"Lifting the Veil"

Judaic-Themed Israeli Cinema and Spiritual Aesthetics

Dan Chyutin

ABSTRACT

The following article addresses the appropriation of the "spiritual style" paradigm, as articulated by certain well-known filmmakers (e.g., Robert Bresson and Yasujirō Ozu) and film theorists (e.g., Henri Agel, Amédée Ayfre, Susan Sontag, and Paul Schrader), into the Israeli-Judaic cinematic context through a close analysis of Avishai Sivan's debut feature, *The Wanderer* (2010). This reading maintains that the "spiritual style" is not used in the film as it was traditionally imagined—that is, to validate divine existence—but rather as means of questioning the nature and value of this existence. This skeptical position, however, never amounts to a wholehearted denial of the possibility of a god, since it is articulated from within the "spiritual style" rather than from without. Thus when interpreted through its formal language, the film emerges as a complex attempt at balancing rejections and affirmations of devotional life, one suitable for a period in Israeli history where the once oppositional Judaic and secular realities have gradually become more intertwined.

There are moments in which, to use a Talmudic phrase, heaven and earth kiss each other; in which there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a vision to what is eternal in time.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel[1]

In the opening to his oft-quoted essay on film and theology, the famed French theorist André Bazin elegantly stated, without resorting to qualification, that "the cinema has always been interested in God."[2] What may be dismissed at first glance as yet another example of the writer's notorious predilection to bold generalization does in fact hold true for the history of cinema. No more than two years after their first screening, the Lumière brothers sent their representatives to document the staging of a passion play at the Bohemian village of Horitz. Released under the (misleading) title *The Passion of Oberammergau*, the resultant product prompted the creation of other, similar texts, turning "religious subjects [...] into an important genre for the early film industry."[3] Since then, countless films have taken the holy—a transcendent realm of being and power—as their principal setting. The evolution of this interest in the holy was surely overdetermined by various social and cultural factors; its roots, however, could be said to reside in the nature of the medium itself. For, as Bazin also explains, "cinema is in itself already a kind of miracle"[4] in that, like a divine act, it too creates a world *ex nihilo*, engendering a presence (an animated image) where once there was only absence (a darkened screen).

This provocative analogy between film and the miraculous was not lost on early film theorists. At face value, if read along the realist-formalist split, these thinkers seemed predominantly concerned with the material question of whether the filmic text should duplicate or manipulate visible nature. Yet, as Malcolm Turvey explains, this split tends to obscure the fact that representatives from both camps—such as Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer—were united in their belief that "cinema's most significant property, one which the other arts do not possess (or at least not to the same degree), is its ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision."[5] While this ability resonated with a scientific mentality, it also possessed a pronounced metaphysical undercurrent. Proof of this may be found in what Rachel Moore defines as early film theory's "primitivist impulse": that is, its reliance, in explaining film's revelatory capability, "on primitive beliefs in animism, the sacred, ritual sacrifice, idol worship, and sympathetic and homeopathic magic."[6] By revealing reality's strange and magical visions, these theorists argued, film ceases to serve as "an advanced form of modern communication" and offers instead "a renewal of primitive faculties otherwise lost to postenlightenment culture."[7]

Though early film theory was clearly preoccupied with film's holy dimensions, this interest was mostly implied. The situation changed drastically in the 1950s

and 1960s, however, when key film theorists came to engage these dimensions explicitly and methodically. Their efforts coalesced around certain prominent filmmakers, such as Robert Bresson, Yasujirō Ozu, and Carl Theodor Dreyer, whose films not only exhibited a similar interest on the level of theme but also shared in a common, ascetic style. This stylistic tendency, contemporary theorists argued, was motivated by a desire to purify the image from unwarranted intrusions into reality's metaphysical core—distractions that blind us from recognizing reality as a threshold onto the ineffable. They related to this style under different rubrics: "transcendental," "sacramental," and "sacred," to name but a few. Yet for the purpose of this discussion, it may be most conveniently described as "spiritual," as an indication not only of the aforementioned theorists' mutual interest in metaphysical realms but also of their overall inclination to extend their arguments beyond a particular religious framework (mainly Christian) and toward the broader category of "spirituality," understood as the "enduring and universally acknowledged 'practices' that evidence the presence of 'Spirit' (not the Holy Spirit of the Trinity) in everyday life and are found in all world religions."[8]

The surge of theoretical interest in spiritual stylistics befitted a postwar era characterized by intense devotional commitments and explorations. Yet as the atmosphere changed in the 1970s, academic film scholarship, influenced by iconoclastic poststructuralism, gradually shied away from the language of spirituality, which was deemed either naïve or oppressive; emphasizing instead the connections between film and social/psychological reality, it accordingly stunted the growth of a multifaceted discussion of spiritualized film form.[9] Whatever remained of this discussion, in turn, was dominated by certain influential elaborations of the aforementioned ascetic model of film aesthetics, which effectively overshadowed other voices of theoretical dissent. The discursive stasis ultimately ensured that this model—this "spiritual style"—would maintain its presence in the cinematic landscape and be incorporated by different filmmakers into diverse cultural contexts.[10]

This article's objective is to trace the migration of the spiritual style into contemporary Judaic-themed[11] Israeli filmmaking and account for its implications for Israeli cinema's attitude toward the divine realm. Using one film—Avishai Sivan's *The Wanderer* (*Hameshotet*, Israel, 2010)—as a telling example, the following pages argue that the appropriation of this style in the Israeli context is not geared toward the unreserved affirmation of sacred truths which film theory has located in the oeuvre of Bresson and Ozu. If anything, Israeli filmmakers who

utilize this style seem to occupy a skeptical position in relation to the holy and its attendant theological claims. Yet because this position is articulated from within the spiritual style—rather than from without—their skepticism never amounts to a wholehearted negation of a holy sphere, but rather remains fraught with ambivalence as to the nature of its existence.

