# Abstract

From 1988-2015, over twenty Israeli documentary films were made on the subject of combat stress reaction (CSR) and its sufferers. These films introduced trauma sufferers' testimonials on the wars they endured, represented the post-traumatic experience, and shed light on sufferers' relationship with their commanders and with Israeli leadership and society. The aesthetic language of these films enfolds different ethical points of view, and ideologies that dictate varying representations of traumatic events and the post-traumatic experience.

The indexical nature of documentary film, and the fact that the 'social actors' it depicts are real-life characters, place the act of watching within an ethical framework; as both the viewer and director, members of Israeli society, are faced with their responsibility toward the trauma sufferers on the screen. The various gazes of the films in question reflect the possible points of view that audience members might adopt toward the trauma sufferers on the screen. Cinematic occupation with trauma and post-traumatic experience produces diverse strategies of representation, both conservative and progressive, that grapple with the 'crisis of representation' pertaining to trauma. The films' representation of CSR and the range of ethical responses to its sufferers, embed the open wound of war into Israeli collective memory via a unique, ever-growing collection of images (Kaes, 1991: 39-40).

The current study examines the singular style of these films as a product of the specific socio-historic moment from which they sprung in contemporary Israel, and as the outcome of an ancient correspondence with the myth of the Binding of Isaac (*Akedat Yitzhak*) in Jewish culture. Thus, they are studied as echoes of both the Israeli present and Jewish mythology, as re-shapers of "general myths or narratives […] models by which people are called to think, live, and die." (Gertz, 1995: 9).

The main contention of this work is that both narrative and visual representations of trauma sufferers and post-trauma change following traumatic events experienced on the Israeli home front, replicate civilian trauma, and demonstrate three shifts in the Israeli social approach to CSR over time: 1. From the denial of CSR to its acknowledgment; 2. From an 'objective,' removed approach to a humane and empathetic approach toward CSR sufferers; 3. From the 'acting out' of trauma to 'working through' trauma.

The films are analyzed by means of three main axes: an inter-textual analysis of the films' correspondence with the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac,[[1]](#footnote-1) a close textual reading of the ethical discourse surrounding documentary film, and the discourse of trauma. The deep structure of these films re-writes the story of the Binding from three different points of view: that of the binder, that of the mother, and that of the bound. These particular perspectives enabled me to categorize the films into three primary models: the "binder," the "bound," and the "mother." These models are distinct from one another in narrative, ethical gaze, and form of trauma representation, and range between the fringe and mainstream during three periods: 1988-1998; 1999-2005; and 2006-2015. These three periods respectively witnessed the terrorist attacks of the 1990s, the Second Intifada, the Second Lebanon War, and unrest in and around the Gaza Strip.

In the first period, during which 23 suicide attacks took place, six documentary films following the "binder" and "bound" models were made, including **Ha-temuna Ha-hasera** (lit. "the missing picture," Asher Tlalim, 1998), **Zihronot Milhama** (lit. "memories of war," Amos Gitai, 1994), and **Erim Ba-laila** (lit. "awake at night," Yoav Ben-David, 1997). In the Second Intifada period, which saw 124 suicide attacks, nine films were made following primarily the "mother" and "bound" model, including **Ha-einayim Shel Ha-medina** (lit. "the country's eyes," Nurit Kedar, 2004), **Ha-hava Ha-sinit – Rashomon** (lit. "the Chinese Farm – Rashomon," Nir Toib, 2004), and **Be-kever Yosef** (lit. "in Joseph's tomb," Yael Kipper, 2004). In the third period, nine films were made following the "mother," "binder," and "bound" models, respectively, including **Mebuzbazim** (lit. "wasted," Nurit Kedar, 2007), **Moreh Dereh** (lit. "travel guide," Avigdor Weil, 2008), and **Wals Im Bashir** ("Waltz with Bashir," Ari Folman, 2008).

