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Abstract

Lesbian Moments in Israeli Visual Popular Culture 1979-2018

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by
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In 1979, Michal Bat Adam made her film, *Moments*. It was Bat Adam's directorial debut following an established acting career, as well as the first Israeli motion picture (a French-Israeli coproduction) to feature "lesbian moments" – a term I shall be using from hereinafter to refer to and describe representations of lesbianism in visual popular culture, and which I will be exploring later on. The film is alluded to at the beginning of Orly Lubin's essay, *Women, Nationality, Ethnicity*, where she writes how "in the dramatic climax that establishes female sexuality and love between women, the film turns into a pornographic cliché" (Lubin, 1998, 223).

In this study, I set out to explore how the figure of the lesbian is portrayed in Israeli visual popular culture. My research is rooted in a passion to examine representations of lesbian moments in Israeli visual popular culture, as well as the notable rise in the recurrence of these representations as we near the 21st century. The quest for representation of lesbian moments commences with Michal Bat Adam's 1979 film, *Moments*, and culminates in 2018 with a number of prime-time drama series such as *Neighborhood* (2018, Giora Chamizer, HOT).

Moments is the story of Yola, a Tel Aviv-based author who heads to Jerusalem where she hopes to get some writing done. On the train, she meets Anne, a French photographer. The two speak French amongst themselves for the majority of the film. It is against the backdrop of several encounters they have with men that an intimate bond is formed between the two women. The film sets up the lesbian moment in an art-centric world of author-meets-photographer, whilst the moment itself is made possible owing to the state of transit between two Israeli cities. The themes emerging from the "close reading" of the text within its cultural context – the French language;

transit between spaces; positioning the lesbian moment in the art world, and the masculine narrative as it reacts to lesbian moments – will guide my reading of all other visual texts that make up the corpus of this study.

At the heart of visual pop culture, we find fiction films and television series that are, by their nature, much more available to a very wide-ranging audience, as opposed to other media such as video art for instance (which is also “visuals in motion”), or short films. With that in mind, this study focuses on Israeli television series and films where lesbian moments are portrayed, whether it be a random kiss between two women, or an on-going relationship that the text identifies as “lesbian” or that can be labelled as such due to the mounting textual themes of “lesbian moments”.

The research’s corpus spans roughly 40 works. This volume of content lends the study a high level of comprehensiveness and allows one to fully categorise and sort the visual texts in this specific period. The study’s aim is to present those themes of lesbian representations as constructed in these texts, and to anchor the discussion in the solid foundation of “lesbian moments” as those are sorted thematically. Therefore, the chapters touch on central themes that occur and recur in representations of lesbian moments in Israeli visual pop culture between the years 1979-2018. The study also includes an addendum featuring the storylines and plot outlines of the texts containing the lesbian moment (including visual imagery taken from the films and television programs).

Examining the corpus in full reveals a key feature of lesbian representations in all of these media; every representation and every narrative where a lesbian is portrayed, presents a “moment” that has come to an end. Thus, what resonates the most in the “lesbian moment” is the fact that the fleeting contact has ceased, and the relationship then quickly dissipates. In reality, Israeli visual popular culture does not truly portray

lesbians but rather, some scant moments of lesbianism that do not persist, which is why the term “lesbian moments” (inspired by the title of the film *Moments*) captures the essence of these onscreen representations.

Though these moments occur in certain social and cultural contexts in a particular period of time, this study ultimately argues that whilst the gradual increase in representations lesbian moment does suggest certain shifts in Israeli culture, these representations do not portray lesbianism as an ongoing, rooted presence that can be identified as decidedly lesbian.

Main Working Hypotheses

The study’s first working hypothesis is that these “moments” are a response to pop culture’s need to be embraced by as wide an audience as possible. The main mechanism that enables this is a series of recurring themes that show up in all types of fleeting lesbian encounters: the French connection, which positions lesbians in an outer-Israeli context; the in-between-cities setting, which serves to emphasize the transient nature of the lesbian moment; the man’s attitude to lesbianism; and the positioning of the lesbian moment in the art world. These motifs effectively make up a strategy by which one can simultaneously portray and curtail lesbianism.