The Spiritual Style

The theorist credited for having initiated the discourse on spiritual film aesthetics has arguably been André Bazin. A practicing Catholic, Bazin rarely made an explicit connection between film and the holy, yet as Bert Cardullo argues, faith has always been "the primary source of his inspiration."[12] Bazin's spiritual account of film emerges from his claim that the medium has a privileged relationship with the real because it is founded on a mechanical process of reproduction. Film's capacity to reproduce nature may seem to distance it from the realm of spirit, yet this understanding is challenged by Bazin's own claim that photographic media share in the *being* of their models and therefore, like ritualistic objects, transcend mere mimesis. Due to this metaphysical valence, the photographic/cinematic medium is then capable of yielding "true" rather than "surface" realism: that is, "to give significant expression of the world both concretely and its *essence*."[13] It is in this act of distillation that, according to Cardullo, Bazin finds the "sacred" goal of photographic imagery: "to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality."[14]

For Bazin, achieving "true" realism is contingent on a proper use of cinematic language. Yet his conception of the medium's appropriate spiritual aesthetics is characteristically vague, which is why Cardullo claims that with Bazin "it would be more suitable to speak of filmic 'realisms' than of a single definitive realist mode."[15] Following Bazin's premature death at the age of forty, however, this openness was traded in for a narrower definition of spiritual film aesthetics, founded on one aspect of his thought: the penchant for stylistic austerity whereby "sentimentality is eschewed in favor of filmic reality and transparence."[16] This move, initially performed by Bazin's collaborators Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre in France and by occasional film critics Susan Sontag and Paul Schrader in the United States, forged a relatively consistent discourse on what constitutes a spiritual film style.

The basic premise common to this discourse is that the holy has a hidden presence within the real: what Ayfre described as an "immanent transcendence,

or even […] radical invisibility,"[17] and for Agel was "a pure point, a center of life."[18] Though the holy remains a fundamental Other to our known reality, filmic art was conceived by these and other thinkers as capable of capturing its traces—as disclosing, in Michael Bird's words, "those spaces and those moments in culture where the experience of finitude and the encounter with the transcendent dimension are felt and expressed within culture itself."[19] Yet to achieve this aim, film had to immerse itself within visible reality, rather than provide a distraction from it. As Ayfre once stated, it should not attempt to shape real materials in such a way as to convey a message. Rather film should show the "things themselves" and "ask what they manifest through themselves."[20]

To achieve this goal, however, filmmakers had to use a particular formal language, one founded on the subtraction of all those elements which the medium adds to reality: what Schrader called a "stylization of elimination," intent on providing "a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living."[21] The paradigmatic example for this style gradually came to be found in the works of French cineaste Bresson. The filmmaker's use of nonprofessional actors, and his demand that they do not "act" or exhibit clear psychological motivation, attracted particular attention; Ayfre, for one, argued that this "increasing tendency towards inexpressiveness"[22] allows characters to "express precisely that which is beyond expression."[23] Another element to be subtracted in Bresson's films is narrative action. Thus Sontag remarked that Bresson makes his films antidramatic by reducing suspense, ending scenes before catharsis, and eliding anecdotal information that could encourage emotional identification.[24] Additionally, he imposes stasis on character behavior: or in Schrader's words, for Bresson, "given a selection of inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence; a choice of actions, the choice is stillness."[25] These measures are complemented formally by an austere décor, resolutely inanimate or stubbornly slow camerawork, and flat and frontal mise-en-scène. The desired result of this strategy is that attention is taken away from plot development and directed toward the imaged reality, now seen as a sacred zone where "the invisible is suggested more than it is represented."[26]

Through elimination, the spiritual style aspires toward transparency. But what is revealed through this translucent screen? Several writers spoke of a *mysterium tremendum* that lurks within filmic reality—a "poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery."[27] Others intimated a more concrete apparition that seems to originate unexpectedly from somewhere "wholly other": what Schrader

defines as a "decisive action," that is, "an incredible event within the banal reality which must by and large be taken on faith."[28] Whether manifesting itself in fleeting mystery or palpable sign, however, the conjured presence is read by film theorists as affirming the holy, and through it, certain basic theological axioms. Such affirmation is seen as necessary for the style to achieve its mission. There can be no half-hearted measures here; any sign of equivocality is marked as a failure, as when Schrader chastises Dreyer's work for having "a consistent thread of ambiguity," and interprets it as an indication of the filmmaker's "fundamental doubts about the nature of the Transcendent in life and art."[29]

It is in this demand for affirmation that one finds the proselytizing kernel of the theory on spiritual film aesthetics. Concurrently, it is there that one also locates a limitation to this theorization, which the aforementioned theorists tended to understate. This limitation is rendered visible when we ask: Could it be possible to define an ambiguous use of the spiritual style in less pejorative terms? Since it is associated with the holy, the spiritual style can function as a tool for affirmation but also as a powerful steppingstone for critique—powerful, because it arrives from within the realm of spirituality rather than from without. As such, it can productively open up questions about the holy, the nature of its supposed verification, and cinema's potential contribution to its understanding. This critical capacity may not have been of primary interest to cineastes such as Bresson or Ozu, but it has captured the attention of some of their current followers. One such filmmaker is Avishai Sivan.

