



The Israel-Lebanon conflict in war cinema: an organisational and comparative analysis

Uzi Ben Shalom & Nehemia N. Stern

To cite this article: Uzi Ben Shalom & Nehemia N. Stern (2020): The Israel-Lebanon conflict in war cinema: an organisational and comparative analysis, *Israel Affairs*, DOI: [10.1080/13537121.2020.1806508](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2020.1806508)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2020.1806508>



Published online: 10 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Israel-Lebanon conflict in war cinema: an organisational and comparative analysis

Uzi Ben Shalom  and Nehemia N. Stern 

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ariel University, Ariel, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the organisational aspects of combat as represented in Israeli films about the Lebanon Wars. It analyzes four prominent films that relate to Israel's engagement in Lebanon from the 1982 war to its operations in the southern security strip. The analysis is augmented by comparison to prominent Israeli war films on the 1973 Yom-Kippur War. These films reflect a common and coherent Military Habitus that originates in the organisational principals that define 'Israeli National Way of War.' This analysis offers an alternative viewpoint to interpretations that view war cinema as manifestations of broader national narratives.

KEYWORDS War films; Lebanon wars; Yom Kippur War; post-heroic; Israel; Lebanon; IDF

This article explores the 'Israeli Way of War' as seen through a series of films produced about the IDF's various military conflicts in Lebanon. It argues that the characters, themes and tensions embedded within these films reflect the mode and manner in which the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) logistically organises and mobilises its combat regiments. That is, in addition to expressing metaphors for the sociopolitical changes and moral dilemmas that have influenced Israeli society over the past thirty years, it is argued that these films first and foremost describe a unique and culturally contingent Israeli way of war. Here cinema can act not just as a metaphor, or an interpretive lens for social malaise, or for the moral and ethical dilemmas of military service (though it is certainly that as well) but also as a poignant representation of very real military problems.

The 'Way of War' was a concept originally coined by historian Liddell Hart to analyse British foreign policy and military strategy leading up to World war I.¹ The term was later adopted by researchers who sought to describe what they understood to be national military 'traditions.'² Nation-states tend to operate their military industries, utilising stable and relatively persistent policies and techniques. A 'way of war' expresses the methods of

CONTACT Uzi Ben Shalom  uzibs@ariel.ac.il  Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ariel University, Ariel 40700, Israel

organising their military forces and their preferences for when and how to utilise these forces in combat operations. The concept has since been used as a holistic means of describing the nature of combat in different national, economic or cultural contexts.³ War films that are directed or produced by combat veterans depict 'a historically and culturally specific pattern of conduct and the dispositions, or habitus, underlying it.'⁴ The conflicts and tensions portrayed in these films often reflect the varying practices and policies that compose a national way of war.

Film interpretation and Israel's wars in Lebanon

Recent years have seen the production of several films on Israel's wars in Lebanon beginning from *Operation Peace for Galilee* in 1982 and culminating in the May 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon. Social scientists, cultural historians, and lay commentators have mainly analysed these films as cultural metaphors, by which the psychological and personal experiences of their protagonists are ascribed meaning through the broad (and fluid) cultural paradigms of Israeli society, such as militarism, and ethics, or to fundamental social and political transitions.⁵ These films have traditionally been viewed as offering a political and social commentary on the Israeli national narratives.⁶ This focus however has often elided many of the other ways in which war cinema may also reflect dilemmas surrounding the organisation structure of the military. This may include the training of officers, the amount of time in service, as well as broader military policies concerning the scope, and goals of combat. We argue that this level of analysis that is grounded in the organisational habitus of professional military practices will prove useful in better explicating certain focus points in war cinema which have otherwise been overlooked by the existing literature.

This focus on cultural politics is certainly not unique to the Israeli national experience. Cinema researchers have often examined the cultural representation of war through issues of cultural politics and national memory. Vietnam War films, for example, have increasingly focused on the narrative of a single warrior and his suffering rather than on a rationalistic analysis of the war and its national goals.⁷ One important illustration may be taken from Oliver Stone's classic Vietnam War film, *Platoon*. That film has classically been viewed as a contemporary morality play that offers a sustained meditation on the nature of evil, or as a reflection of American society's larger fantasies about war and historical narratives.⁸ These analyses however often fail to consider the very pragmatic nature of the human resources layout of the United States Army during the Vietnam war and its impact on the unit on which the film is focused. The nature of the experiences of the protagonist and his platoon members stems in large part from the specific nature of the American way of war in Vietnam. Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen)

-the central protagonist – was stationed in Vietnam for one year as a replacement in a seasoned company whose personnel are ‘Short Timers’ and are tired of the war.

