

The Israeli Contribution and Evolution to LGBT Cinema: LGBT Israeli Representations from the 1980s until Today

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Abstract

This research explores the cinematic representation evolution of LGBT characters in Israeli cinema. Do Israeli LGBT characters receive adequate amount of media exposure within Israeli cinema? Are they represented as “mainstream” or “Queer” and stereotypical? Has the representation evolved over the years? Or has it stayed the same? This research compares different Israeli LGBT oriented films, from the 1980s to today; the different LGBT stereotypes presented, the shattering of this community masculine vs. Feminine Gays and Lesbians image throughout media history and the need to become mainstream opposed to Queer, and simply blend into the majority of the population. In the beginning of the millennium – just like the rest of the modern world took cinema towards the future; Israeli gay filmmakers began creating films devoid of stereotypes and actually told a real honest story, which helped various audiences related to those LGBT characters. It is very clear that the Israeli film industry has come a long way from the 1980s until today. In the past five years you cannot find LGBT films that show LGBT characters in a stereotypical way, and the representation of those characters are always positive.

Keywords: Mainstreamism; Stereotypes; Media; Evolution; Queer theory; LGBT

Introduction

This research shows the integration of the LGBT community in a western context through Israeli LGBT themed films. These aims were followed by means of a research conducted on exploring the LGBT community evolution from niche margins and stereotypes into modern mainstream media, by shattering stereotypes, negative and prejudice stigmas while showing the advancement of modern society with regard to this issue. Using quantitative research method through theoretical and media analysis, analyzing how media representation of “LGBT” has changed over the past four decades, while testing the analytical potential of “Queer Theory” in front of a whole range of public and private understandings of sexual orientation in present society.

Queer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant, an identity without an essence [1]. The Queer Theory suggests that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are, furthermore, it is meaningless to talk in general about a certain minority group, since different identities comprise of various elements, it is wrong to assume that people are joint together on the basis of one shared characteristic. Mainstreamism is the transition from the niche margins into normative lifestyle [2]. The aim of this research is to understand in what ways the Israeli LGBT community is represented in Israeli cinema; to explore the evolution of LGBT characters representation in Israeli cinema from the 1980’s – today: How have these representations evolved over the years? To explore how LGBT characters are represented in the various Israeli films, to examine LGBT characters involvement, from the Queer margins into mainstream culture.

This research compares different Israeli LGBT oriented films, from the 1980s to today; The different LGBT stereotypes presented, the shattering of this community masculine vs. Feminine Gays and Lesbians image throughout media history and the need to become mainstream opposed to Queer; and just blend into the main population. I am basing this research on previous ones I have made and published (Lesbian representation evolution in mainstream media published by LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing December 14, 2016) which

focused mainly on The Lesbian point of view in western context, however did not focus on The Israeli film and television industry. In order to understand how real LGBT people relate to LGBT characters on film, they need to be able to identify with them and see themselves within those characters; a process called: “deification” [3]. Over the past decade and a half, we witness an ascent in “LGBT mainstreamism awareness”, especially on television shows. Not only in LGBT oriented programs such as: “Ellen”, “Queer as Folk”, and “The L Word”, but in every mainstream, prime - time television show. There are at least one or two LGBT characters, for example – “Friends”, “Grey’s Anatomy”, “Glee”, “Beverly Hills 90210”, “Ally McBeal”, “All my Children”, “Sex and the City”, “True Blood”, Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, “The Fosters”, “Chicago Fire” “The Good Wife” and “Orange is the New Black”. It all started when Gay men revolutionized and changed the way the world viewed gay men, when straight, well-known actors played gay characters in different films [4]. For example: River Phoenix in “My own Private Idaho” [5], Tom Hanks in “Philadelphia” [6], Robin Williams in “The Birdcage” [7], Greg Kinnear in “As Good as it Gets” [8] Hillary Swank in “Boys Don’t Cry” [9], Charlize Theron and Christina Ricci in “Monster” [10], Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhall in “Brokeback Mountain” [11]. Note that the Lesbian characters above were either transgender who were murdered at the end, or a murderous hooker and were based on a true story [4]. The first prime-time gay oriented television show, which was aired in the United States from 1998 to 2006, was the sitcom “Will and Grace”. Even though it was critiqued for being stereotypical, the show ran for eight years and won numerous awards. In the British version of the show “Queer as Folk” [12], and the

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American version of it in 2001-2005; gay men were represented in a very mainstream manner and most of them were leading very sexual active life styles. There was only one Lesbian couple represented on that show, which was stereotypically divided into the "Butch and Femme" pattern. The American show - "The L Word" [13], was the first time mainstream looking Lesbians were seen on prime time television. Surprisingly enough, LGBT media awareness in Israel is extremely evolved, even though we are portrayed as a Middle Eastern, religious and primitive country, most LGBT content is from the United States and is aired without any censorship on the various cable programs offered in Israel. Farther more, the tolerance towards the LGBT community in Israel is rising, not only on mainstream Television shows and films but also in everyday life. Whether there are openly LGBT celebrities In prime time television shows like "A Star is Born" and "The X Factor" or Television dramas that show LGBT life. For some reason the LGBT community, around the world, is still perceived as one - Gay, Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender - LGBT. Why this community is still connected as one? Why aren't all African originated connected? Or all Asian people? Or even all white people?