The Wanderer: Verifying God through Pain and Violence

Though not arriving from the religious world, multimedia artist Sivan was always fascinated with the faith of observant Jews,[30] and consequently chose to situate his directorial debut, *The Wanderer*, within a Judaic setting. The film, however, does not amount to a paean to religious life. At the center of this work stands Yitzhak, an adolescent ultra-Orthodox ("Haredi") Jew who lives with his parents in a religious enclave outside Tel Aviv. Forced out of the strict Haredi routine by debilitating abdominal pains, Yitzhak acquires new awareness of the stifling nature of his surroundings. From this new position, he then embarks on a journey toward greater corporeal liberation, which first takes the form of incessant wandering through metropolitan streets and then transitions into the rape of an unsuspecting woman. Through this journey the viewers are thus exposed to a

portrait of Judaic-Israeli society as founded on repression and violence, specifically in the context of sexuality.

In depicting Yitzhak's tale, Sivan drew his inspiration from Robert Bresson, the director he most admires.[31] Accordingly, the film carries the staples of the spiritual style: the use of nonactors to foreground "inexpressiveness"; the subversion of suspense so as to create a relatively antidramatic narrative; the removal of clear psychological motivation as a means of "emptying out" characters; the deployment of a subdued mise-en-scène and lethargic bodily gestures, captured through extended static shots that foreground physical textures. These formal attributes work to support the aforementioned critical vision of Haredi society as fundamentally repressive. The inert and vacuous performances reveal repression to be ingrained within Haredi physicality, and the antidramatic structure and use of nonactors intimate that this impression is "authentic." The choice to shoot both indoor and outdoor scenes from a stationary third-person camera perspective, in turn, further emphasizes the inhibited manner of Haredi corporeal behavior and implicates the audience in the operation of Haredi panopticism.

This type of symptomatic reading of Yitzhak's journey, which situates narrative and formal choices in a sociocultural context, is extremely valuable in illuminating the film's ideological operation, as I have argued elsewhere.[32] Yet it would be wrong to reduce *The Wanderer* to its social commentary. For as Haviva Pedaya explains in her study of the subject, Judaic wandering always transpires along two axes: horizontally, where the wanderer relates to societal demands; and vertically, where the wanderer relates to God.[33] It is this latter axis that is underrepresented in a strictly sociocultural reading of Yitzhak's narrative, but may be crucial for understanding the film's overall project, especially in connection to its use of the spiritual style. In exploring this trajectory, an obvious starting point may be the question: Why must Yitzhak's journey be linked to pain and violence? A possible answer may instruct us on the relationship between the protagonist's corporeal development and the presumed nature of divine revelation, as well as on the spiritual style's capacity to elicit or undermine devotion.

In her seminal study *The Body in Pain* (1985), literary scholar Elaine Scarry sought to articulate through corporeal terms the interdependency between humans and their God. Looking at the Old Testament, Scarry returns to the traditional Hebraic equation of human with body and God with voice. Within this paradigm, "the physical and the verbal run side by side, one above the other, as two distinct or at least distinguishable horizontal ribbons of occurrence." Here the presence

of the Hebraic God in human life is imagined not via its materialization in bodily form but only through the results of His commands, particularly in relation to two sites of human action: reproduction and wounding. The significance of this insight resides for Scarry in the fact that, within both sites, the body in transformation serves to bridge the gap between the two ribbons of occurrence. Hence,

> the Word is never self-substantiating: it seeks its confirmation in a visible change in the realm of matter. The body of man is self-substantiating: iteration and repetition (the material re-assertion of the fact of their own existence) is the most elemental form of substantiating the thing (existence, presence, aliveness, realness) that is repeated. But the body is able not only to substantiate itself but to substantiate something beyond itself as well: [. . .] the existence, presence, aliveness, realness of God.[34]

While in the creation of the physical world one could find confirmation of the existence of God, it is in the continued reshaping of this world—and especially, in its human bodies—that His providence is supposedly made traceable. Scarry contends that, of the two types of reshaping, violence, at least in the Old Testament, allows God's presence to be more palpably felt. "In the scenes of generation," she explains, "there is no fixed path imaging the passage from the upper to the lower ribbon: insofar as there is one, it must be improvised with each new instance of generative affirmation." Scenes of wounding, however, provide a more consistent and "easily available form of conceptualization"—the image of the weapon—to connect the two ribbons.[35] The manifestations of God's presence as a weapon often take place in scenes of doubt, where procreation ceases to satisfy humans as proof of divine presence. "Unable to apprehend God with conviction," Scarry explains, "they will—after the arrival of the plague or the disease-laden quail or the fire or the sword or the storm—apprehend him in the intensity of the pain in their own bodies, or in the visible alteration in the bodies of their fellows or in the bodies (in only slightly different circumstances) of their enemies." In these instances of violence, then, the Scriptures "openly identify the human body as a source of *analogical verification*" and "specified forms of hurt [. . .] as demonstrations of His existence."[36]

Following this logic, one sees that the biblical primal scene which connects violence to the structures of doubt, verification, and belief is that of the binding of Isaac (Yitzhak). Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son to prove his faith. This

proof, however, is not for the benefit of God, who already knows the faithful from the unfaithful. Rather, the proof is for Abraham, so that he may extinguish those few remaining flames of doubt burning inside him. Appropriately, verification is offered through an undeniable physical alteration—the mutilation of the child, whose exposed entrails would overcome "the distance, dimness, and unreality of God" to make "the dimly apprehended incontestably present."[37] Before this cathartic climax, however, the scene ends abruptly, with God offering a ram as a substitute object for substantiating violence. Yet even with this dislocation, the impact of violent verification remains so palpable that it is enough to reinforce Abraham's belief in the Almighty.