The Lebanon wars corpus

We include in the analysis of Israel-Lebanon war cinema a number of films, which tell the stories of soldiers serving in regular military units within the ground forces. Most of the films developed out of their creator’s personal military experience and all grapple with the personal or emotional experiences of combat. These films are:

- ***Two fingers from Sidon (1986)***: This film, also known as ‘Ricochets,’ directed by Eli Cohen, was produced by the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit and the filmmaker had been in very close contact with combat units. The film depicts the IDF’s operations in the security strip of Lebanon after it had been occupied during the 1982 Lebanon War. Gadi, the film’s protagonist, is an inexperienced platoon commander at his first command post in Lebanon. He is required to cope with the challenges of leading his soldiers and carrying out the orders of his commander and ponders over moral issues. As the film had been produced by the IDF, its creator enjoyed a high accessibility to the military system and the film provides an extremely realistic representation of life in an operational ground forces company.
- ***Beaufort (2007)***: Directed by Joseph Cedar, the film is based on a book by Ron Leshem (in Hebrew: *If There’s a Heaven*), written following conversations with soldiers and commanders who fought at the Beaufort post in Southern Lebanon and in Lebanon’s security strip. The book’s publication garnered a great deal of popularity among those who fought in Lebanon and was even used during lectures at IDF colleges. The book faithfully describes the characteristics of the fighting carried out by soldiers and junior commanders, their dilemmas and daily routine along the front line military posts of Israel’s security strip in Southern Lebanon. Liraz, the film’s protagonist, is a junior officer commanding a company in which some of the soldiers are his own age and express their doubts of his operational and leadership capabilities. During the film Liraz does in fact fail more than once as a commander, but struggles to gain his place and finally his soldiers acknowledge and accept his leadership.
- ***Waltz with Bashir (2008)***: The film, created and directed by Ari Folman, is based on Folman’s personal experiences as a junior commander in regular military service during the 1982 Lebanon War. The film’s protagonist, who served as a section commander in the infantry

corps, takes a journey following his memories of the war after 20 years. Despite the personal nature of the film, it faithfully represents the combat experience on important topics such as operational border crossings and the way arms are used during those crossing, the need to kill other human beings as well as with the more routine aspects of war.

- ***Lebanon* (2009)**: This film, directed by Shmulik Maoz, is likewise based on the director's personal experiences as a junior commander in regular military service during the Lebanon War. The film's protagonist is an inexperienced recruit gunner in the armoured corps, assigned to a tank manned by soldiers and a commander he has never met before. The four of them fight under the command of an experienced ground forces company commander whom they likewise do not know at all. During the course of combat, the protagonist copes with the terrors of war, experiences the collapse of his immediate commander, develops independent command capabilities and acquires combat experience.

Winning international recognition, these films are not only common topics of analysis in the academic literature but are also regularly filmed on Israeli memorial and Independence Days. Each has also had a central role in helping to shape the collective national myths regarding Israel's wars in Lebanon.⁹ Moreover, while the primary goal of these filmmakers was not to address organisational or operational issues, they do seem to have been keenly interested in anchoring their films in concrete operational reality – as they understood it. That is, the films are uniquely grounded in the tactical and organisational reality of the IDF's 'way of war.'

The analysis is augmented by comparison to two seminal war films about the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The first is *Kippur* (2000), directed by Amos Gitai, is based on his experiences as a commando trooper who couldn't find his unit in the chaos of war and subsequently joined an Israeli Air Force mobile rescue team. The second, *Adjusting Sights* (2003), is directed by Haim Halfon. It is based on the experiences of Haim Sabato – a tank crew member who fought the Syrians on the Golan Heights. These two films were chosen for the unique ways in which they reflect the personal experiences of the protagonists, who fought in the war.

War films – even ones that may appear 'realistic'¹⁰ – are not documentaries of historical reality. Nevertheless, the thematic elements that are experienced by their protagonists may often reflect a certain organisational reality inherent to military structures. In other words, through a focus on the trials and tribulations of individual protagonists, war cinema can reflect a certain military habitus that is shaped by the military structure that is being represented in film. In this way the themes that emerge through these

films function less as an emblem of wider social processes, but can rather be seen as a reflection of the organisational principals that produced them.

The present analysis differs from a pure cinematographic reading of Israeli war films – an analysis of lighting, camera angles, acting or directing etc.- by focusing on the everyday habitus of military practices that are reflected through the thematic elements of Israeli war cinema. While the scholars have explored the cinematographic elements of films like *Waltzing with Bashir*, *Lebanon*, and *Beaufort*¹¹ and its relationship to wider Israeli social and moral, or even psychoanalytic dilemmas, little work has been on the pragmatic military themes that emerge from these films. Relatedly, we do not argue that the above films index a ‘realistic’ or even ‘accurate’ representation of the experience of combat. Indeed, we see in cinematographic realism a strategy that is meant to evoke a visceral palpability to the cinema experience, and not as a vehicle for accurately depicting the ‘reality’ of combat as such.¹² What these selected films do have in common, however, are the personal military experiences of their creators and their reliance on the personal experiences of combatants themselves. In a similar way, this analysis excludes a number of prominent films about the wars in Lebanon such as *Cup Final Time for Cherries*, or the *Last Band in Lebanon*, which are far more ‘narrative’ in their nature and are less grounded (if at all) in personal wartime experiences.