On the axis of the Binding story, this study demonstrates how the respective narratives of these films correspond with the ancient story of the Binding as shaped by Jewish tradition and Israeli art. Correspondence with this myth serves as an outlet for the social contradiction still present in Israeli society – the sacrifice of the sons. This correspondence occurs through the central theme[[2]](#footnote-2) of the movies: a young man is sent to combat by his parents/commanders, is in mortal danger, his life is spared while another's is sacrificed, and he is doomed to endure the traumatic memory for years to come. The correspondence process entails the continued re-shaping of the mythical binding story, which is used in Hebrew and Israeli art as an allegory for sending sons to the battlefield: "Our Abrahams are the bereaved parents while our Isaacs are the fallen" (Efrat, 1988). [[3]](#footnote-3)

On the ethical axis, this study introduces three main cinematic gazes that signify the ethical stance of the viewer regarding the trauma sufferers: a cold, hegemonic stance, which identifies with the state that has sent these warriors to battle and adopts the distant perspective of state institutions toward sufferers, viewing them as "others" and "anomalies"; an empathetic stance that poses an alternative to the hegemonic approach through connection and identification with the sufferer; and the personal documentary stance, which characterizes directors who were sent to the battlefield themselves, experienced CSR, and document their own post-trauma. Using Vivian Sobchak and Bill Nichols theory on ethical representation in documentary film (Sobchack, 1984; Nichols, 1991), this study shows how each of the stances above reflects a distinct moral position regarding the sufferers of battle trauma. The hegemonic viewpoint parallels the "clinical-professional" gaze, which represents the sufferers as anomalies within Israeli society; [[4]](#footnote-4)the empathetic stance parallels the "humane-identifying" gaze toward the sufferer; and the third stance parallels the "interventional" gaze, in which the director himself processes the trauma he or she continues to endure.

On the trauma axis, this study examines how the films in question represent trauma and the post-traumatic condition of their heroes through various poetic strategies, which reflect distinct forms of grappling with the post-traumatic experience. These include the post-traumatic poetics of 'acting out' as the result of repressed trauma, 'acting out' as a form of its over-representation, and 'working through,' which represents both trauma and history while placing boundaries between the past and present. Some of the films use complex representation strategies such as contradicting memories, fantastical events, an overload of audio-visual tools, the disconnection of signs from their referents, lack of narrative coherence, a skewed temporal and spatial structure that intermixes "then" and "now" and "here" and "there," and deliberate errors and mistakes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some of the films utilize conservative strategies such as avoiding cinematic representation of the subjective experience alongside realistic representation of the historical aspect of trauma, while maintaining a causal, linear narrative and a clear distinction between past and present. Some also intertwine alternative representations of the inner experience and realistic representations of external historical events.

Using these three axes, the current study defines the "binder" model as characterized by a hegemonic narrative and a distant, "objective" ethical gaze, a model that represents historical events while under-representing the traumatic experience; the "mother" model is characterized by a narrative of grief over the sufferer along with criticism of the hegemony, and by an empathetic and identifying ethical gaze, which over-represents the traumatic experience while representing a balance between inner experience and external events; and the "bound" model is characterized by a narrative that serves the sufferer's viewpoint, an ethical gaze of identification, and over-representation of the traumatic experience alongside a representation of balance between inner experience and external events.

In order to draw the connection between the cinematic apparatus and the historical apparatus, the current study utilizes a neo-historicist approach, which simultaneously examines cinematic and historical texts. The three axes of this study function as the three levels of interpretation proposed by Jameson (2004 [1981]): the first considers the aesthetic act a solution for social contradiction, the second interprets the aesthetic act as a unit that preserves inter-class dialogue, and the third views aesthetic form as a reflection of ideological position. Thus, new writing on the themes of the Binding as a solution to existing cultural contradiction in Israeli society is used to examine the contradiction within the myth itself, the different ethical gazes preserve the inter-class dialogue, and the various representations of the traumatic experience reflect various ideological standpoints.