But what of the young Isaac? Faced with undergoing the ultimate test of God's reality through his own flesh, was he left with no doubt as the blade moved from him to the sacrificial ram? Did he not secretly want further proof of his maker? Since the Scripture hides the young boy from our sight, the question remains unresolved.[38] Yet it may be argued that this potential predicament, disavowed within the Old Testament, becomes a major preoccupation for Isaac's namesake, the protagonist of *The Wanderer*. From the film's outset, the Haredi Yitzhak is shown to be questioning godly existence. This doubt, however, should not be confused with utter disbelief; if anything, by choosing to follow the path of pain and wounding, Yitzhak does not attempt to assert the nonexistence of God but to locate sources of verification of His reality. Thus his movement from suffering to inflicting pain may be seen as a way of overcoming doubt, of a gradual upping of the ante in terms of embodiment so as to respond to an ever-increasing suspicion that God does not exist. This process, however, fails to provide conclusive proof, since the moment of "incontestably presencing" God never arrives in the aftermath of the rape. Consequently, the film's conclusion makes clear that substantiation through pain can be a questionable endeavor, if not for ethical concerns, then for the basic (theological) reason that the realms of God and humans are largely distinct: since God may never fully materialize, analogical verification must be repetitive, obsessive, and—when violence becomes the means to an end—costly.

How does one avoid an endless cycle of verifying-via-violence? Perhaps this is what troubles Yitzhak's mind during the final moments of the film. God's operation in the binding scene seems to suggest a possible solution, offering a sacrificial animal body to relieve the human corpus from the burden of verification. Another, less lethal solution to this problem, however, may be found in the category of artifact. Thus artistic representations can function as "a substitute for man's

body which was originally itself a substitute for God's body";[39] by their physical existence, subject to a process of initial creation and continual alteration (additions, deteriorations), they facilitate "a materialization of God."[40] This solution of an artificial intermediary may seem incongruent with Judaism's prohibition against image-making, but such a viewpoint ignores the fact that the Second Commandment did not prevent Jews from developing an impressive visual culture and making it "a significant constituent of Jewish thought and identity."[41] As a product of this culture (though less committed to its religious tenets), *The Wanderer*, an artistic rendering of extreme embodiment, may then be said to act for its viewers, if only fleetingly, like an artificial intermediary. But therein lies the rub. Scarry's arguments apply to graven images that have a material presence in our reality. Films, however, occupy a different ontological ground, as they are "made present in the mode of absence."[42] Consequently, we are left to wonder: Can cinema act as a devotional medium, verifying God in moments of doubt?

A possible key to answering this question may be found in film's relationship with the most final of bodily alterations—death. Bazin, for one, was adamant about the importance of this connection, which he defined as "justif[ying] the term [...] of cinematic specificity."[43] In his mind, cinema exists in relation to the denial of mortality. Film can, if desired, present the moment of death only to transcend it again and again; it can allow us to "desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!"[44] Yet what this assertion also makes clear is that the filmic process of cheating death is performed at the price of bringing spectatorial attention to death; and not only death per se but everything in film that, in the words of Serge Daney, "simulates death: the sexual act, metamorphosis. More generally, the main nodes of a story, the decisive moments when, under the impassive eye of the camera, something is unraveled, someone changes."[45]

Film can therefore raise awareness to the passages and transformations of bodily modes, and as such may be used by spectators as a platform for the analogical verification of God. The measure of awareness is contingent on the choice of subject matter; hence films that specifically deal with death may result in greater spectatorial engagement with bodily transformations than those that do not. Yet subject matter alone is not enough to make a spectator cognizant of corporeal reality through film. Aesthetics can work to render this reality tangible—and thus amenable to use for overcoming doubt—or to dismiss it. For Bazin, Daney argues, the basic aesthetic rule was that "we must not glide over the precise moment of

transformation. It must be seen and 'apprehended'; it must not be read or let itself be imagined in the back and forth movement of montage."[46] To not abide by this aesthetic rule, then, is equivalent to making death, or any other form of bodily alteration, generalized and invisible.

The question of proper aesthetics subsequently affords us an opportunity to return to *The Wanderer* and discuss the operation of its spiritual style. Sivan's decision to shoot the characters in extended uninterrupted shots, usually from a distance, allows bodies to maintain their integrity of action in full view. Additionally, the "nonacting" goes against traditional cinema's reality effect and helps divert attention to human physiognomy. The minutiae of physicality and its transformations are further highlighted through the minimalism of the film's décor and mise-en-scène, which throw each gesture into sharp relief. Finally, the insertion of gaps within the narrative, and the choice to exchange cuts-on-action for shots that function as "standalone scenes,"[47] undermine the film's linear flow, foreground the physical texture of the diegesis, and imbue it with mystery. Together these characteristics function much as they do in a typical Bresson film, which, according to Steven Shaviro, "exalts whatever it encounters, raising everything to its utmost level of carnal intensity, its highest possible degree of embodiment."[48] This description reminds us that the spiritual style is not merely a negation but also an affirmation of "things [. . .] in their absolute, asignifying immanence."[49] With Bresson, as with Sivan, such affirmation would be interpreted by theorists of the spiritual style as allowing things to be "just themselves but disclose more than themselves,"[50] and consequently as evoking for the spectator a comforting vision of unity between the physical and metaphysical.