Israel’s way of war

The past 35 years since the onset of the 1982 Israel-Lebanon War has seen little change in the organisational, logistical and manpower apparatus of the IDF’s combat ground forces. Currently, soldiers and commanders are recruited, classified, taught, trained, and deployed within their units in much the same way as they were on the eve of the 1982 Israel-Lebanon War. As a result, the personal experiences stemming from organisational or logistical mechanisms are quite similar throughout the representative cinematic history of these wars.

The similarities between these films are also a result of how combat in the ground forces (not just in the IDF) has similar and stable attributes which transcend many of the limitations of time and space. Militaries today use much of the same equipment, manoeuvre and respond to tactical threats in much the same way as they did three decades ago. At the same time however, Israel’s ‘Way of War’ has changed in certain larger political and strategic ways as the IDF has gradually transitioned from fighting large existential wars against enemy nation-states to more limited asymmetrical conflicts against non-state and quasi-state actors.¹³

In practical terms, Israel’s way of war reflects a distinct strategic vision of how best to recruit, teach, train and develop soldiers, commanders and

officers. This vision invariably influences the daily routines of IDF forces engaged in operational combat activities. Compared to most other armies, Israel's military manpower is unique in its compulsory recruitment, in the development of its command ranks, and in its substantial and readily available reserve force.¹⁴ Contrary to most other armies, the IDF relies on the service of young and relatively inexperienced soldiers in critical command positions and less on professional manpower. Israel has no professional military colleges, like West Point or Sandhurst, designed to produce a cadre of professional military leadership. All senior commanders in the IDF's ground forces – as opposed to its navy and air forces – have risen from the ranks of enlisted personnel. As a result, the junior and midlevel command cadre are relatively young, inexperienced, and there is a certain level of informality that inhabits the relationship between commander and soldier.¹⁵ Though the IDF has instituted various changes in the manpower resources of its professional forces, there have been no critical changes in the organisation of forces in the regular army and in its system of leadership development. These relatively static principles of force and command development contribute to the formation of a culture that is distinct and unique to the IDF's ground forces.¹⁶

In tandem, Israel has developed a type of combat that has been defined in the literature as 'post-heroic warfare.' The post-heroic paradigm is understood to be a combination of long-term low-intensity conflicts, a reticence to accept the risks of military encounters, and an aversion to the casualties that inevitably accompany those risks.¹⁷ To be sure, the post-heroic paradigm is not an official IDF combat doctrine and has not originated from the combat units themselves. Rather, it emerged organically as a social and political phenomenon in the 1990s as the Israeli public faced years of asymmetrical conflict.¹⁸ Ground forces in the field however certainly feel the limiting effects of the post-heroic paradigm in the hesitancy of the political leadership in deploying and fully utilising combat troops.¹⁹ In this way while the internal structure of the IDF's combat units remains stable throughout its series of conflicts in Lebanon, the tasks they fulfill have changed. These differing dimensions of the Israeli way of war have a significant impact on the structure of Lebanon war films.

Analysis

We propose to examine the specific cinematic expressions of the Israeli way of war in the series of personal films listed above, based on four criteria: 1) The inexperience of combat leadership; 2) Short-timers in combat units; 3) Combined arms units; and 4) Post-heroic conflicts and their effects on the uncertainties of the films' protagonists regarding their tasks. In addition, we

compare our main conclusion in each dimension to the selected Yom Kippur War films.

The inexperience of combat leadership

Human contact between soldiers and their commanders (both junior and senior) is extremely important in war.²⁰ Direct combat leadership – where the individual warrior is not just driven but directly led by his superior – is a central source for motivation and unit cohesion.²¹ This kind of combat leadership, however, is not created on its own but is rather the product of a combination of learned personal attributes, discipline and acquired operational experience. In contrast to the cadre of commissioned as well as non-commissioned officers serving as professional soldiers in western military forces such as the British, the American or the Dutch, IDF junior commanders have a very limited ability to develop practical operational experience. Junior officers often experience field combat for the very first time and therefore their ability to motivate their men always depends on their ability to work through their inexperience and handle the confusing environment of war. Functional collapse – or the inability to quickly come to terms with the new experience of combat – is a common characteristic of the commanders portrayed in the Lebanon film corpus.

Functional collapse is uniquely prominent in Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* and is expressed in the difficulty to perform technical operations under acute stress. This theme emerges in a poignant scene that depicts a massive bombardment of small arms fire on an IDF armoured vehicle that is in the process of evacuating wounded soldiers from the Lebanese battlefield to a regimental meeting point. 'What should I do?' a terrified soldier asks Folman, who serves as munitions commander. 'Shoot, it doesn't matter where,' Folman answers. 'Pray and shoot.' Reports of similar situations repeat themselves in Folman's encounters with soldiers from his unit and from others who fought nearby.

