

Justice Delayed: Nadav Lapid's Films and the Rebirth of Individualism

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Watching the Israeli film director Nadav Lapid's films might be considered a strange way to explore questions of justice. Lapid's four feature films—*Policeman* (2011); *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014); *Synonyms* (2019); and *Ahed's Knee* (2021)—seem to militate against shared ideologies or concepts, of which justice, widely understood in political philosophy as a concept designating the transcendence of private desires in favor of some broader (if often elusive) notion of social good, would be a central example. Lapid's films only allusively engage with questions of the collective good or moral right, although all of his films can be read as sharp critiques of the social status quo in Israel, including the country's rampant economic disparities, the advent of neoliberal logic in cultural and social domains, and rising ethnonationalism. His films thus seem to accomplish what noted scholar of film and television Yael Munk

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recently argued was the promise of Assi Dayan's apocalyptic dramatic film *Life According to Agfa* (1992), which she suggests had singularly, for its era, turned a "critical mirror" on Israeli society.ⁱ Also comparable to Dayan's film, in Munk's view, the five socially critical films since the 2000s she discusses unfortunately share a "moral discourse" that "is not intended to drive anyone to action, because no action can be taken" and these later films ultimately "manifest greater compliance [in] the face of [Israel's] moral deterioration." It is certainly true that Lapid's films, which Munk does not discuss, suggest no obvious answer to the sense of social decline that they each narrate and implicitly comment upon. But is this absence of a trajectory of action really the "socio-political dead end" that Munk diagnoses?

My argument is that by presenting a series of what only seem like dead-end narratives, Lapid's films do something unexpected, which I think of as the creative effort to show that individual freedom asserted in the face of a demanding collective ideology is a necessary but difficult prerequisite for a concept of justice that begins with the individual's contestation of pervasive social violence.ⁱⁱ The protagonist of *Synonyms* adumbrates this encompassing violence at the foundational level of language, ruminating on "words that are hurtful, violent, muscular. Words that dominate other words, humiliate them." This gloss on language should remind us that each of Lapid's four feature films has concluded its narrative with an apocalyptic confrontation of one kind or another in which collectivist ideals are perceived as violent impositions on individual freedom; such pivotal collisions, however, never fall back on romantic notions of individualism. Lapid's films turn the viewer's attention, rather, toward the resource of individual consciousness that is bounded by—yet somehow potentially able to exceed—social structures when it is not suppressed. Individual consciousness offers, for Lapid, the possibility of enacting a broader concept of justice—based in an elusive, never stable, but nevertheless real freedom entailing the flexibility to perceive and understand new contexts—that the strictures of any collective ideology alone cannot offer.

Here I shall discuss only Lapid's third film, *Synonyms*, which won the Golden Bear award at the 2019 Berlin



Scene from Synonyms, courtesy Kino Lorber

International Film Festival (a first for an Israeli film), and which is perhaps the filmmaker's most acerbic commentary on the threat, in Israel or elsewhere, represented by a highly regimented collective identity. In this film, the protagonist Yoav, having finished his army service, seeks to flee to France from everything he despises in Israel but ends up discovering that he cannot easily rid himself of his national identity. He gradually comes to realize that his idealized French elsewhere is essentially no different from—synonymous with—the repressive conditions he had sought to escape. All of this is revealed, as in Lapid's other films, through a series of darkly comical scenes; these tableaux serve as the narrative stations of Yoav's picaresque pilgrimage away from Israel to France and, finally, into a kind of liminal nowhere zone. In this zone, Yoav the outsider has no home, no friends, and no reliable language, but what he does have is the freedom he seeks to see through the veil of ideology. This makes him, like other Lapid protagonists, something of a reprehensible human monster; but also, in the more generative sense that

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri intend, he comes to embody Western modernity's unnatural or malformed figure of "the monster [which] is not an accident but the ever present possibility that can destroy the natural order of authority in all domains, from the family to the kingdom."ⁱⁱⁱ Implicitly refusing the unjust instruction by his Israeli embassy supervisor in France to racially profile travel visa applicants, Yoav drolly opens the gates to all; but of himself, when asked by his Hebrew-speaking Israeli superior what he is doing there (in France? in the Israeli embassy job? in an existential reality he shares with no one?), he replies in Hebrew-accented French, "Je me suis évadé" (I escaped). Justice, in Lapid's film, unavoidably implies a quixotic attempt to evade or refuse ideological subjection.