The following is an overview of the four central chapters included in this study: Chapter Two outlines the theoretical and methodological context of the research axes, and discusses the shift in the Israeli discourse of trauma from denial to acknowledgment, as reflected by clinical research, institutional military discourse, and narrative and documentary film. Chapter Three discusses the first wave of the cinematic corpus and centers on four films: **Ha-temuna Ha-hasera** (lit. "the missing picture," Asher Tlalim, 1988), **Milhemet Yom Ha-kipurim – 20 Shana Ahrei** (lit. "the Yom Kippur War – 20 years later," Reuven Hecker, 1993), **Zihronot Milhama** (lit. "memories of war," Amos Gitai, 1994), and **Erim Ba-laila** (lit. "awake at night," Yoav Ben-David, 1997). The chapter begins with a socio-historical overview of the concept of trauma in Israel toward the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, with reference to terrorist events related to the First Intifada and the Gulf War. It then presents the two central models of the period: the "binder" and "bound" models. Chapter Four concerns the second wave of the corpus and discusses four films: **Kohoteinu Lo Shavu** (lit. "our forces did not return," Irit Gal, 1999), **Be-kever Yosef** (lit. "in Joseph's tomb," Yael Kipper, 2004), **Ha-einayim Shel Ha-medina** (lit. "the country's eyes," Nurit Kedar, 2004), and **Ha-nosea Ha-74** (lit. "the 74th passenger," Hagai Arad, 2004). The chapter begins with a socio-historical overview of the concept of trauma in Israeli society during the Second Intifada, addresses the chronology of trauma during this period, and presents its two primary models: the "mother" and "bound" models. Chapter Five examines the final wave of the corpus, and presents trauma representations that depict stages of processing and healing. The chapter discusses seven films that respectively represent all three models: **Mebuzbazim** (lit. "wasted," Nurit Keder, 2007), **Moreh Dereh** (lit. "travel guide," Avigdor Weil, 2008), **Sameah Sheh Ata Hai** (lit. "happy you're alive," Hilla Medalia, 2010), **Lahtoh Et Ha-ke'ev** (lit. "cutting through the pain," Tsafrir Gelman and Yonatan Nir, 2011), **Wals Im Bashir** ("Waltz with Bashir," Ari Folman, 2008), **Krav Ehad Yoter Midai** (lit. "one battle too many," Yoel Sharon, 2013), and **Sipur Sagur** (lit. "story closed," Micha Livneh, 2015). The chapter begins with a socio-historical overview of Israeli society following the Second Lebanon War and during the period of unrest in and around the Gaza Strip. It then investigates the unique variations of the three models that characterized the period, while focusing on the stages of processing and healing represented in the narrative of the "bound" model.

The analysis laid out in the different chapters indicates that the 1990s were characterized by films consistent with the "binder" model, which signifies identification with the hegemonic approach, a distant gaze toward the sufferers, conservative aesthetics, and realistic representations of trauma; the Second Intifada period was characterized by films consistent with the "mother" model, depicting identification with the sufferers and criticism of leadership, a close and humane gaze toward the sufferers, aesthetics of ethical responsibility, and complex representation strategies of the post-trauma experience; finally, the periods of the Second Lebanon War and Gaza Strip unrest were characterized by a transition from the "mother" model to the "binder" model.

In parallel, all three periods saw the production of films consistent with the "bound" model, which told the post-traumatic story from the sufferer's perspective, adopted the aesthetics of ethical responsibility and engagement, and demonstrated complex strategies of representation regarding the post-traumatic experience. The overall shift in the writing of trauma can be observed in the transition from traumatic 'acting out' in the "bound"-model films of the first and second intifada, to the 'working through' of trauma depicted by "bound"-model films of the third period. The meaning behind this periodization is that the age of "the new wars," during which the civic sphere suffered many traumatic events, is represented in documentary cinema by films with complex aesthetics, innovative forms of expression, and documentary practices that evince ethical responsibility. In the words offered by Comolli and Narboni's groundbreaking article, these films have a progressive quality and belong in the second and third categories—

Films that attack their ideological impact on two fronts. First, through direct political action […] this becomes politically effective only if it interrupts traditional methods of describing reality […] there is another category in which the same double action occurs, though 'against natural progression.' The content is not explicitly political, but somehow become so through the necessary level of criticism expressed toward the content (Comolli and Narboni, 1969: 62).