Most researchers have primarily interpreted this and other similar scenes in the film as an expression of Folman's position towards the IDF, his attitude towards the war in general and his growth as an individual critical of the impersonal violence of combat.²² What is missing from this thematic and psychological analysis is an appreciation of the operational limitations (born from inexperience) that it depicts. This type of shooting, alongside other functional handicaps, such as loss of orientation, and an inability to communicate, depicts a typical kind of confusion among young soldiers in combat.

The character of the inexperienced junior commanding officer in the IDF can be better understood when juxtaposed against the image of junior and midlevel commanders in American war films, where a strong non-

commissioned officer (NCO) is often depicted as becoming the moral and professional focal point for both the officer in command as well as the unit as a whole during the tempest of war. Soldiers, including the film's protagonists, fear, respect, and depend on these professional non-commissioned officers. 'I thought you were my mother' says the company commander, Captain Miller, the protagonist in Spielberg's war film *Saving Private Ryan* to his NCO. This exchange, amidst desperate fighting on the shores of Normandy, attests to the contribution of the senior NCO to the success of the battalion commander. Similar comparisons can be drawn from the evil sergeant Barnes in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. He too, is seen as the best soldier due to his strength, leadership and technical skills. Likewise, this type of strength is also expressed in the character of the senior and tough sergeant Hartman in the first part of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, and in that of the senior sergeant in the film *The Big Red One* and even in older war films such as *From Here to Eternity*.

A marked difference exists here from the Yom Kippur War films. In those films, the protagonists are not as confused while in action and their leadership roles in their local units are depicted more positively. Both Yom Kippur War films depict the experiences of reservists who are actually mature and experienced as compared to the protagonists in the Lebanon War corpus who are all conscripts.

In the IDF those who gain combat experience are promoted within the officer corps to mid-level and ultimately senior positions. In several Lebanon films, including *Two Fingers from Sidon* and *Lebanon*, this paradigm is depicted in the combat leadership, authority, and prowess of the company commanders Tuvia and Jamil. The combat leadership of these commanders is based on extensive field experience, which is what differentiates them from their more junior subordinates. For those inexperienced protagonists – such as Gadi, Asi, Folman, and Liraz – the war is the last and most difficult stage in their military service, which includes a very short practical training period and a lack of status that results in suspicion on the part of the unit's more senior soldiers.

To be sure, the dilemmas faced by the protagonists of these films are in many ways universal. The shock at the first combat encounter or the brutality of war serve as the background to the philosophical and ethical discourse that occur in the wider tradition of war films. One could certainly argue that the experiences of Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, bobbing inside his patrol boat into the Cambodian war zone, are not very different from those of Shmulik and Asi in *Lebanon*, bobbing inside their tank between villages and towns. To be sure, Captain Willard's journey is both internal and psychological, while the viewers of *Lebanon* are distanced from Shmulik and Asi's journey via the tank's viewfinder. At the same time, there is certainly a pragmatic military comparison to be drawn between the two films in

their depictions of drafted (enlisted) and inexperienced soldiers. Both inexperienced teams serve in a socially controversial war and experience similar kinds of bewilderment and confusion in their first experiences of the moral dimensions of combat.

The practical military differences between these two character types are crucially important. Willard is a highly experienced officer, as opposed to Shmulik, Folman and Asi who have only recently completed their military training. Their behaviour is more reminiscent of the young soldiers in regular military service who accompany Willard in his quest of Col. Kurz and are hesitant and confused, and as a result start shooting randomly. 'Until now I only shot at cardboard targets' Shmulik admits as he tries to explain why he could not shoot when he was supposed to. But the truth behind his words is more substantial: even Asi, his tank commander, is unable to shoot due to the very same difficulty. Moreover, he is unable to command his senior gunner who teases him and refuses to accept his authority. By contrast, the non-commissioned officers in *Platoon*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Fury* are all highly experienced soldiers. With great resolve and uncompromising aggression they enforce their will on the young soldiers who join their unit, and the soldiers wholly accept their leadership and authority. In this way, national ways of war – or the practical means militaries have traditionally found of organising men and command personnel – serve as the backdrop for depictions of heroism, cowardice, and criminal behaviour in both American and Israeli war films.

Short-timers in combat units

Military organisations are normally strongly hierarchical, though not all military hierarchies are formal. In regular conscripted regiments of the IDF ground forces, a soldier's seniority usually has a far greater significance than his 'official' rank. Senior enlisted personnel are accustomed to obtaining informal rights, especially as compared to their more junior comrades. In several militaries around the world, as in Israel, the imposition of authority by a junior commander on a senior soldier is always the reason for insubordination, confrontation and even revolts.²³ In the Vietnam War this phenomenon became known as 'Short Timer Fever' and in Russia's war in Afghanistan it was referred to as 'Dedovshchina.' In the IDF's ground forces this type of struggle has been a result of its conscripted recruitment method, similar to the situation in the former Soviet Union.²⁴ Such a phenomenon is to be found in the compulsory service echelon of the IDF but is only rarely reported within the reserve echelon.