So, where does one locate the fulcrum from which both subject and society delicately propend in mutually sustaining balance? How can one conceptualize a fluid equilibrium that permits individual freedom to remain equitably poised against the demanding weight of the

collective? Yaron Ezrahi, the late eminent Israeli scholar of political philosophy, discussed more than a quarter century ago the importance but difficulty of finding such a just balance in the context of what he perceived as a hegemonic collective identity. "In a society like Israel, where until recently a formal commitment to legal and political principles of individual freedom has coexisted with an impoverished culture of selfhood, the liberal-democratic façade often conceals quite an invasive collectivism." He acknowledged that "individuals are not born individuals" and must instead be socially "brought into being," but he argued that "the necessary role of the community in the genealogy of the individual does not foreclose the possibility of a 'second birth' of the individual as a distinct voice, with its own sensibilities and moral agency."^{iv} Such a "second birth" resembles the experience of self-recreation Yoav undergoes and, in a manifest sense, fails to accomplish in Lapid's *Synonyms*. And yet, this frustrated spiritual rebirth can also be described as a *necessary* failure. Such difficult and frequently aborted second births are precisely what offers the possibility of a just relationship to the self that defends individual consciousness and expressive freedom well beyond, and thereby paradoxically also for the sake of, the collective good.

In Lapid's cinematic world, there is no telling in advance if or when such an ethical rebirth may succeed (it typically doesn't); but the inability to systematize ethical outcomes is, as Hannah Arendt understood, the very sign of the irreducibility and necessity of individual judgment. As Sharon Sliwinski has argued, Arendt recognized that Adolf Eichmann's legalistic self-defense relied on the fact that no precedent in law existed for prosecuting his refusal to disobey orders. Only a concept of human rights not solely dependent, therefore, on the logically determined principles of the collective but, rather, endowed with the inventiveness and flexibility of individual judgment could arbitrate the truth of his immorality.^v The "failures" of individual rebirth in Lapid's films reflect, in the uncertainty of their outcomes, the necessary provisionality of idiosyncratic individual judgment as a condition of justice; these "dead ends" can be read as narrative deferrals that open onto the possibility of resuscitated individual agency in a context

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in which dissent has withered because the nonconformist self is devalued. Lapid's films taken together thus surprisingly enact a temporal structure that Judaism has long associated with messianic postponement: an ideal of justice whose value is vested, not weakened, in delay.

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i Yael Munk, "The Catastrophic Horizon: Contemporary Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberal Israel," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2019). Munk's account places a very different emphasis on the prescience of Dayan's film than does an analysis by the historian Joel Beinin, who argued in 1998 that *Life According to Agfa* reflected the disaffection or "internal exile" of the Ashkenazic liberal elite, who themselves seem unconscious of the ways their social biases are "reflect[ed] in a common amalgam of benevolent paternalism toward the Palestinian Arab cooks, racialized contempt for Mizrahim, and masculinist exploitation of women." Joel Beinin, "Political Economy and Public Culture in a State of Constant Conflict: 50 Years of Jewish Statehood," *Jewish Social Studies* 4, no. 3 (1998): 96–141.

ii For a convincing reading of the sense of ubiquitous violence in twenty-first century Israeli cinema, see media scholar Neta Alexander's account, also cited in Munk, of the "New Violence" cycle of films. Neta Alexander, "A Body in Every Cellar: The 'New Violence' Movement in Israeli Cinema," *Jewish Film and New Media* 4, no. 1 (2016): 4–24.

iii Hardt, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 195.

iv Yaron Ezrahi, Yaron. *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel*. (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1997), 79.

v Sharon Sliwinski, "The Aesthetics of Human Rights," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, no. 1 (April 2009), 33–35.