Yet this aesthetic strategy also carries with it certain drawbacks in eliciting spectators' devotion. Shooting from a distance, for example, can sometimes block access to the particularities of imaged bodies. Similar distance is also created by the relative avoidance of cutting, which can prevent cinema from penetrating reality "like a surgeon [who] cuts into a patient's body."[51] And finally, Sivan's choice to fashion character movements as lethargic also alienates from corporeal experience by hiding the full range of bodily expression. As a result of these stylistic aspects, particular bodies occasionally dissolve into a generalized form and consequently foreground the cinematic signifier's intrinsic "absence"; they stop acting as palpable effigies, helpful proxies for the viewers' physical body, and become imaginary and abstract, thereby undermining the promise of God's materialization established by other elements of the film's style. In presenting scenes of pain and violence

through the spiritual style, *The Wanderer* thus ends up highlighting this style's basic ambivalence vis-à-vis the project of analogical verification: a simultaneous desire to materialize God through the "things themselves" and the fear that such materialization would fail by reducing holiness into profane matter. Like the film's protagonist, this aesthetic strategy seems at odds with itself, unable—or unwilling—to appease doubt entirely.

Bresson scholars may have implicitly recognized this ambivalence in the spiritual style which *The Wanderer* emphasizes. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Schrader asserted the importance of a "decisive action," which countermands the style's proclivity toward absenting materiality with an undeniable physical presence. Such an action, which allows corporeal transformation to be apprehended in its utmost intensity, arguably appears only once in *The Wanderer*. The moment in question, unique in its stylistic rendering, takes place during a scene at the office of Yitzhak's doctor. Yitzhak is seen watching the doctor, and then suddenly fainting and falling to the floor. The collapse is shot from the general direction of the physician, and follows the transition into a loss of consciousness, only to cut after Yitzhak has fallen; concurrently, the frame, centering on Yitzhak's upper body in medium range, begins to shake, as if in identification with the protagonist's bodily transformation. Caught off-guard by this stylistic choice, the spectators are impelled into recognizing the occurrence of two bodies. On the one hand, there is Yitzhak's body, whose unraveling is made tangible by the frame shaking. On the other hand, however, there is the shaking frame that looks upon Yitzhak rather than strictly represents his point of view, thereby indicating the existence of another body: not the doctor's, but that of the film itself. The viewer, then, comes to understand that Yitzhak's body relies on the body of a film to survive, as if the two were connected by an invisible umbilical cord. Accordingly, each side is affected by the connection: as Yitzhak breaks down, so does the film; and when the film ends, Yitzhak is no more.

"An editor's cut," Sivan once noted in an interview, "resembles the guillotine—one has to know where to cut, and when to let the frame breathe a while longer."[52] Nowhere is this statement more apropos than in relation to the cut that follows Yitzhak's collapse. The awareness of the two intertwined bodies—the represented Yitzhak and the film object that contains and sustains it—unexpectedly makes them both appear in the flesh; and as the cut arrives, the editor's blade enters deep. For an instant, it may even feel for the viewers like the guillotine's sweep can extend as far as their own bodies, resulting in some discomfort. It is in this

moment of impact, where bodily transformation is effected on and off the screen, that doubt could potentially find appeasement. Its placement in a seemingly inconsequential section near the ending of the film—as opposed to the climactic "decisive actions" of Bresson and Ozu—may work against this aim, and serve as a deliberate manifestation of the filmmaker's aforementioned ambivalence regarding the possibility and value of verification. In the diegetic world, at least, this instance does not offer Yitzhak a pathway to deliverance, perhaps because it seems to him insufficiently violent, inadequately corporeal; he thus is impelled to continue wandering in search of other diegetic bodies whose pain may help him overcome his misgivings. Yet for certain audience members who sense the reverberation (and amplification) of Yitzhak's pain through a body of film, this brief instance may still seem powerful enough to support a position of faith.

Epilogue: Spiritual Aesthetics, Judaism, and Israeli Film

As a treatise on religious life, *The Wanderer* presents a grim perspective, in which the struggle to maintain faith leads to a disastrous obsession with suffering and inflicting pain. Thus envisaged, the film seems to channel a basic mistrust that has traditionally typified much of the Israeli-secular discourse on Judaic reality. This criticism emerges from a more profound sense of doubt as to the existence of God, which is sustained by the film's exposure of the spiritual style's inherent tensions in relation to scenes of extreme embodiment. Yet by sustaining these tensions, *The Wanderer* also imparts the understanding that a critique of religious reality is not necessarily equivalent to a denial of God. Rather, the film seems committed to showing that an effective critique can grow only from the bedrock of doubt—and not of disbelief. For only by not foreclosing the possibility of God's existence can one truly come to grips with the social actions performed in His name.

That Sivan is not the only contemporary Israeli filmmaker to use the spiritual style in such a way[53] makes the task of analyzing *The Wanderer*'s formal-theological stance particularly important. Additionally, the fact that such a trend exists within a distinctly Jewish context also forces us to contemplate its meaning in relation to Judaic aesthetic thinking. Does the "spiritual style" represent a foreign entity that is incorporated from outside Judaism so as to pollute it? If so, it is not because the style transgresses the Second Commandment, since this edict, as previously mentioned, has never entailed "a general and indiscriminate ban

on visual images."[54] A more pertinent claim to the spiritual style's "foreignness" may be located in the fact that its theological and philosophical foundations were decidedly Christian, as were the majority of scholars who shaped the discourse around it. Does this mean, however, that the style should inevitably be defined as anti-Judaic? Does its claim to universality, inherent to the term "spiritual," find its limit in relating to the Jewish faith? Such unequivocal assertions may seem unwarranted, since the spiritual style's mélange of the material and immaterial does resonate with a certain Judaic approach to visualizing the holy. Contrary to common understandings, God's revelation in the Bible was not solely auditory, as the Word was often preceded by a visual manifestation. This visual theophany, in turn, oscillated between presence and absence so as to simultaneously maintain the sanctity of divine transcendence (God as metaphysical) *and* immanence (human being as God's image).[55] Much of Jewish visual culture maintained a similar oscillation, especially in relation to the representation of the human figure. In this respect, this tradition resisted bestowing on the represented figure a sense of fullness, because that would indicate an attempt to replicate the completeness of God or to reduce it to materiality. At the same time, it also did not want to discard the human body and face altogether, because these carry the traces of God's visage. The result of this was the acceptance of an aesthetic rule whereby, in the words of Lionel Kochan, "if any material entity is to symbolize God, it must be of such a nature as both to disguise and reveal this relationship."[56] This was often done by means of subtraction: by indicating in a visual fashion that the represented object is somehow incomplete or lacking (what Melissa Raphael terms as the "theology of the slashed nose,"[57] in reference to the practice of severing the noses of represented faces to create a distance between them and the complete face of God).