The recruitment of ground forces to the IDF and its combat units is based on recruitment cycles or periods. Israeli teenagers are generally inducted into their respective combat units in August, November and March. Soldiers tend

to identify themselves and their position in the internal hierarchy of the regiments according to their respective recruitment cycle. Each ground forces regiment is comprised of various positions, sections, platoons and companies, each having well defined purpose. However, the duties and rights of each individual soldier are also determined according to his military seniority, which becomes a significant factor in the distribution of the more banal tasks such as guard duty, kitchen duty, time off and various other duties.

Not every soldier recruited into military services is able to complete it. Many leave the service for a range of reasons, while others are directed to command positions. Only a few are able to persevere in their service and reach the status of 'senior soldier' in their company. Consequently, the challenge of commanding a senior soldier in operational companies is very great. The ability to impose authority and discipline depends on the commander himself and on his personal empowerment. Many junior commanders find it difficult to enforce their authority on senior soldiers as those have much more seniority than they do, and often much more practical experience as well.

A central challenge among commanders in the Lebanon War corpus centres around the imposition of authority on senior soldiers. This is an arena of harsh confrontation which forms the foundation for the protagonist's struggle and his development process throughout the film, such as in the case of Gadi (*Two Finger from Sidon*), Liraz (*Beaufort*) Asi (*Lebanon*) and Frenkel (*Waltz with Bashir*). 'You were with me since squad commander training,' says Frenkel the platoon commander to Ari Folman. These are two commanders with similar seniority, serve together in the same company, but only one of them was appointed commanding officer, while Folman's command position is unclear. 'They deserve a better commander than you,' the senior and dominant soldier Kuris exclaims to Liraz at a time when everyone at the post already knows that Liraz did not function well twice during combat. However, Liraz responds to the challenge by explaining his motivations to Kuris and the complexity in which he finds himself as a junior commander expected to follow the orders of his superiors. In doing so he finally succeeds in asserting his authority. He does so again in a much more charged scene when he struggles to motivate his soldiers risk their lives by manning a guard post exposed to lethal long-range missile fire. Only thanks to Liraz's willingness to break the barriers separating him and his soldiers, to live with them in the same room and to be exposed to the same dangers, are they dissuaded from rebelling against him and motivated to carry out their mission, which ultimately results in the loss of lives.

A similar process can be seen in *Two Fingers from Sidon*. 'Boy, are you crazy,' his three senior soldiers say to Gadi after he has raided the house alone, killed the terrorist and was wounded himself. Their smiling faces are

blurred but despite his pain Gadi sees them smiling at him and knows that by taking the risk upon himself he has gained their trust and won their acceptance of his leadership. In these films the interpersonal conflicts between soldiers has less to do with a general malaise over the necessity or morality of combat in Lebanon, than with Israel's national way of war as exhibited through the organisational traditions of command that are found in most IDF ground units. Lastly, we could not find similar aspects of leadership tensions in the Yom Kippur War films. Simply put, generational differences between junior and senior soldiers in the reserve forces are not as important as they are among the conscript army.

Combined arms units

An additional component of the discussion relates to the way in which the IDF combines its ground forces between the various branches in times of war. During routine activity, the IDF organises its ground forces by corps (armoured, combat engineering, artillery and infantry). During periods of combat however the military dismantles the corps that are in the affected area and creates combined combat teams. In cases of injury, absence or training – all common occurrences – commanders must join existing units to replace absent position holders, and command soldiers and junior commanders even though they do not know them at all. The commanders and soldiers in these combat teams need to work together even though they do not necessarily know each other. In this way a company of infantry soldiers may find themselves under the command of an armoured unit. This situation was very prominent in studies conducted at the beginning of the 'al-Aqsa Intifada,²⁵ and is aptly portrayed in the Lebanon war corpus. For example, Asi's tank in the film *Lebanon* is teamed with an infantry unit whose commander he had never met before, and he knows him only by his first name (Jamil). In *Beaufort*, Ziv, the bomb disposal unit man, is teamed with Liraz's force at the post. The case of Gadi, the new platoon commander, is also similar as he is teamed up with Tuvia's company as a replacement to a commander who had been killed.

The Lebanon War corpus also reflects the kind of alienation this kind of combined force activity can produce for soldiers on the ground. In *Waltz with Bashir*, for example, during his journey to understand the events he experienced during the war Folman locates armoured corps personnel who were assigned to combat teams together with his infantry forces. Some of the main characters in the film are these people whom Folman fought alongside and were part of his combat team – but he does not know who they are or what their part was in his experience. At various points in the film, Folman is briefly placed under the command of officers whom he does not know and who send him on missions that he is required to complete. In one such case

he is sent to evacuate injured soldiers – ‘To pour them out’ – as the officer instructs him, and in another – to ambush a vehicle, which results in innocent people being hurt. Folman’s memory loss may be partially the result of repression or perhaps a way of coping with the pain of war on the psychological level.²⁶ At the same time, it is important to note that he most likely did not know his combat comrades before, during or after the war. Folman’s alienation from his job and the sense of loneliness that comes across in the film are the outcome of a lack of personal familiarity during battle with his closest, yet anonymous, comrades-in-arms. Here the comparison to the Yom Kippur War is telling as both protagonists struggle with the same organisational consequences after being separated from their unit and linking up with another (as in *Kippur*), or while losing contact with close comrades who were deployed and killed in different tank formations (*Adjusting Sights*).