My study’s second hypothesis posits that this fleeting lesbian moment also possesses the power to undermine its very transience; that is to say, the displaying of lesbian existence outside time and space – in the fleeting moment in a random location – suggests a number of subversive avenues by which the lesbian moment may continue as something that never truly concludes, but is rather left there, reverberating and echoing on.

Prevalent Themes in “Lesbian Moments”

This research is thematic, in that it engages with themes that embed the lesbian moment into the study's corpus, and which also make up its chapters: the connection between lesbianism and Frenchness; the “in transit / in-between” spatial setting; the male viewpoint in regards to the lesbian moment, and the positioning of the lesbian moment in the art world. These themes, which transpire in the “lesbian moments”, lend themselves not only to sorting and cataloguing, but also to exploring the ways in which the lesbian moment is constructed, the contrast between the growing number of “lesbian moments” and their seemingly permanent fate as moments doomed to conclude, and the identity dilemma: the painstakingly obvious presence of lesbianism versus the unwillingness to label neither character nor situation as such.

These “lesbian moments” tie into each of these themes as they allow the texts to mark the lesbian as an “other”; particularly, in the spatial sense – she is someone who is not from our neck of the woods, she's not from “around here” – whether it be by positioning her in a foreign language, a French context, or in the otherwise unattainable art world. The exclusion of the lesbian also involves the highlighting of the transient nature of these “lesbian moments” as fragmented, possessing neither stability nor continuity, and subject to the male gaze which represents the “viewers” as well as the “norm”.

Features of the “Lesbian Moment”

The lesbian moment occurs in the text as an erotic moment of lesbianism. The lesbian moment itself can be a single, fleeting moment, where two women share a kiss; one of whom may not necessarily even be a lesbian (e.g. the two soldier friends in the musical dramedy *Our Song* [2006, Ori Gross, Yoav Tzafir and Tamira Yardeni, yes).

At the same time, it could just as well emerge as a meaningful, on-going relationship between a lesbian woman and another woman for whom this is her first same-sex relationship (see *Parashat Ha-Shavua* [2008, Rani Blair and Anat Asulin, HOT] or *Ha-Alufa* [2006-2008, Dror Nobleman, HOT]). The emphasis on sexuality as the element that establishes the lesbian moments is anchored in Teresa de Lauretis' definition of "lesbian" as a term that refers, first and foremost, to sexuality in the broadest possible sense (de Lauretis 1994, 284).

In her book, *The Practice of Love*, de Lauretis seeks to give lesbianism a sexual definition. Sexuality is a main focal point for de Lauretis, who has been consistently troubled by theoretic and cinematic schools of thought that de-eroticise lesbian identity. In this sense, her strategy is essential to the construction of lesbian identity without risking the annihilation of its sexual aspect (Ibid.). The thing that sets lesbian sexuality apart, she explains, is desire – beyond any form of female identification, or even a sexual act. De Lauretis stresses that one cannot just “make” a lesbian in a void, as an encounter between two women is required. “[I]t takes two women, not one, to make lesbian” (Ibid., 283). That is to say, lesbianism is something that forms in the course of a relationship and is not autonomous. Therefore, I opt to highlight and further examine visual texts that portray interactions between two women (i.e. a lesbian moment), and will favour them over texts that focus solely on the definition of “who is a lesbian?” without ever showing the “lesbian” character present and active in any moment that is decisively and categorically lesbian. Hence, this study seeks to define the lesbian moment as a sexual act, and will discuss distinct representations of sexuality and desire between two women.