There are many films representing the Gay male community in Israel and even the Tel-Aviv Gay film festival once a year, however, most of the representation is male oriented. There is a small Lesbian film festival called "Lethal Lesbian" that has been going on for a decade, it only addresses Lesbian audiences and not the majority of the population (like the gay film festival) Where are the Lesbian film - makers and their audiences? This "symbolic extinction" has only the Lesbians themselves to blame. [2]. The "Lesbian extinction", when discussing the "gay" subject, refers only to gay men - middle - upper class, white males [14]. Lesbians are not mentioned in religious books, sexual intercourse between women is not a sin and Lesbians were never prosecuted by the law (Unlike Gay men).

Literature Review

Film: Establishing and shattering stereotypes

It all began when Gay men altered the way the world perceives them; when non-Gay famous Hollywood actors played Gay characters in various films like: River Phoenix in "My own Private Idaho" Tom Hanks in "Philadelphia", Robin Williams in "The Birdcage", "As Good as it Gets", Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhal in "Brokeback Mountain". In the Lesbian part: Angelina Jolie in "GIA", Hillary Swank in "Boys Don't Cry" and Charlize Theron and Christina Ricci in "Monster".

When it comes to Israeli LGBT oriented films, it is very clear, unfortunately that "The Gay men scene" rules. There are far more Gay men oriented films than there are Gay women - Lesbians. Here are the films I have examined in this research:

Drifting, 1982, by Amos Guttman; A young man's personal relationships provide little support as he tries to come to terms with his homosexuality. The film is in synchronization with the western world and it's "Gay Cinema" stories that are told are mainly about coming out and dealing with one's sexuality and his or hers surroundings response and accommodation to the situation.

Hairdresser by Ze'ev Revach; A janitor (Revach) calls on his gay twin, estranged for many years, for help after having second thoughts about theft of some money from his boss's office safe. The gay twin brother (also played by Revach) is extremely stereotypical, however correlates with the period (Appendix 1).

Amazing Grace: By Amos Guttman; is one of the few Israeli films dealing with Gay subjects and HIV. The film is a unique biography of

Guttman's life and was his last film before he died of AIDS. The story is about a young man leaving his home and moving to Tel Aviv in the late 1990s. He falls in love with Thomas, a Gay man with HIV and their love story ends in tragedy.

Yossi and Jagger, 2002, By Eytan Fox; tells a story of Israeli soldiers at the Israel-Lebanon border and their daily routine of war. Yossi, the commander of the platoon leads a secret romantic relationship with his second-in-command officer - Jagger. The two commanders lead a secret love affair and gently ignore the female courting in the base. One night, at a stakeout, Jagger gets shot and dies in the arms of Yossi - his lover but no one knows of their relationship, and what they meant for each other. Noa Greenberg Round Trip: Nurit is a bus driver who an unhappily married and one day decides to leave her husband and run off to Tel Aviv with her two children. Mushidi is a Nigerian fugitive who comes to move to Tel Aviv as well. The two meet when Nurit hires Mushidi as her children's nanny. The two women fall in love with each other but their relationship causes problems for Nurit with her family and provides Mushidi with a dilemma.

Walk on Awater, 2004, Eytan Fox. Eyal is a "Mossad" agent who recently lost his wife and has been burying himself in work ever since. His assignment is to find a Nazi war criminal; through his granddaughter Pia whom is spending time on a kibbutz, and when he learns that her brother Axel is coming to visit her. Eyal decides to go undercover as a tour guide in order to get close to them. To his surprise, he falls in love with Pia and realizes thea Axel is gay and finds himself torn between his genuine fondness for Axel and his long-standing homophobia.

Good Boys: Yair hochner. Two escort boys living in Tel Aviv are hired are hired to have sex with one another. The two establish an intimate bond and find comfort and contentment together; As a result, they decide to spend the night together. Being escort boys does not help their relationship flourish and it isn't long before the stress of the street puts their devotion to the ultimate test.

The Bubble:Eytan F . The film follows a group of young friends living in Tel Aviv and the fact that people in Tel Aviv are isolated from the rest of the country. The movie shows the lives of Gays and straights, Jews and Arabs, men and women living together in Tel Aviv. The film begins with Noam, an Israeli soldier, meets Ashraf, a Palestinian, at an Israeli check - point. Ashraf shows up at Noam's apartment and a romance between to two begins.