Post-heroic warfare

While the IDF’s asymmetrical wars certainly did not begin in Lebanon, it was there that the heavy moral and strategic price of protracted conflict against non-state actors began to take shape for Israeli politicians and the public alike. Many themes found in the Lebanon war corpus emerge out of the relative technical or organisational stability of Israel’s way of war. Other themes however attest to how the political and strategic underpinnings of that way of war have changed over the past three decades. Post-heroic warfare is a term used to describe some of the political and strategic changes that undergird modern conceptions of warfare. Post-heroic warfare emphasises the excessive caution contemporary armies take in both deploying their own ground forces as well as in their willingness take the lives of the enemy. This kind of warfare is often highlighted by long term asymmetrical military conflicts against non-state actors, and is supported by a dependence on airpower, technology and intelligence gathering.²⁷ In the Israeli context post-heroic warfare has included the involvement of civilian interest groups – such as organisations of bereaved parents – working to promote specific policy goals. The four personal films in the Lebanon War corpus express the kinds of political and moral uncertainties that characterise these post-heroic developments in contemporary Israeli forms of warfare.

This can be most clearly seen in *Beaufort*, where Liraz the junior commander of the outpost expresses a keen awareness of the political discussions taking place in Israel concerning the justness and necessity of the war. When the outpost comes under continuous deadly fire Liraz’s immediate mid-level commanders choose to fortify rather than take direct action against Hezbollah. Liraz sees this defensive approach as an unreasonable and even cowardly response to the deaths of his comrades. He attributes this reticence

to directly engage the enemy to the political activity – such as the ‘four-mothers’ protest – in Israel. The notion that the IDF currently responds to terror activities through a paradigm of defence (fortification) rather than the traditional paradigm of offence has been common topic of conversation among lay military observers in Israel. The IDF for example periodically builds fortifications around common bus stops along West Bank highways after terror attacks. These actions have proven to be controversial among the Jewish residents of the West Bank, who claim that victory over terror does not come through defence. The spectre of Lebanon hangs over these debates, and this is current post-heroic way of war is reflected in *Beaufort*.

The other films in the corpus that depict earlier engagements in Lebanon include different kinds of post-heroic deliberations. For instance, in *Waltz with Bashir* Folman repeatedly illustrates his revulsion at the fact that he has taken part in (what he perceives as) an unjustifiable operation that exposed him and his friends to danger and led them to target innocent people. A similar paradigm can be seen in *Two fingers from Sidon* where Gadi’s experiences during policing operations give rise to painful dilemmas while conducting searches in houses in the presences of children, women and the elderly.

The differences in how combat activity is perceived between films like *Beaufort*, *Waltz with Bashir* and *Two Fingers from Sidon* may indeed reflect a changing Israeli self-perception concerning the ethos of military conflict. The comparison to the Yom Kippur War films further clarifies this contention as the protagonists of these films are fighting a classical well-armed and trained enemy that they can see. While they may mourn their friends who died, begrudge their suffering while in the field or in combat, they fall short of expressing notions of despair or of a lack of purpose. By contrast, in *Beaufort*, for example, nearly every instance of death is presented as ultimately meaningless amidst the coming withdrawal from Lebanon. In the face of this loss of purpose the military command and the political echelon became increasingly concerned with exposing soldiers to enemy fire.²⁸

Indeed, that in the months and years directly preceding Israel’s withdrawal from the security strip open patrols along the villages of Southern Lebanon nearly ceased entirely. Liraz’s anger in *Beaufort* over the lack of initiative expressed by the midlevel and upper leadership is a very real frustration that was (and still is) experienced by many junior commanders and officers.²⁹ While questions of morality were a poignant part of the 1982 Lebanon War, the issue of combat initiative among the IDF’s Junior and midlevel officer corps became a central topic particularly after the 2006 Second Lebanon War. *Beaufort* was released in 2007 and one of its central tensions (between Liraz and his midlevel commanders) expresses a distinct unease with the Israeli way of post-heroic warfare that so limits an army’s ability to function on enemy territory. This tension is not so much

a reflection of a cultural or moral ethos but rather emerges out of the very pragmatic political and strategic dilemmas of over 30 years of conflict in Lebanon.