Characteristics of the Lesbian Moment

When examining the study's corpus, it emerges that in all representations of lesbian moments, whether a random kiss or long-term relationship, the "moment" always meets its end – the relationships are doomed to reach a permanent impasse, and in some cases the characters themselves fade out of the texts, until they gradually phase out of the narrative altogether. It therefore appears that whilst the texts do present the premise of lesbianism, at the same time they undermine and prevent any prospects of its longevity. Moreover, despite the relatively large number of lesbian representations, very few of the characters actually adhere to this definition and self-identify as lesbians.

The term "lesbian moments" circumvents the question of identity and does not presume that the women included in it are in fact "lesbians" per se. In this respect, the majority of characters can be placed on the lesbian spectrum outlined by Adrienne Rich in the essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in which she refers to a "range" of experimentation in every woman's life throughout history. These experiences are characterized by feminine identification, which extends beyond the scope of whether a woman has in fact engaged in actual genital, sexual contact with another woman, or had consciously desired such contact. Furthermore, throughout all of the texts in this study's corpus, the prospect of bisexual identification is not raised, not even once; for when there is no space for lesbian identification and for imbuing the lesbian moment with meaning, there would inevitably be no way of acknowledging bisexual identification. Thus, whilst the research corpus does bring forward a large number of lesbian representations, however transient, the narratives continue to hurl their characters back and forth between formal identifications as lesbians and a refusal to "acknowledge" that they are leading a lesbian life.

The chapter titled **The French Connection** explores the connection to Frenchness through character or language, and the very theme of Frenchness as an element that denotes Mizrahi characters. I will suggest an extensive discussion of *Round Trip* (2002, Shahar Rozen), *Turn Left at the End of the World* (2004, Avi Nesher), *The Secrets* (2007, Avi Nesher), *Joe + Belle* (2011, Veronica Kedar), and *Parashat Ha-Shavua*. The lesbian narrative, which portrays characters with some French ties, positions the lesbian character outside the Israeli context – that is to say, her lesbianism is something that happens to “others”, therefore framing it as a presence with a continental air that is decidedly foreign. Another potential strategy may place the lesbian character’s French connection in a local, Israeli-Mizrahi context. Examples cited in this chapter range from anecdotal references to a character of French descent to such that allow exploring the lesbian moment by making it romantic, almost sublime, but simultaneously remote via French culture.

With this in mind, I offer two readings of the French connection: the first is a global reading, a nod to the European dream and an acknowledgment of the influence French culture has had on Israeli culture (beginning with the Israeli 1960s and ‘70s “New Sensitivity” cinematic movement; see Shohat 2005; Schweitzer 2003; Munk 2012), while the second assumes a local-Mizrahi angle, seeing as how the majority of Israeli French speakers are immigrants from North African countries. In this chapter, I will also be addressing the representation of the “French woman” as hypersexual: French, stereotypically known in pop culture as a romantic language and/or a sexually promiscuous culture, may facilitate the establishing of the lesbian moment. In this context, then, Mizrahiness is also delineated as hypersexual (Yosef 2010), certainly in the case of a Mizrahi, French-speaking woman.

The chapter **Between Two Cities** raises the argument that the prospect of a relationship between the two women only becomes viable whilst in transit between two cities (see *Moments*, *Joe + Belle*, and *Who Gave you a License?* [2014, Daniella Doron, Talya Lavie and Michal Vinik, Channel 1]). This is very much in contrast with gay films, where in most cases it is the move to Tel Aviv that facilitates the primary homosexual moment, as the male protagonist arrives in the big city that is the culture and nightlife capital (and as such, also the epicenter of gay life). In lesbian narratives on the other hand, not all roads lead to Tel Aviv, with particular emphasis placed on one's travels, being on the road, and the state of transit as a means of establishing the relationship where the locale acts as the agent of desire; thus, each of the women frames her companion within the vistas of the foreign town which they are passing through.