On the other hand, periods that depict the traditional battlefield and attribute traumatic events mainly to the frontlines, are reflected by more aesthetically conservative films and by documentary practices consistent with the expository mode, which eschew expressions of ethical responsibility toward the other who has suffered combat trauma. These films belong in the first category –

Films soaked-through in dominant ideology in the purest, clearest sense, that give no indication that their creators were even aware of the fact […] these films wholly reflect the institutionalized method of describing reality […] a careless avoidance, as perhaps something is amiss in the very concept of "describing reality" (ibid., 61).

Thus, the **"binder" model** is described in the context of the first period through the films **Ha-temuna Ha-hasera** (lit. "the missing picture," Asher Tlalim, 1988) and **Milhemet Yom Ha-Kipurim – 20 Shana Ahrei** (Reuven Hecker, 1993). I demonstrate that **Ha-temuna Ha-hasera** is the product of a particular historical moment, during which the approach to CSR transitioned from denial to acknowledgement through the social discourse generated by the "psychologists' letter." I contend that **Ha-temuna Ha-hasera** is characterized by a narrative that includes the sudden healing of its hero, Yoel Sharon, who is described as a martyr that willingly sacrifices himself for the homeland, and lacks criticism of leadership; follows the expository mode and has a "clinical-professional" gaze; and depicts an "objective" writing of trauma, which addresses the historical aspect but overlooks the subjective aspect. As an additional variation of the "binder" model, I demonstrate that **Milhemet Yom Ha-kipurim – 20 Shana Ahrei** does not feature a "redemption" narrative that concludes with the healing of its hero, but rather the ongoing post-traumatic state of a group of CSR sufferers. In parallel, the film depicts protagonists who sacrifice themselves for the homeland and avoids criticizing leadership; ethically, the movie is consistent with the expository mode and mostly adopts a "clinical-professional" gaze alongside instances of a "humane-identifying" gaze. Finally, the film offers realistic representations of the traumatic event that avoid addressing its excessive nature.

Using a symptomatic reading, I indicate that both films' avoidance of visually grappling with trauma leads to the 'acting out' of trauma, which undermines the text on its surface. The "binder" model disappears during the Second Intifada period, but resurfaces in the first decade of the current century, in films such as **Sameah She-ata Hai** (lit. "happy you're alive," Hilla Medalia, 2010) and **Lahtoh Et Ha-ke'ev** (lit. "cutting through the pain," Yonatan Nir and Tsafrir Gelman, 2011), which were featured during the period of unrest in and around the Gaza Strip. **Lahtoh Et Ha-ke'ev** is characterized by a narrative that includes the sudden healing of its hero as the result of a surrealist dream, a description of Matan Berman as a martyr who has willingly sacrificed himself for the nation, identification with the hegemonic stance and avoidance of criticizing leadership; the film is consistent with the expository mode, and even includes voyeuristic/attractive elements alongside a "clinical-professional" gaze toward Berman; it depicts an aesthetically realistic representation of trauma, usually by using archival footage and newscasts. **Sameah She-ata Hai** is also characterized by a narrative that includes the healing of its hero – following protracted psychological treatment in Kinnel's case and a musical performance in Whitman's case; it represents its heroes as martyrs who have sacrificed themselves for the nation due to their upbringing and avoids criticizing leadership. The film is consistent with the expository mode and largely implements a "clinical-professional" gaze. Much like **Lahtoh Et Ha-ke'ev**, **Sameah She-ata Hai** avoids representing the structure of the post-traumatic experience or aesthetically addressing traumatic excess. Using a symptomatic reading, I show that in these films as well, the attempt to create narrative closure of healing from trauma actually prompts the 'acting out' of trauma.