The Kabbalah's "sefirotic diagram" may serve as a productive illustration of this aesthetic strategy. Medieval Kabbalah mystics did not shy away from an anthropomorphic understanding of God as did contemporaneous mainline Jewish lawmakers. Instead, they formulated a complex vision of God, the underlying principle of which, according to Gershom Scholem, was: "*Ein-Sof*, the Infinite—that is the concealed Godhead—dwells unknowable in the depth of its own being, without form or shape. It is beyond all cognitive statements, and can only be described through negation—indeed, as the negation of all negations. No images can depict it, nor can it be named by any name. By contrast, the Active Divinity has a mystical shape which can be conveyed by images and names."[58]

For Kabbalists, the most potent symbolic representation of the active divinity, which combines both name and image, is the *sefirot*. While central to Kabbalah, the *sefirot* system was never conceptualized in a unified way.[59] It is often described as a collection of ten "potencies" that make up the divine structure, as well as means of divine emanation, through which holy light flows from *Ein-Sof* and animates creation. Though fluid in nature, this structure nevertheless did not remain merely as a conceptual formulation. Rather it was given form in the "sefirotic diagram," which became a principal feature of Jewish mystical ritual. At face value the diagram seems too abstract to be defined as figurative; yet upon closer inspection, a visual correlation is revealed between it and both "the bilaterally symmetrical human figure"[60] and "an inverted Tree of Life."[61] This actualization of *harmonia mundi*—the fusion of deity, nature, and humanity—via a relatively ascetic visual motif connects the "sefirotic diagram" with the spiritual style and its Christian art antecedents, as well as with the stripped-down visualizations found in *The Wanderer*, and explains their shared ambivalence as responding to the Janus-faced character of God as transcendent and immanent.

It may be a mistake, however, to claim that the diagram captures an essential "Judaic visual aesthetic." Though seldom providing a fully embodied image of God, Judaic culture has nevertheless shown a remarkable variety in its visual representations, ranging from the abstract to the figurative.[62] As a result, the current scholarly consensus asserts, in Rapahel's words, that "the essentialist, normative accounts of Jewish art ignore irreconcilable differences and discontinuities between its histories."[63] Concurrently, it may also be unproductive to reduce cinema's spiritual aesthetics to the singular model of the "spiritual style." Indeed, several scholarly works have recently attempted to undermine the dominance of this paradigm and offer alternatives.[64] A more inclusive approach to Judaic cinematic art may therefore be required, since it allows us to imagine a broader spectrum of works within the category of filmic spirituality.

Along these lines, we might count in this spectrum a group of Judaic-themed Israeli films that were made predominantly during the 1990s and represented a supernatural order through spectacular means. These include Daniel Wachsmann's *The Appointed* (*Hameyu'ad*, 1990), which abounds in spontaneous combustions that charge the plot's major relationship—between an influential rabbi-mystic and a Lilith-like vagabond—with uncanny valences; Hagai Levi's *Snow in August* (*Sheleg B'August*, 1993), the tale of a secular Israeli's adventures in search of his lost Haredi paramour, which culminates in the miraculous appearance of snowfall

in the dead of summer; and Yossi Zomer's *Forbidden Love* (*Ahava Asura*, 1997), a modern rendition of S. Ansky's *Der Dybbuk*, set in Israel's ultra-Orthodox community, which includes many fantastic moments, including a CGI-enhanced vision of the Garden of Eden. These films certainly do not fall within the ascetic standards of the spiritual style but come closer to what Schrader defined as the "cinema of overabundant means."[65] This category, which is associated with mainstream Hollywood aesthetics, is often derided by "spiritual style" theorists for naturalizing—and by implication, cheapening—holiness. But, as Judith Wilt argues, such criticism fails to consider the possibility that spectacular images are not a continuation of Hollywood's naturalizing effect so much as "ruptures in this order" that expose the viewer to "the unsettling presence of a trickster god."[66] Thus it is possible to entertain a theoretical position by which the aesthetic disturbance of fantastic images within *The Appointed*, *Snow in August*, and *Forbidden Love* can serve as a viable representation of holy presence.

Such a view is supported by Ronie Parciack in her account of *Snow in August*, formulated not long after the film's release. In this film, according to Parciack, the ultra-Orthodox are presented as a "greedy totalizing institution"[67] that lacks genuine sentiment and true belief, attempting instead to (sinfully) appropriate divine power from the transcendent to the worldly plane. They are often associated with militant terminology and eschatological rhetoric, as well as with menacing and bewildering physical spaces that resonate with the nightmarish visions of German Expressionism. This negation of Israeli religious life, however, is countered by the appearance of snow at the film's dénouement. This spectacular miracle, for Parciack, comes to assert the existence of a metaphysical being, and the secular need to believe in such a higher order of existence, in spite of being rooted in a basic mistrust of religious practice.