Conclusions

The social and moral interpretation of the realism featured in Lebanon Wars cinema is largely unable to explain the protagonists' experiences and seems relevant only to the post-heroic and asymmetrical dimensions of warfare. This lacuna is also prevalent among some film scholars, whose theoretical interpretations are often alienated from the tactical and operational dilemmas endemic to military organisations.³⁰

This article presents a different approach that is grounded in the military sociology of the Israeli army. It argues that the personal experiences of protagonists in war films primarily reflects the military organisational system that is most responsible for shaping combat experiences. Most of the films in the Lebanon war corpus (with the exception of *Two Fingers from Sidon*) have much in common with 'personal war diary documentaries,' created out of footage from individual soldiers with private cameras and later 'produced' into documentary films. These films offer an intimate perspective on war that transcends the IDF's official message.³¹

The personal films of the Lebanon war corpus offer a similar intimate perspective, one that is closely grounded in both the gruelling as well as quotidian realities of Israel's way of war. Scholarship has generally viewed the harsh experiences of protagonists in Israeli war cinema through the broad perspective of larger social processes or the narrower filters of individual psychological or moral dilemmas. In his analysis of *Beaufort*, Yosef draws a comparison between the lonely pain of the individual combatant set against larger processes of social disintegration at the national level. *Beaufort* echoes with a 'melancholic nostalgia for a lost mythical world [and a] feverish desire for the memory of the national unity of a paternal community free of internal divisions.'³² As a result, he sees films like *Lebanon* and *Beaufort* as a metaphor of rebirth that depicts the transformation of Israeli society through its experiences in Lebanon. While these metaphorical interpretations are certainly compelling, they tend to overlook the ways in which the thematic conflicts portrayed in the films are also closely tied to the organisational modes through which Israel chooses to fight its wars. The national way of war in Israel is reflected in the differences between conscripts, junior NCOs and reservists. The comparison between the personal accounts of protagonists in Lebanon Wars films, Yom Kippur films and American war films reflects this contention. That is, in addition to acting as a metaphor for societal or ethical transformation, these films also portray the very practical dilemmas that combat in Lebanon posed to the IDF's way of waging war. It is

this aspect that few scholars have yet to analyse. The IDF's military traditions and make up – the ways in which it recruits, equips, trains, and organises its personnel both conscripts and reservists – evolve slowly. Yet they also evolve alongside rapidly changing political and strategic conditions. In this way, some modes of operation such as the dynamics of intra-unit seniority, or the lack of combat experience of junior officers remain strikingly static while others have changed in fundamental ways.

The contemporary Israeli way of war emerged alongside the IDF's many engagements in Lebanon. The personal films that portray those conflicts reflect an interpretive light back on the many contemporary challenges that Israel's way of war must grapple with in the post-heroic present. To be sure the Lebanon war corpus can offer cinematic metaphors for better understanding how Israeli society grapples with the social and political challenges that it faces.³³ Yet surely any analyses of Israeli society through the prism of military conflict must begin with the habitus of military practice itself. These films ultimately offer a way to debate the moral dimensions of military service, in a different and more practical register. The significance of the Lebanon war corpus then is precisely this issue of military habitus. While offering a metaphor for changing Israeli social norms, these films also portray how Israel's conflicts in Lebanon have impacted the IDF's practical operating procedures both in the organisational and strategic sense. In so doing, they help both scholars and lovers of war cinema alike to better understand how the pragmatics of military operations become articulated in media and art but also the ways in which military organisations respond and react to societal changes themselves.

Notes

1. Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare*.
2. Weigley, *The American way of war*.
3. Citino, *The German Way of War*.
4. Slocum, "Cinema and the Civilizing Process," 50.
5. Yosef, "Traces of War," 61–83.
6. Benziman, "Mom, I'm Home," 112.
7. Lachmann and Mitchell, "The Changing Face of War in Textbooks," 188–203.
8. Conolly-Smith, "Race-ing Rape," 244.
9. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*.
10. Williams, *Realism in the Cinema*.
11. Morag, "Perpetrator Trauma and Current Israeli Documentary Cinema."
12. Hallam and Marshment, *Realism and popular cinema*.
13. Kober, "From Heroic to Post-Heroic Warfare."
14. Cohen, Bacevich, and Eisenstadt, *Knives, Tanks, and Missiles*.
15. Marcus, "Military Innovation and Tactical Adaptation," 513.
16. Ben-Shalom, "Trends in Training."
17. Coker, *War in an Age of Risk*.

18. Lemish and Barzel, "Four Mothers."
19. Ben-Shalom, "Introduction: Israel's post-heroic condition."
20. Kellett, *Combat Motivation*.
21. Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari, "Cohesion during Military Operations."
22. Bassil-Morozow, "Waltz with Bashir."
23. Moskos, "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam"; Winslow, "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne."
24. Herspring, "Dedovshchina in the Russian Army."
25. Ben-Shalom, Lehrer & Ben-Ari, "Cohesion during Military Operations," 63.
26. Stewart, "Screen memory in Waltz with Bashir," 58–62.
27. Kober, "From Heroic to Post-Heroic Warfare," 99–101.
28. Jones, "Israeli counter-insurgency strategy," 103.
29. Rapaport, *The IDF and the Lessons of the Second Lebanon War*.
30. Ben-Shalom and Benbenisty, "A Time of War," 371; and Williams, *Realism in the Cinema*.
31. Duvdevani, "How I Shot the War."
32. Yosef, "Traces of War," 50.
33. Benziman, "Mom, I'm Home," 114–5.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Uzi Ben Shalom is Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ariel University and co-chair of the Military Sociology Community in the Israeli Sociological Society.