The chapter distinctly characterizes the protagonists during lesbian moments as ones who require movement through space in order to realize and act out the lesbian moment. The majority of the research corpus is referenced in this chapter – from characters travelling between settings to characters as drivers. The texts alluded to in this chapter prominently feature movement between cities, both in and outside Israel; when set in Israel, physical statements are made concerning driving either as a precursor to sex or as the very location for the sex scene.

The chapter **Take it like a Man** explores the lesbian moment from the narrative's male focal point. The study's corpus suggests a rather large number of popular texts in which lesbian moments are addressed from a male point of view and where emphasis is given to the reaction of the father or former partner of the character who has had a lesbian moment; see *Parashat Ha-Shavua*, *In Treatment* (2008, Hagai Levi, HOT), *Round Trip*, and *Beauty and the Baker* (2013, Assi Azar, Keshet channel 2). This point

of view promotes far more daring sexual representations (see the sex scenes on *When will we Kiss* [2008, Dalit Kahan, channel 10] and *Parashat Ha-Shavua*), while mediating them and portraying lesbians as women who have “sinned and strayed” into a same-sex relationship, and are either punished for it, or end up alone. *Parashat Ha-Shavua*, for instance, features a tragic model whereby the protagonist’s demise is of her own making: Elia Ben David, who is having a relationship with a lesbian woman, dies after eating some of her own homemade Chraime (a spicy, Moroccan fish dish); *Beauty and the Baker*, on the other hand, leaves the character of Merav trapped in her impossible love for her teacher.

The term “lesbian kiss” is also discussed in this chapter. An investigation of the research corpus suggests that the masculine narrative acknowledges the lesbian moment, and is employed as a justification for the visual portrayal of the sexual act, in such a way that eventually, lesbian sex is represented as if it was being performed for the male gaze’s benefit. On the other hand, the chapter also proposes a subversive reading whereby the lesbian moment can be established and validated, with the male character used as the mediating agent.

The almost forced binding of lesbianism with masculinity gives one pause, as it suggests an attempt to link the characters to heterosexuality; that is to say, more than an attempt to suggest that even a heterosexual married woman could “turn lesbian” (as in the case of Michelle in *Bad Girls* [2006, Arik Rothstein, Yoav Paz and Izhar Harlev, Channel 24] or Nurit in *Round Trip*), we are given a stark reminder that even a lesbian woman “belongs” in fact to some man. That, right there, is the additional layer that surrounds every lesbian representation, however diverse, marginalizing it and rendering it utterly transient.

The chapter **Lesbian Moments in the Art World** will explore those narratives in which lesbian moments are positioned in the art world. *It's that Age* (1989, Hagar Kot), *Bad Girls*, *Our Song*, and *Danny Hollywood* (2008-2009, Ori Gross, Yoav Tsafir and Tmira Yardeni, yes) are all texts in which the lesbian character who is an artist – whether a photographer, musician or sculptor – is out of the closet and is identified as lesbian. To a great extent, this narrative pattern corresponds with the global, visual culture in which lesbians are positioned in the art world. Nonetheless, these Israeli texts employ the art world as a means of keeping the lesbian contained, through the romanticizing of the creative woman (which, as well as being a form of glorification, is also a way of portraying something as only attainable to some) whilst in the process, erasing her from the Israeli day-to-day landscape. The art world is a place of glamour, of musicians, authors and photographers; however, the woman watching does not have recourse to any of that, seeing as how “she who is arty” is, by definition, the exception to the rule. Therefore, setting up the lesbian character in the art world essentially renders her captive there, in that lesbians are strictly confined to that glamorous, closed off, and utterly unattainable world.