The Secrets: Avi Neshet; Naomi, the daughter of a well-known rabbi, convinces her father to postpone her arranged marriage for a year, in order to study at a Jewish seminary for women in Safed. At the seminar, Naomi's meets Michelle, a strong young student. The two secretly lead Anouk - a young foreign woman through a series of Kabalistic cleansing rituals. New horizons open up for them both in the process who find themselves caught between the orthodox male establishment they came from and the desire to be true to themselves.

Japan Japan: Lior Shamriz. Imri, a 19 year old Israeli soldier, moves to Tel-Aviv right after discharging from the army, but really dreams of relocating to Japan. The story follows Imri in his wild sexual Tel Aviv night-life and his relationships.

Yair Hochner; Antarctica, 2008 Omer, a young gay man, is looking for love. He meets Danny, a young dancer; but ignores the attention of Ronen - a handsome journalist. Omer is just begging to solve his own personal crisis when his little sister, Shirley, imposes her problems on the family. Eager to get married, Shirley chooses to pursue a Lesbian romance with Michal, her boss, and owner of a coffee shop.

Only one person seems to have all the answers: Matilda Rose, a best-selling novelist and psychologist who believes that aliens are going to land in the middle of Tel Aviv and change the world as we know it.

Eyes wide open: Meyrav Doster Aaron, A middle-aged Orthodox Jew, living and working in Jerusalem with his wife and children, meets Ezri, a 19-year-old homeless student. Aaron offers to give Ezri work as his assistant at his family's butcher shop.

The two men grow close and their attraction becomes sexual. Aaron must now confront his own sexuality, his feelings for Ezri and his obligations to his family and faith. But when the truth gets out, there are serious repercussions for his transgression.

Melting away Doron Eran Assaf's father finds women's clothing and accessories in his room and decides to teach him a lesson. Assaf comes home and discovers his father locked him out. 4 years later Gallia – Assaf's mother hires a private detective in order to locate her son and bring him to see his father before he dies of cancer. Assaf is performing as a transgender singer who goes by the name of Anna at a night - club in Tel Aviv. A few days later, Assaf shows up as Anna at his father's (Shlomo) hospital room, claiming the insurance company hired her. Anna wins Shlomo's heart by her charming personality and her special attitude toward life, without the audience knowing whether Shlomo knows Anna is really Assaf.

Roni Keidar; Jo and Bell: A dark comedy about two girls who fall in love with each other. Joe is a drug dealer and Belle is a strange lost girl. The two meet and get involved in an absurd murder in the center of Tel Aviv. They now have to dump the body and escape the police. AS they fall deeper in love with each other throughout their criminal dark comedy journey.

Yossi's story: Eytan fox; The sequel to the film from 2003 – Yossi and Jagger; Following the death of Jagger, Dr. Yossi Hoffman has become a workaholic cardiologist who lives a closeted Gay life in Tel Aviv. An encounter with his past, sends on long overdue vacation to Eilat – a sunny city in southern Israel. There he meets Tom – a young soldier on vacation, handsome and very openly Gay. The two have a fling, which allows Yossi to move on from his grief and begin to live again.

Out in the dark: Michael Mayer. Nimer, a young Palestinian student from the West-Bank dreams of a better life. Nimer meets Roy - a young Israeli lawyer at a night - club in Tel Aviv and the two start a romantic relationship. As time goes by and their relationship moves on, they are confronted with the Israeli and Palestinian reality; on the one hand the lack of tolerance towards Homosexuality from the Palestinian side, and a closed Israeli society who is intimidated by the Arabs. When Nimer's Palestinian friend is caught in Tel Aviv, Nimer is forced to choose between his love for Roy and his home and manners.

Snails in the Rain, Yariv Mozer: The story takes place in the 1980's in Tel Aviv; Boaz, a young student, receives anonymous love letters that undermines his sexual identity and interferes with his normal straight life and relationship with his girlfriend. Sending him on a journey of self-revelation and obsession.

Cupcakes: Eytan Fox. Six Eurovision song contest junkies from Tel Aviv number one fans friends from Tel Aviv decide to record their own song on a mobile phone. Find out that their recording is selected to represent Israel in the contest for next year's competition. The film shows the way those friends deal with the stress and fun on the way to their big moment.

The Dune: Yossi Aviam. A French Israeli film about a man without identity papers who doesn't speak a word is found on a beach of the Landes. A retired missing person's policeman tries to unravel the mystery.

Michal Vinik M, I Blush: 17 year old Naama Barash enjoys alcohol, drugs and hanging out with her friends, instead of dealing with home issues - where her parents always fighting, her sister who goes missing from the army one day. A new girl shows up at school, which confuses Naama and the two begin a relationship in which Naama falls in love for real for the first time.