Similar claims were made more recently—and retrospectively—by Shmulik Duvdevani in relation to what he defines as the facets of "magical realism" in *The Appointed* and *Forbidden Love*. In this context, Duvdevani notes that the appearance of magical realism in Israeli films of the 1990s countered decades in which Israel's cinema was committed to a strict regime of realism. This shift, for him, relates to a challenge to the values of Zionism which subsisted Israeli cinema's realistic inclinations, and "reflects the move from a monolithic unicultural society to a diverse multicultural one."[68] In relation to Judaism, the move to multicultural-ism marked a greater acceptance of the religious lifestyles that Zionism once marginalized as part of its strategy of "negating the diaspora."[69] Duvdevani does

not deny that—like *Snow in August*—*The Appointed* and *Forbidden Love* also mirror the popular secular view of the time, which defined the religious sector as "a real threat" in light of "the rise in the power of ultra-Orthodox political parties [...] and the sense that they were subverting the secular Sabra character." Nevertheless, such criticism seems for him to be overshadowed by the greater meaning of the films' return to "Diaspora culture," especially in relation to their reliance on the miraculous and magical, which ultimately serve to question "the concept of nationalism and its correlation of cultural homogeneity,"[70] as well as to legitimize a religious lifestyle and an attendant belief in the holy.

As envisaged by Parciack and Duvdevani, then, these three films from the 1990s seem to operate in much the same way as *The Wanderer*, which complicates its social critique of Jewish-Israeli religious life by potentially affirming God's presence. Yet this argument presupposes that, within the contemporary Israeli context, the "spiritual style" and its FX-laden counterpart are accepted as equally capable of evoking the holy within a religious-themed film. Such a claim, however, seems problematic, primarily because the "spectacular style" has been dismissed by the Western discourse on filmic spirituality, which is still prominent in Israeli thinking about cinema.[71] In these films, then, the filmmakers' choice to employ a spectacular style explicitly connotes a much-maligned tradition of the "grand style" religious spectacular, and therefore seems geared more toward denying a transcendental order than, as Parciack and Duvdevani suggest, asserting its reality. Contrastingly, it could also be said that the use of the spiritual style in *The Wanderer* signals a more consistent attempt at balancing rejections and affirmations of faith-based existence. As such, Sivan's film seems to respond to the challenges of Israel's present, where Judaic and secular realities, once conceived as oppositional, have now become more intimately connected.[72]

As *The Wanderer*'s response to these challenges is grounded in ambivalence, it is difficult to determine what future vision of Israeli social reality it ultimately wishes to articulate. It may be a future where the irresolution surrounding God's existence leaves secular and observant Israelis in a perpetual state of deadlock. Indeed, the grim realities portrayed in the film seem to point to no other direction. Yet if read in light of the "sefirotic diagram," *The Wanderer* also gestures toward a remote prospect for reconciliation among these Israeli factions. The diagram, after all, has been imagined as permitting the faithful, through ecstatic prayer, to bridge the chasm between the tellurian and transcendent spheres, which is the foundation for further divisions within the various parts of humanity itself. By

taking on similar stylistic characteristics as the diagram, *The Wanderer* is thus tacitly implicated in the latter's Kabbalistic project of promoting harmony—of enacting a *tikkun olam*, the "restoration or integration of all things to their original condition."[73] In this respect, then, though occupying different positions on divinity and its ultimate value, these filmic and graphic texts both aim to "[lift] the veil at the horizon of the known" so as to help us entertain the possibility of mending a fractured existence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Chyutin is a PhD candidate in Critical Cultural Studies and Film at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on the intersection between religion and film, and specifically on contemporary Israeli cinema's negotiations of Judaism and Judaic identity. He has essays published or forthcoming in the anthologies *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion* (University of Texas Press) and *Media and Translation* (Bloomsbury Academic), as well as in the peer-reviewed publications *Cinema Journal*, *Shofar*, and *Journal of Jewish Identities*. dsc24@pitt.edu

Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschl, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: John Calder, 1956), 138.
2. André Bazin (1950), "Cinema and Theology," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91.2 (Spring 1992): 402.
3. Charles Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play: Theater, Film, and Religion in America 1880–1900," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 63.

4.   Bazin, "Cinema," 393.

5.   Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

6.   Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 2.

7.   Ibid., 11.

8.   Wendy M. Wright, "Religion, Spirituality, and Film," in *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (London: Continuum, 2009), 200. This universalizing tendency reveals how theories on spiritual film aesthetics are indebted to Hegel's philosophy of *Geist*—and specifically to the argument that "underlying the multiplicity of historical and geographically dispersed religions was an ultimately metaphysical transhistorical substratum" (Tim Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010], 4)—while attempting to overcome the biases of his "gradation" argument, in which different levels of spirituality were ascribed to different religious cultures from a perspective that was "manifestly Eurocentric and [. . .] overtly Christocentric" (ibid., 75). This article's epilogue attempts to demonstrate how the theory of spiritual aesthetics may be applied beyond Christianity to Judaism (over and against Hegel's firm belief that the Jewish religion is less spiritual than its Christian counterpart, the "consummate religion"), but will also point to the limitations of this theory's universalizing tendencies.

9.   Jeffery Pence, "Cinema of the Sublime: Theorizing the Ineffable," *Poetics Today* 25.1 (Spring 2004): 30–68.

10.   Gregg Taylor, "Approaching the Cinema of Silence," *Post Script* 26.2 (Winter–Spring 2007).

11.   Since "Jewish" refers to a broad cultural category that is not exclusively religious, I use the term "Judaic" in reference to those spheres within it that relate specifically to religion.

12.   Bert Cardullo, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 4.

13.   André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 12; my emphasis.

14.   Cardullo, *André Bazin*, 5.

15.   Ibid., 6.

16.   Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religious Film* (London: Continuum, 2012), 38.