Furthermore, these storylines create a comparison of sorts between lesbianism and the art world – as something that is alluring and sublime but is also not “real” or practical for the Israeli woman to be pursuing in the long haul. There is therefore a mirroring between the representation of art and that of lesbianism: art is depicted as something that is appropriate for young girls and which is likely to “fade over time”, making its way to a “proper”, more “authentic” and “grownup” profession, just like the lesbian moment which is portrayed in those same visual texts as something that is ultimately dropped in favor of a more “valuable”, “real” relationship. Therefore, one ought to linger on the correlation between the portrayal of lesbianism as something you take up in your own free time, a hobby if you will, which neither suggests nor

commands continuity, and the taking up of art as something that is equally “nonbinding.” I wish to offer a reading whereby this correlation not only delineates and confirms the lesbian moment’s timeframe and transience, but also its *marginality*: on the one hand, it can only exist in one’s own free time, when you can devote yourself to what you truly love; however, at the same time, it is made painstakingly clear that whatever one does in their own free time is never intended to be a long-term engagement.

Based on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “third space” and Yael Munk’s dissertation, titled “Border Cinema” (2004), one may argue that for lesbians in Israeli visual popular culture, the third space is the only place that they can truly inhabit. Positioning the lesbian moment in a third space allegedly hinders the prospect of an ongoing, lesbian identity; however, in effect it may also operate as an alternative site for intimacy between the women, where passion can continue unimpeded and where “women’s time” is allowed to go on – all within a mode of cyclical writing which rejects templated, chronological and narrative closure. In this context of film and television representations, cyclical writing can also be read as a feminine narrative, much like those open-ended soap operas that never conclude and just carry on moving through their fictional space and time. I consider Sally Munt’s work in a similar manner – as part of a greater strategy of female writing which is neither bound by chronology nor coherency.

Therefore, on the heels of Elizabeth Freeman and Sally Munt’s work, and in order to avoid the danger of replicating the lesbian moment’s lack of continuity, my aim is to anchor the characters in the otherwise-fleeting lesbian moment and open it up to subversive readings in which it is made present within the space of the text *and* beyond what is seen onscreen. I emphasize the subversive potential in the very act of making the lesbian moment present and visible; demonstrating how from this very

motion in one space, emerges the defiant prospect of the lesbian moment's secured longevity.

Another theoretical framework is suggested by Hartal et al., who link between lingering in a safe space and a "suspension of time". According to them, the act of time suspension is the fourth practice required for establishing a "queer space": "it aims to create a space of continuity, a type of space that does not form gaps between one's own inner experience of identity and the ability to perform and articulate this identity" (Hartal, David, and Pascar 2014, 113). Taking this into account, I propose the prospect of an *imagined, symbolic space where the lesbian moment can be present throughout time*. It is a way for the lesbian character in those visual texts to hit the proverbial "pause" button on time, and to carry on existing within that same space; a place where the lesbian moment ceases to be just that, and instead can retain a cyclical, female existence. This also ties into Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "non-sequential forms of time", capable of generating and placing the subject into "time durations otherwise invisible to the historicist eye", in order to grant the lesbian moment continuity and longevity across time in a lesbian sphere that transcends the screen. It is through these theoretical strategies that I wish to suspend the transient lesbian moment and by pausing it, give the relationship its hitherto illusive continuity.

Moreover, I aim to draw on soap operas' power that comes from the open-ended nature of their genre, tie it to the subversive queer potential that is enabled by the characters' lack of continuity in the lesbian moment, and argue that this connection provides continuity to those otherwise-fleeting lesbian moments. After all, the majority of the narratives referenced in this study's corpus offer no "solution" in the form of dramatic resolution, but rather allow the characters to simply fade into the ether without any plot justifications – the storylines just seem to go in another direction (script-wise, these are usually the story arcs of supporting characters). That

is to say, it is the absence of narrative accountability for the immediate absence of a character that also sets up a potential reading whereby the characters can be placed right back in the same narrative sphere they had been inhabiting, and where they can still go about further pursuing those lesbian moments, beyond the framework of time.

The lesbian character is trapped between the Israeli “here and now” and a flirtation with a cosmopolitan world; ever-wandering and in transit between places, whether by train, bus, or car – she is always in motion between two cities. Therefore, she ultimately becomes a representation of a hybrid figure who cannot evolve, wedged between the metropolis and the suburbs, and between an Israeli and European context. However, she also effectively makes a home for herself in this “in-between” space; a place that is a subversive setting and space where she, who is neither here nor there, can finally put the ‘be’ in lesbian. At the same time, the female character faces another prospect where she can make a home for herself in any place or city she ends up in.