Methodology

Films analysis

While looking into the selected films in this research, I thought it was best to show them in a table. I used qualitative content analysis examining 20 Israeli LGBT feature films from the 1980s – Today, from various creators and females and divided them into seven categories:

- Name of film.
- Year of release, organized chronologically.
- Creator of film.
- LGBT group, which the film represents.
- Type of film – Genre - drama, comedy, horror, sci-fi, action etc.
- Weather the characters were presented as stereotypical or not.
- Whether or not the main character of the film was perceived as a positive or a negative representation of the LGBT community and how the environment in the film behaved towards the LGBT theme (Table 1).

Findings

I have examined and analyzed 16 different Israeli LGBT themed films, all feature films, all published and released in Israel and other different film festivals around the world throughout 1982 until Today.

I have found that: 75% of the films were created by Men, 25% were created by women, in 69% of the films the LGBT theme was Male Homosexual 25% of the films the LGBT theme was Homosexual women - Lesbians and only 6% of the films the LGBT theme was Transgender oriented. There were no bisexual innuendos in any of the films. When it comes to stereotypes: it is clearly shown in films from the 1980s and 1990s that stereotypes were more visible within 19% of the films examined in those years. In the rest of the films only 12.5% had some stereotypes within the transgender representation and within Palestinians Gay men. 94% of the films genres were Drama, and only 6% were Comedy. When examining positive and negative representation of those film's characters, it is clearly seen that up until the beginning of the millennium all LGBT themed films presented their Homosexual characters as negative – 19%. 25% of all films examined showed both negative and positive representation – however all of those films dealt with either religious homosexual characters or Palestinian characters.

Conclusion

In the 1980s there was one pioneer when it came to LGBT themed films – Amos Guttman – a gay film maker created several films about Gay men, Aids and their severance from the rest of the Israeli society. Both his films examined in this research deal with the main Gay character's struggles with his Gay identity and the stigmas that are

Film	Year	Creator	LGBT	Genre	Stereotypes	Positive/ Negative
1. Drifting	1982	Amos Guttman	Men	Drama	Yes	Negative
2. Hairdresser	1984	Ze'ev Revach	Men	Comedy	Yes	Negative
3. Amazing Grace	1996	Amos Guttman	Men	Drama	Yes	Negative
4. Yossi and Jagger	2002	Eytan Fox	Men	Drama	No	Positive
5. Round Trip	2004	Noa Greenberg	Women	Drama	No	Positive
6. Walk on Water	2004	Eytan Fox	Men	Drama	No	Positive
7. Good Boys	2005	Yair Hochner	Men	Drama	Some	Both
8. The Bubble	2006	Eytan Fox	Men	Drama	No	Positive
9. The Secrets	2007	Avi Neshet	Women	Drama	No	Both
10. Japan Japan	2007	Lior Shamriz	Man	Drama	No	Both
11. Antarctica	2008	Yair Hochner	Men	Drama	No	Positive
12. Eyes wide open	2009	Meyrav Doster	Men	Drama	No	Both
13. Melting away	2011	Doron Eran	Trans	Drama	Some	Both
14. Jo and Bell	2011	Roni Keidar	Women	Drama	No	Both
15. Yossi's Story	2012	Eytan Fox	Men	Drama	No	Positive
16. Out in the dark	2012	Michael Mayer	Men	Drama	Some	Both
17. Snails in the rain	2013	Yariv Mozer	Men	Drama	No	Positive
18. Cupcakes	2013	Eytan Fox	Men	Comedy	Some	Positive
19. The Dune	2014	Yossi Aviram	Men	Drama	No	Positive
20. Blush	2016	Michal Vinik	Women	Drama	No	Positive

Table 1: Israeli films examined in this research.

inflicted from that fact, whether the main character is exploring within his sexuality or his Aids reality. The second film mad examined in this research made in the 1980s is a comedy - even a parody of Gay men and their flamboyant being, giving the impression that this character is nothing but a comic relief.

In the beginning of the millennium – just like the rest of the modern world took cinema towards the future; Israeli gay film - makers began creating films devoid of stereotypes and actually told a real honest story which helped various audiences related to those LGBT characters. The only examples in which the representation was both negative and positive were in films that dealt with LGBT within the orthodox Jewish society – both male and female and with LGBT Palestinians characters. It is very clear that the Israeli film industry has come a long way from the 1980s until today, in the past five years you cannot find LGBT films that show LGBT characters in a stereotypical way, and the representation of those characters are always positive. Farther more, it is clear that even Israel is following the footsteps of other western countries when it comes to LGBT acceptance within cinema, leaving prejudice and stereotypes behind and taking LGBT cinema into the future of mainstreamism.

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- Boys don't cry (1999) written and directed by Kimberly Pierce.
- Monster (2003) written and directed by Patty Jenkins My Own Private Idaho, US, written and directed by Gus Van Sant.
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