The **"mother" model** is discussed in the second wave through three female-directed films from the Second Intifada period: **Kohoteinu Lo Shavu** (lit. "our forces did not return," Irit Gal, 1999), **Ha-einayim Shel Ha-medina** (lit. "the country's eyes," Nurit Kedar, 2004), and **Be-kever Yosef** (lit. "in Joseph's tomb," Yael Kipper, 2004). I show that **Kohoteinu Lo Shavu** is characterized by a narrative that identifies with the position of the mother – which expresses identification with the sufferer and criticism of leadership; follows the reflexive expository mode, which reveals the power dynamics between the creator behind the camera and the documented objects, and reflects a "humane-identifying" gaze toward its heroes Ronny Yarkoni and Israel Simantov; the film uses an aesthetic that represents the traumatic structure alongside historical events, reflecting processes of 'working through' trauma. My contention is that **Ha-'einayim Shel Ha-medina** has a narrative of extreme identification with the sufferer alongside vehement criticism of Israeli leadership and society; follows the performative mode, and has a "human-identifying" gaze and a counter-hegemonic stance toward Israeli society and leadership; the film uses innovative aesthetic strategies that, beyond addressing the traumatic structure, seek to represent a collective post-traumatic consciousness in which the nation itself 'acts out' post-traumatic symptoms. I propose that **Be-kever Yosef** is characterized by a narrative that identifies with the sufferers and expresses articulate, specific criticism of leadership; follows the participatory mode, which deconstructs the submersion of the hegemonic point of view; and has a realistic aesthetic that leads to the 'acting out' of trauma.

In the third wave, I examine two films consistent with the "mother" model: **Mebuzbazim** (lit. "wasted," Nurit Kedar, 2007), and **Moreh Dereh** (lit. "travel guide," Avigdor Weil, 2008). I show that **Mebuzbazim** is characterized by a narrative that identifies with the sufferers while criticizing leadership and society; follows the performative mode and has a "humane-identifying" gaze; and uses a complex aesthetic that addresses the excess of trauma. I contend that **Moreh Dereh** is also characterized by a narrative that identifies with the sufferers while criticizing leadership (in both its actual and symbolic forms, as represented by Avri's father); follows the participatory mode along with some reflexive attributes, and has an overt "humane-identifying" gaze demonstrated by extreme, prolonged close-ups of the sufferer's face throughout the movie; and uses an aesthetic of \_\_\_, which represents trauma through erosion of the \_\_\_ process and rejection of \_\_\_ processes.

Films consistent with the **"bound" model** appear in all three waves. In the first wave, I discuss **Zihronot Milhama** (lit. "memories of war," Amos Gitai, 1994) and **Erim Ba-laila** (lit. "awake at night," Yoav Ben-David, 1996). I show that **Zihronot Milhama** is characterized by a narrative written from the sufferer's point of view, is critical of the state while depicting the sufferers as martyrs, and presents a prolonged post-traumatic state alongside the possibility of healing; the film follows the performative mode and has an "interventional" and "humane-identifying" gaze; its aesthetic expresses post-traumatic 'acting out' through a number of representation strategies that interrupt temporality and cinematic space. I contend that **Erim Ba-laila** is also characterized by a narrative written from the sufferer's point of view, is vehemently critical of leadership and society and expresses a prolonged post-traumatic state; mainly follows the participatory model and has an "interventional" gaze along with critical counter-hegemonic viewpoints; and uses an aesthetic that expresses the 'acting out' of trauma by reconstructing the traumatic experience.

In the second wave, I examine the characteristics of the "bound" model in the film **Ha-noseah Ha-74** (lit. "the 74th passenger," Hagai Arad, 2004). I show that the film is characterized by a narrative written from the sufferer's point of view, is vehemently critical of leadership (both actual and symbolic, as represented by the sufferer's parents), and presents a prolonged traumatic state without the possibility of healing; the film follows the performative mode and has an "interventional" and "humane-identifying" gaze; and uses an aesthetic that represents the temporal and referential interruption of the traumatic structure.