17.   Amédée Ayfre (1962), "The Universe of Robert Bresson," in *The Films of Robert Bresson* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 20–21.

18. Henri Agel, *Le Cinéma et le sacré* (Paris: Les Editions du cerf, 1961), 8, quoted in Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema*, 40.

19. Michael Bird, "Film as Hierophany," in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 4.

20. Amédée Ayfre (1952), "Neo-Realism and Phenomenology," in *Cahiers du Cinéma—The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hiller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 184–185.

21. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 39.

22. Ayfre, "The Universe of Robert Bresson," 15.

23. Ibid., 22.

24. Susan Sontag (1964), "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson," in *The Films of Robert Bresson: A Casebook*, ed. Bret Cardullo (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 34.

25. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 39.

26. Amédée Ayfre (1960), "The Cinema and the Christian Faith," trans. J.-F. Tiffoche (Regent University, unpublished PhD diss., 1988), 109.

27. Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005), 37.

28. Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 47.

29. Ibid., 112.

30. Avishai Sivan, "Interview with Avishai Sivan," *The Wanderer—Promotional Booklet for Cannes 2010* (Or Yehuda: Mouth Agape, 2010), 6.

31. Avishai Sivan, "Directors & Scriptwriters to Watch: Avishai Sivan," in *A Decade in Motion: The New Voice of Israeli Cinema*, ed. Avital Bekerman and Noa Mandel (Tel Aviv: Israeli Film Fund, 2012), 34.

32. See Dan Chyutin, "Judaic Cinecorporeality: Fleshing Out the Haredi Male Body in Avishai Sivan's *The Wanderer*," *Shofar* 33.1 (Fall 2014): 57–82.

33. Haviva Pedaya, *Walking Through Trauma: Rituals of Movement in Jewish Myth, Mysticism, and History* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011).

34. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 193.

35. Ibid., 198.

36. Ibid., 201; my emphasis.

37. Ibid., 205.

38. Though the Bible remains mute on the topic, the Midrash does include interpretations of the binding story which describe Isaac as taking an active part in his own sacrifice, even to the extent of asking Abraham to tie him well so that the involuntary

movements of his body would not interfere with his father's execution of divine will. See Aliza Shenhar, *Love and Hate: Biblical Wives, Lovers, and Mistresses* (Haifa: Pardes, 2011), 185.

39.   Scarry, The *Body in Pain*, 237.

40.   Ibid., 241.

41.   Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum, 2009), 2.

42.   Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 44.

43.   André Bazin (1950), "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 30.

44.   Ibid., 31.

45.   Serge Daney (1983), "The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals)," in *Rites of Realism*, ed. Margulies, 38–39.

46.   Ibid., 39.

47.   Sivan, "Interview with Avishai Sivan," 8.

48.   Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 251.

49.   Ibid., 247.

50.   Gerard Loughlin, "Within the Image: Film as Icon," in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 196.

51.   Walter Benjamin (1936), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 233.

52.   Sivan, "Interview with Avishai Sivan," 8.

53.   See Dan Chyutin, "Negotiating Judaism in Contemporary Israeli Cinema: The Spiritual Style of *My Father My Lord*," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 211–222. Interestingly, a comparison between *The Wanderer* and a Judaic-themed film like *My Father My Lord* (*Hufshat Kayitz*, David Volach, 2007) may prove that, though the latter was directed by a person who grew up in ultra-Orthodoxy and the former was directed by one who is distinctly secular, both texts similarly foreground ambivalence by presenting social criticism through the spiritual style. Broadening the investigation beyond *The Wanderer* may thus challenge any facile alignment between the measure of a filmmaker's intimate familiarity with the religious world and the nature of criticism he or she levels against this world on screen.

54.   Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 38.

55.   George Savran, *"He Came Upon the Place": Biblical Theophany Narratives* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), 61–104.

56.   Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 62.

57.   Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 38.

58.   Gershom Scholem (1976), *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 38; emphasis in the original.

59.   For a summary of the different definitions, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1993), 151–168.

60.   Leslie Atzmon, "A Visual Analysis of Anthropomorphism in the Kabbalah: Dissecting the Hebrew Alphabet and Sephirotic Diagram," *Visual Communication* 2 (2003): 104.

61.   Ibid., 108.

62.   Sharon Weiser-Ferguson and Ronit Śoreḳ, "Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art," in *The Divine Image: Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2006), 13–53.

63.   Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 8.

64.   See for example: Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema*; Tiago de Luca, "Carnal Spirituality: the Films of Carlos Reygadas," *Senses of Cinema* 55 (July 2010); Eric G. Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

65.   Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 164.

66.   Judith Wilt, "Acts of God: Film, Religion and 'FX,'" in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, ed. John Mahoney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 332.

67.   Ronie Parciack, "The Religious Experience in Israeli Cinema" (Hebrew University, unpublished MA thesis, 1995), 102.

68.   Shmulik Duvdevani, "Magical Realism in Israeli Cinema," in *With Both Feet on the Clouds: Fantasy and Israeli Culture*, ed. Danielle Gurevitch, Elana Gomel, and Rani Graff (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 141.

69.   Ibid., 152.

70.   Ibid., 157.

71.   This may be contrasted to other national contexts—for example, India—where the holy is automatically connected to the spectacular style (Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema*). The conclusion that may be drawn from this is that different styles can be potentially spiritual, but that this potential becomes actualized only when a style corresponds to the specifications of a particular cultural-historical moment.

72.   See, for example, Yair Sheleg, *The Jewish Renaissance in Israeli Society: The Emergence of a New Jew* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2010).

73.   Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 242.