Nehemia N. Stern is a postdoctoral residence in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ariel University.

ORCID

Uzi Ben Shalom  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1988-0744>

Nehemia N. Stern  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4842-0544>

Bibliography

- Bassil-Morozow, H. "Waltz with Bashir." *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 61, no. 5 (2016): 712–714. doi:10.1111/1468-5922.12267.
- Ben-Shalom, U. "Trends in Training for the Military Profession in Israel – The Case Study of the Tactical Command College." *Political and Military Sociology: An Annual Review* 42 (2014): 51–73.
- Ben-Shalom, U. "Introduction: Israel's Post-heroic Condition." *Israel Affairs* 24, no. 4 (2018): 569–571. doi:10.1080/13537121.2018.1478783.
- Ben-Shalom, U., and I. Benbenisty. "A Time of War – Contextual and Organizational Dimensions in the Construction of Combat Motivation in the

- IDF." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 3–4 (2019): 371. doi:[10.1080/01402390.2017.1360772](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1360772).
- Ben-Shalom, U., Z. Lehrer, and E. Ben-Ari. "Cohesion during Military Operations: A Field Study on Combat Units in the Al-Aqsa Intifada." *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 1 (2005): 63–79. doi:[10.1177/0095327X05277888](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X05277888).
- Benziman, Y. "'Mom, I'm Home': Israeli Lebanon-War Films as Inadvertent Preservers of the National Narrative." *Israel Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 112. doi:[10.2979/israelstudies.18.3.112](https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.18.3.112).
- Citino, R. *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005.
- Cohen, E. A., A. J. Bacevich, and M. J. Eisenstadt. *'Knives, Tanks, and Missiles': Israel's Security Revolution*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998.
- Coker, C. *War in an Age of Risk*. London: Polity, 2009.
- Conolly-Smith, P. "Race-ing Rape: Representations of Sexual Violence in American Combat Films." *War & Society* 32, no. 3 (2013): 244. doi:[10.1179/0729247313Z.00000000025](https://doi.org/10.1179/0729247313Z.00000000025).
- Duvdevani, S. "How I Shot the War—Ideology and Accountability in Personal Israeli War Documentaries." *Studies in Documentary Film* 7 (2013): 280.
- Hallam, J., and M. Marshment. *Realism and Popular Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Herspring, D. R. "Dedovshchina in the Russian Army: The Problem that Won't Go Away." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18, no. 4 (2005): 618–620. doi:[10.1080/13518040500356948](https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040500356948).
- Jones, C. "Israeli Counter-insurgency Strategy and the War in South Lebanon 1985–97." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 8, no. 3 (1997): 103. doi:[10.1080/09592319708423186](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592319708423186).
- Kellett, A. *Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Men in Battle*. Hingham: Kluwer, 1982.
- Kober, A. "From Heroic to Post-Heroic Warfare: Israel's Way of War in Asymmetrical Conflicts." *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 1 (2015): 96–122. doi:[10.1177/0095327X13498224](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X13498224).
- Lachmann, R., and L. Mitchell. "The Changing Face of War in Textbooks: Depictions of World War II and Vietnam 1970–2009." *Sociology of Education* 87, no. 3 (2014): 188–203. doi:[10.1177/0038040714537526](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040714537526).
- Lemish, D., and I. Barzel. "Four Mothers: The Womb in the Public Sphere." *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 2 (2000): 147–169. doi:[10.1177/0267323100015002001](https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323100015002001).
- Liddell Hart, B. H. *The British Way in Warfare*. London: Faber & Faber limited, 1932.
- Marcus, R. D. "Military Innovation and Tactical Adaptation in the Israel–Hizballah Conflict: The Institutionalization of Lesson-Learning in the IDF." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 513. doi:[10.1080/01402390.2014.923767](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.923767).
- Morag, R. "Perpetrator Trauma and Current Israeli Documentary Cinema." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 27, no. 2 (2012): 93–133. doi:[10.1215/02705346-1597222](https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-1597222).
- Moskos, C. C. "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam." *Journal of Social Issues* 31, no. 4 (1975): 25–37. doi:[10.1111/j.1540-4560.1975.tb01009.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1975.tb01009.x).
- Rapaport, A. *The IDF and the Lessons of the Second Lebanon War*. Ramat Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2010.

- Slocum, J. D. "Cinema and the Civilizing Process: Rethinking Violence in the World War II Combat Film." *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 3 (2005): 50. doi:[10.1353/cj.2005.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2005.0021).
- Weigley, R. F. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Williams, C. *Realism in the Cinema*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Winslow, D. "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne." *Armed Forces & Society* 25, no. 3 (1999): 429. doi:[10.1177/0095327X9902500305](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9902500305).
- Yosef, R. "Traces of War: Memory, Trauma, and the Archive in Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort*." *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 61–83. doi:[10.1353/cj.2011.0006](https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0006).
- Zerubavel, Y. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.