In the third wave, I examine the films **Wals Im Bashir** ("Waltz with Bashir," Ari Folman, 2008), **Krav Ehad Yoter Midai** (lit. "one battle too many," Yoel Sharon, 2013), and **Sipur Sagur** (lit. "story closed," Micha Livneh, 2015), and show that they signify stages of the processing of trauma in both their narratives and aesthetics. I propose that the narrative of **Wals Im Bashir**, which is written from the sufferer's point of view, describes the processing of traumatic experience; follows the performative mode and has an "interventional" and "clinical-professional" gaze; and uses an aesthetic of documentary animation that signifies the processing of trauma by combining an indexical soundtrack with iconic animation. I contend that the narrative of **Krav Ehad Yoter Midai**, written from the perspective of the sufferer, describes processing of the traumatic experience; follows the reflexive, participatory, and performative modes and has an "interventional" and "humane-identifying" gaze that includes a counter-hegemonic stance; and that the film's aesthetic signifies processing through realistic cinematography alongside surrealist animation. I demonstrate that the narrative of **Sipur Sagur** describes the processing of the traumatic experience; follows the reflexive, performative, and participatory modes, and has an overtly "interventional" and "humane-identifying" gaze; and that the film's aesthetic signifies processing by combining realistic and symbolic cinematography with elements of parapraxis.

This study is significant, first and foremost, for its identification, organization, and categorization of the Israeli documentary corpus of combat stress reaction. This corpus has yet to be investigated, despite the considerable space it claims in the Israeli documentary field, and despite the centrality of trauma in Israeli cinema at large. Secondly, from a cinematic perspective, the study methodically introduces alternative cinematic representation practices with which documentary films can present subjective experiences of trauma that elude ordinary memory and representation constructs. Thirdly, the current study is interdisciplinary and forms unique connections between various social sciences including cinema, psychology, sociology, mythology, history, and ethics. Fourth, the study is particularly significant to war-ridden Israeli society: it discusses the capacity of Hebrew culture to address the trauma of war, and indicates the shift in collective memory from the 'acting out' of trauma to 'working through' trauma, and from dissociation from its sufferers to kinship with them. The centrality of the cinematic medium to collective memory (Kaes, 1991) affects Israeli society's view of CSR sufferers, as well as its social tendency toward traumatic repetition compulsion. The processes of re-membering[[6]](#footnote-6) depicted in some of the films at hand allow us to restore identities that have been silenced, [[7]](#footnote-7)and processes of 'working through' trauma, presented in the final films of the corpus, embed into Israeli collective consciousness the possibility of healing from the protracted trauma inflicted by past wars and terrorist attacks.

An additional, central aspect of this study's significance concerns its objects. Israeli society's acknowledgement of those who have fought on its behalf and returned with mental injuries is the foundation necessary to bridging between trauma sufferers and the community. For many years, the institution and society of Israel have ignored trauma sufferers and their voice, as "subjugated or remote groups that were formerly silenced" (Silberstein, 1996: 114). They were excluded and repressed out of collective memory for political, ideological, and economic reasons, among others. The current study seeks to treat the documentary corpus in question as an aesthetic act that participates in efforts to "restore the status of the outcasts" (Shohat, 1998: 55).

1. In doing so, I do not seek to determine the intention of the creators (Barth, 2005 [1968]), but to perform an inter-textual reading of cinematic text as a "palimpsest" (Gerard Genette, 1997 [1982]), a multi-layered document in which elements of former writing resurface in new writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "The theme, as opposed to the myth, is its literary manifestation in 'plays,' so to speak, that place a narrative and characters from different contexts in one creative work or another" (Levi, 1991; 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Also see Weiss's claim that, "One of the most prevalent themes in new Hebrew storytelling and poetry… it the Binding" (Weiss, 1991: 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the words of Ann Kaplan, this stance can be described as "empty empathy," a voyeuristic gaze into the lives of sufferers, devoid of ethical-social responsibility toward the victims (Kaplan, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As I will later show, many studies have addressed the representation strategies of films on post-trauma. For instance, see Kaes, 2009; Walker, 2005; Radstone, 2000; Elaesser, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A term coined by Homi Bhabha that describes the act of re-membering in the subjective story, which reassembles the dis-membered past and illuminates the traumatic condition in the present (Bhabha, 1994:63; in Munk, איות? 2012: 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As noted by Gertz איות? in another context, "They produce an alternative history using a cinematic aesthetic whose past, present, and future prompt a new human point of view: an ethical point of view" (Gertz, 2017: 215). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)