

# The Other Side of the Silver Screen

## Nili Gold

*Tali Yahalom*

**N**ili Gold, an Assistant Professor of Modern Hebrew Language and Literature, has been at Penn since 2000, when she began infusing students with her contagious passion for Israeli literature and film. Born in Haifa, Israel, Dr. Gold graduated from the French Alliance School and earned her B.A. in Hebrew Literature and Education-research, as well as her High School Teachers diploma, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She later received her M.A. and doctoral degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Dr. Gold brings her diverse background, in-depth understanding of Israel's history and culture and psychoanalytical approach to education to her classes at Penn. With

unwaveringly modesty, Dr. Gold, year after year, provides students an expert's point of view on the ever-evolving film and literature industry in Israel. She offers two classes every semester, one in English and one in Hebrew, and uses primary texts and films to engage students in the ongoing dialogue about the role and growth of Israeli culture. Her devoted students, in turn, have only positive things to say about her and her classes, which receive high praise and continue to be in high demand.

**Kedma:** How has Israeli cinema changed over the last few years?

**Nili Gold:** Israeli cinema, in the last couple of years, has become a boom industry, and Israeli films have gotten awards [and] international

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recognition that they never did before. For example, the Israeli film/documentary called “Hot House” (2006), just won a Special Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. Israeli films are viewed outside Israel as films, as artistic works that are not necessarily associated with Israeli life. Many of the works are universal works that could relate to any reality and many are made by graduates of the many film schools that have sprung in Israel. A recent example is the 2006 adaptation of David Grossman’s novel, “Someone to Run With” (2001): both the screenwriter and the director graduated from the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem.

**Kedma:** How would you characterize the Israeli film industry as a whole?

**NG:** There is a strong connection to literature, which I don’t think is true in many other industries. There is a strong connection between literature and film. Hebrew novels and stories are often remade for television and/or film, not beginning with but including “The Smile of the Lamb” (1986) which was a reworking of an

early novel by David Grossman before he was famous. The aforementioned “Someone to Run With” was also based on Grossman’s novel and opened the prestigious Jerusalem Film Festival. Side-by-side to films that attempt to be more universal, some are political and do comment on the tense existence in a country often at war. Films such as “The Syrian Bride” (2004), “Beyond the Wall” (1995) and “Hot House” make political comments. “Hot House,” for example, documents an Israeli prison where Palestinians, some of whom were involved in suicide bombings, are serving life sentences. The film enables the inmates to express their opinions and national aspirations. In contrast, films like “Aviva, My Love” (2006), “Nina’s Tragedy” (2005) and “Sweet Mud” (2006) tell stories about the human struggle in everyday life. “Sweet Mud” just won “The Crystal Bear for the Best Feature Film” at the Berlin Film Festival in 2006.

**Kedma:** Does an Israeli film need some sort of political message in order to be successful or influential?

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**NG:** Absolutely not. Just the opposite. It's interesting that [to] a film like "The Syrian Bride" (2004), which is, in many ways, a political film, most Israelis responded by saying that it's not really political but is about the human condition. Many Israeli films that have been very successful have absolutely nothing or very little to do with political reality.

**Kedma:** How is Israel's film industry different from the country's literature?

**NG:** It seems to me that the present day film industry is more willing to explore the lives of individuals than the national, collective arena. In the 1960's, literature tried to be more universal and [was] not bound to time and place. In those early decades of Israel's existence, the film industry lagged behind literature; while literature was more experimental and avant-garde, films were still stuck ideologically in the trends that dominated immediately after the War of Independence. After the Yom Kippur War, literature took upon itself the commentary in a variety of

ways. The novels of the time, written by the leading writers, were bound to reality, history and politics. A.B. Yehoshua examined the relationships between Jews and Arabs in Israel in "The Lover" (1977) and Amos Oz, who reacted to the events of the Yom Kippur War in "The Hill of Evil Counsel" (1976). These two pillars of Israeli literature continued into the 21st century and still examine their country's path parallel to theirs. [Oz's] "A Tale of Love and Darkness" (2006) is almost an autobiography; in it, the life of a person parallels the life of a land.

**Kedma:** Do you think there's a gender imbalance among Israeli filmmakers and authors?

**NG:** In Israel, there are many important Israeli film directors who are women. Orna Ben-Dor Niv, [for example] directed the first Israeli documentary about the Holocaust — "Because of that War" (1988)—and then continued with the feature film related to the same subject, "Under the Domim Tree" (1994). Michal Bat Adam started as an actress and

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graduated to be an important director and, similarly, the prominent actress Gila Almagor cooperated in producing the film—“HaKayitz Shel Aviya” (The Summer of Aviya) (1988)—based on her own life story.

**Kedma:** Why do you think that is?

**NG:** Starting in the 1980s, Israeli women populated the Israeli cultural arena more than ever before. This is true of literature as well as of film.

**Kedma:** What do you see as the difference between Jewish and Israeli identities when it comes to literature and film? Can you separate the two?

**NG:** Your question itself is a remnant of an earlier period when Israel was much more in need of forging its own Israeli identity. Additionally, it depends on the work, on the writer or the filmmaker. There have been individual works of film and literature that are made in Israel that I could describe easily as being very strongly Jewish and as having Jewish content as well as Israeli content and there are some that don't. For example, Appelfeld comes to mind. His writing is not only Israeli

—it concerns the whole Jewish people and not only because it's about the Holocaust. Although the style and the scenes of Amos Oz are different, he may also be perceived as both an Israeli and Jewish writer. He portrays the Israeli experience and his work is clearly Israeli in its locale. At the same time, in his works there is a very deep concern and awareness of the Jewish belonging, the fact that you are connected to this tribe that you come from, be it Europe or elsewhere, and a very deep awareness of how the past is a part of the Israeli identity.

**Kedma:** There have been movements in both literature and film that are either very critical or ambiguous in their messages about Israel. What do you think is the significance in taking either type of stance?

**NG:** Traditionally, the arts, and especially literature and film, are subversive—they do not belong to the establishment, but rather, express the subconsciousness of the people, the dark side and the nightmares, not the visible reality. When artistic works are critical, there's nothing wrong with

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that—it's natural. It's a sign of self-assurance that yes, we are people, we have flaws, we make mistakes.

**Kedma:** Do you think, then, that there's a pressure on either authors or filmmakers to take some sort of stance, even if not political, but perhaps intellectual or social?

**NG:** Filmmakers are free to say whatever they want. Moreover, films that are critical of what happens in the country often are supported by government funds.

**Kedma:** How is the perception of Israeli films different from the perception of American films that are brought in as pop-culture icons?

**NG:** This is part of the new Israeli film revolution. It used to be that the only people who saw Israeli films were the

Jews who went to Israeli film festivals outside of Israel. And very few festivals actually broke that barrier. But that's changed in the last couple of years. Israeli films are viewed in Israel—hundreds of thousands of people see them—and that's really a new development. What also is happening is that there are co-productions, there are Israeli-German productions or Israeli-French productions that usually have more money and a wider audience.

**Kedma:** What are your favorite films?

**NG:** “The Summer of Aviya” (1988) and “Because of that War” (1988)

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*Tali Yahalom is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is majoring in History and minoring in Arabic and Hebrew Studies.*