* (New York: Holt, 1996).
 20. Maya Rosenfeld, *Confronting the Occupation: Work, Education, and Political Activism of Palestinian Families in a Refugee Camp* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Neve Gordon, *Israel’s Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
 21. Adrianna Kemp and Rebecca Raijman, *Migrants and Workers: The Political Economy of Labor Migration in Israel* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-meuhad, 2008).
 22. On the status of Palestinians with Israeli citizenship within mainstream Israeli imaginations of this moment, see Rebecca L. Stein, *Itineraries in Conflict: Israelis, Palestinians, and the Political Lives of Tourism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
 23. At the time of its founding, Florentin lay within the municipal borders of Jaffa and contained a mixed population of Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Its eventual annexation by the municipality of Tel Aviv was the subject of considerable controversy. See Mark LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 202–11.
 24. For an account of the gentrification projects of the 1990s, see Daniel Sekel and Danielle Haas, “Florentin Flavor,” *Jerusalem Report* (1998), 36–37.
 25. During the 1990s, a group of community activists from Florentin, Kvutzat Peilim Florentin, organized to present their demands to the municipality.
 26. Fox stopped directing *Florentin* in 1998, yet the series continued for a third and fourth season.
 27. On the interplay between private and public in Fox’s work, see Shai Ginsburg, “Between Sex and Country,” *Tikkun*, May–June 2005, 73–77.
 28. In interviews with the media, Fox has been clear about his support for military ser-

- vice: "Every Israeli man has his war. . . . Because it's an army of the people, everybody has to go. They [the army] will say, 'We don't care if you're gay. It's your duty.' Which I think is good. I don't think armies or the war situation is good, but if that's the case, everyone should participate" (Sylvie Simmons, "Eytan Fox's 'The Bubble': A Gay Love Story in Israel," *SF Gate*, September 2, 2007, articles.sfgate.com/2007-09-02/entertainment/17260408_1_eytan-fox-tel-aviv-film-festival). For a critical reading of how lesbian and gay organizations in Israel have aligned themselves with the state, see Yael Ben-zvi, "Zionist Lesbianism and Transsexual Transgression: Two Representations of Queer Israel," *Middle East Report* 28 (1998): 26–37.
29. For a history of the postarmy ritual of travel to India, see Darya Maoz, "The Conquerors and the Settlers: Two Groups of Young Israeli Backpackers in India," in *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*, ed. Greg Richards and Julie Wilson (Buffalo, NY: Channel View, 2004), 109–22.
 30. For greater discussion of the politics of Rabin memorial culture in Israel, see Stein, *Itineraries in Conflict*, 97–128.
 31. The possibility of such an exemption did not conform with Israeli legal norms, but with de facto army practice. By law, "suspected homosexuals" could neither be barred from service nor be banned from the military's upper ranks during the 1990s.
 32. Amnesty International, International Secretariat, *Israel, the Price of Principles: Imprisonment of Conscientious Objectors* (London: Amnesty International, International Secretariat, 1999).
 33. Avram S. Bornstein, *Crossing the Green Line between the West Bank and Israel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
 34. This theme of love across enemy lines was anticipated by Fox's *Walk on Water* (2004) with its depiction of a relationship between a Mossad agent and the German grandchildren of an ex-Nazi officer, Axel and Pia. Save Axel's romantic interest in a resident of the occupied territories, Palestinians play no role in this film.
 35. On racial passing in Israeli cinema, see Carol Bardenstein, "Cross/Cast: Passing in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema," in Stein and Swedenburg, *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 99–125; Dorit Naaman, "Orientalism as Alterity in Israeli Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 4 (2001): 36–54. *The Bubble's* satire of Tel Aviv's insular café and club culture is the film's most successful political critique. This is the "bubble" to which the title of the film refers—that is, Tel Aviv as a place seemingly insulated from politics.
 36. Kobi Nahshoni, "Most Israelis Would Accept a Gay Child," *Ynet*, July 7, 2007, www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3420964,00.html.
 37. For one instance of this narrative, see Tovah Lazaroff, "Foreign Ministry Promoting Gay Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, October 26, 2006.
 38. In rare instances, Israel has granted temporary residency permits to Palestinians

- seeking to join gay Israeli lovers. See "Israel Grants Permission for Gay Palestinian to Join Lover in Tel Aviv," *Reuters*, March 23, 2008.
39. This portrait of the Arab is relatively frequent in Israeli cinema. See Yosef, *Beyond Flesh*, 118–41.
 40. The film was not shot in the occupied territories; rather, scenes of Palestinian life in Nablus were filmed in a Palestinian village within Israel where requisite permits were easier to acquire.
 41. For an example of one such review, see Simmons, "Eytan Fox's 'The Bubble.'" Fox envisioned *The Bubble* as a tribute to his deceased mother, Sarah Kaminker, a left-wing city planner and elected member of the Jerusalem city council, who was in charge of planning Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem, and on whom the character of Noam's mother is modeled.
 42. On the political context surrounding the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising, see Joel Beinin and Rebecca Stein, "Histories and Futures of a Failed Peace," in *The Struggle for Sovereignty: Palestine and Israel, 1993–2005*, ed. Joel Beinin and Rebecca L. Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 1–26; Sara Roy, "Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy," *Current History: A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs* 101 (2002): 8–16.
 43. For detailed discussion of how Israelis conceptualized the attacks of this moment, particularly those targeting cafés, see Stein, *Itineraries in Conflict*, 129–48.
 44. The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem has published numerous studies of the separation barrier, with particular attention to human rights violations that have attended its construction and route. See B'Tselem, *Under the Guise of Security: Routing the Separation Barrier to Enable the Expansion of Israeli Settlements in the West Bank* (Jerusalem: B'Tselem/Bimkom, 2005).
 45. Barak's campaign slogan drew on a spatial ideology on which Israel would capitalize in the next decade. There is a large geographic literature that discusses links between geography and power in the context of the occupation. See, for example, Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007); Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
 46. B'Tselem, *Ground to a Halt: Denial of Palestinians' Freedom of Movement in the West Bank* (Jerusalem: B'Tselem, 2007).
 47. The barrier's effects were contradictory in this regard. See Dina Kraft, "Arabs Moving to Jewish Jerusalem," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 24, 2008, jta.org/news/article/2008/01/24/106587/jerusalem.
 48. Even as the barrier blocked Palestinian movement into Israeli territory, it also obstructed Israeli views of the occupied territories in some places along its route. Alternative landscapes painted on the Israeli side of the barrier helped advance the

fiction of national geography liberated from territorial contiguity with its Palestinian neighbor. See, for example, Yizhar Be'er, "The City and the Dogs: A Psychedelic Tour through Jerusalem's More Peculiar Districts," *Huffington Post*, July 30, 2009, www.huffingtonpost.com/ir-amim/the-city-and-the-dogs-a-p_b_247583.html.

49. Ayelet Shachar, "Whose Republic? Citizenship and Membership in the Israeli Polity," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 13 (1999): 233–72.