In all the visual texts cited in the study, multiple elements shadow the complexity of the lesbian moment’s existence within the framework of “Compulsory heterosexuality” (in the words of Adrienne Rich): the movement – the potential of giving yourself a “lesbian moment” virtually almost anywhere, coupled with the physical relocation required to facilitate it; the constant shifting between unbridled freedom and exhaustion; and the changes between impossible locations that undermine the establishing of a solid home. What is more, the lesbian moment’s fleeting existence allows one to try to create it anywhere possible on the one hand, but at the same time whenever the lesbian moment is realized and acted upon, its existence (or lack thereof) is instantly delimited.

I therefore wish to position the characters in the lesbian moment and to turn its very dissipation into a way of making it present and tangible. Such a reading

highlights the subversive potential in the very act of making the lesbian moment present: and from that very move, emerges the prospect of continuing the lesbian moment and transcending from a momentary flight into lesbianism, to a state of les-being.

This study aims to cover the full scope of Israeli film and television content featuring lesbian moments until 2018, delimiting over 40 years' worth of lesbian moments in Israeli visual popular culture. The recurrence of the same themes throughout the full 40-year period covered by the research corpus further solidifies the arguments I have presented in the course of this study, with regards to the prevalent fleetingness motif which assumes many forms within the various themes. Lesbian moments always occur under the headings of the major themes I had mapped out and identified: the French connection; between two cities; take it like a man; and moments in the art world.

About 40 years separate between *Moments*, the first film discussed in the study's corpus, and the television series *Neighborhood*. However, the themes I have identified and presented in the course of the study are present in both. Whereas in *Moments*, the two women meet whilst in transit on a train, and later opt to spend more time together and check into a Jerusalem hotel, in *Neighborhood*, the two girls, Racheli and Dorie, rendezvous at an Eilat hotel until they head back together to Racheli's neighborhood. The very fact that in two visual texts that are decades apart from each other (in terms of when they were made, aired, how they were produced and the genre to which they belong), the representations of a lesbian moment feature that many thematic parallels and similarities, further cements the claims made throughout the research, and their importance to the reading of all visual texts referenced in its course.

The theoretical structure of this study, at the core of which is the sorting and occurrence of all aforementioned themes, suggests a lack of distinction between television and film. What is more, whilst on television, the majority of lesbian moments seem to appear only in a series' later seasons, in film, since 2017 onwards, there has been a notable surge in storylines focusing on a meaningful lesbian moment; in *Blush* (2016, Michal Vinik), *In Between* (2017, Maysaloun Hamoud), *Montana*, (2017, Limor Shmila), and *Red Cow* (2018, Tsivia Barkai), for instance, even when the lesbian moment fades, as per the themes, the lesbian character *is* assigned a major storyline, and the lesbian moment is further developed and given depth. In these independent films, the lesbian is a lead character, whilst the female directors and creators actively sought out a lesbian actress for the lead role. This is LGBT cinema, where even when the main character is not a lesbian, the lesbian moment featured in the film is nonetheless heartrending, and given meaning and attention in order to create a truly touching lesbian moment.

In the course of this study, I have proposed a discussion of how the themes, in which the lesbian moment occurs, integrate and facilitate its removal and its exclusion from continuity across time, creating a potent motif of transience, woven into all themes in the “lesbian moment”. The portrayal of these themes combined, displays the lesbian moment and its growing presence in Israeli popular culture as a moment inserted into the text only to then be unceremoniously yanked out of it and stopped in its tracks. Nonetheless, the very absence, which contains the fading of both the lesbian moment *and* the lesbian characters from the visual text, emerges as a space where one may find continuity after all, despite the text's best efforts.