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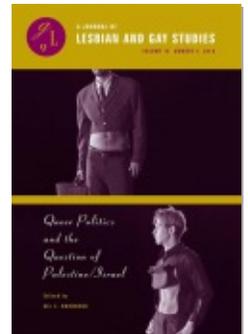
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IS QUEER SECULAR?

Netalie Braun's *Gevald*

Thea Gold

A recent symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, was organized around the question “Is critique secular?”¹ Responding to a growing critical engagement with secularisms, the symposium examined, among other things, Western critique’s current investment in secular ideals and the liberal imaginary through which Western intellectual critics can be nonreflexively attached to ideals of autonomy, creativity, and freedom. In a similar vein, we might also question the investment of queerness in secularism and its own uncritical attachments to such ideals. In other words, “Is queer secular?”

The short film *Gevald* (2008), by the award-winning Israeli filmmaker Netalie Braun, provides an interesting study of this question.² Beautifully shot and remarkably rich and multifaceted for its modest sixteen-minute running time, *Gevald* relates a lesbian love story set in West Jerusalem on the eve of the contested 2006 pride parade in the city. The film intersperses musical scenes from Shushan, a neighborhood gay drag club, with documentary footage of Haredi Jews rioting and protesting against the parade.

Jerusalem city lights fade into a sparkling disco ball. At the club, drag queens on stage lip-synch their hearts out to Hebrew pop, as the gorgeous Palestinian bartender (the remarkable Samira Saraya) buys her Jewish dyke friend a drink. “L’chaim,” toasts the friend (Noga Meltzer) in Hebrew as the two women down the shots. “Saha, habibti,” the bartender toasts back in Arabic. The club’s pop music continues over chaotic handheld nighttime footage of rioting Haredi men setting fire to garbage cans in the street, and being chased by policemen on horseback.

Gevald is one in a recent flurry of films about the battles over gay pride in Jerusalem.³ The overwhelming interest in these battles has much to do with Jerusalem's status as a city holy to three religions. Such battles are often framed by liberal democratic secularist ideas that conflate religion with oppression and LGBTI or queer agency with resistance to that oppression. It is no coincidence that the first World Pride gathering took place in Rome during the Roman Catholic Church's 2000 Jubilee celebration and the following one was held in Jerusalem in 2006. "Dramatic conflict pits the city's tolerance-oriented Open House [an LGBTI organization] against fundamentalist and superstitious critics," summarizes Peter Debruge in his *Variety* review of Nitzan Gilady's related film *Jerusalem Is Proud to Present*.⁴ Debruge's summary underscores the prevalent liberal dichotomy fueling these cinematic dramas: the "enlightened" homosexual versus the "backward" religious fundamentalist (always assumed to be straight).

Gevald, too, seems to pit religious against gay from its very first frame, in a caption that reads: "In 2005 three people were stabbed at the pride parade in Jerusalem by an ultra-Orthodox Jew who charged at the marchers with a knife." By marking the assailant only by his religious identity, the film introduces religious Jews (and perhaps religion in general) as a violent and dangerous enemy of the local LGBTI community, an enemy against which one must cry out in protest. Indeed, seconds later all the queers at the club, egged on by the resident drag queen M.C. (Gil Naveh), are crying out "Gevald!" Cut to documentary footage of an outdoor antigay protest of Haredi men also shouting "Gevald!"

The word is an idiomatic Yiddish cry for help or cry of protest, originally used by diasporic European Jews when attacked by anti-Semites. Here the Haredi men in Jerusalem cry "Gevald!" to protest the contamination of the holy city with a parade of "sexual abomination," while the queers (using the Haredi vernacular, Yiddish, with biting irony) cry "Gevald!" against Haredi violence and religious attacks on sexual and secular freedoms. Tellingly, the German word *Gewalt* means violence, power, or force. It is also the root of the Yiddish verb *fargvaldikn*, which means to rape or force someone. The film's title thus foregrounds various relations to the subject's autonomy.⁵

Enter stunning transgender drag king Slim Shuki, in a classy gray suit, his serious, masculine face made up with glittery blue makeup—blue lipstick, blue eye shadow, blue mustache. He lip-synchs in Hebrew to what is by now an unofficial LGBTI anthem in Israel, Erez Halevi's "This is how nature created you." (The words are in stark contrast to the religious sentiment, "God created you.") Sud-

denly Slim Shuki removes his suit jacket and shirt, and stands bare-chested with the female symbol painted on him in red. He claws at his own chest: “Don’t try to fight it, don’t try to change / for it will always come back again, suddenly.” Later, with his female symbol transformed into a red and blue transgender symbol, he spreads wet blue paint from his own hands onto audience members’ hands, while lip-synching: “This is how nature created you / with a little imagination and free thought.”⁶ The words “free thought” bridge the next shot of a mob of Haredi men all identically dressed in their traditional black suits and hats.

Does the Pope Wear a Dress?

If *Gevald* constructs local queerness as secular, it simultaneously complicates and undermines this very construction. The film’s central love story involves a secular Jewish dyke reuniting with her religious lover, who has come to the club to warn that the pride parade will be dangerous because of Haredi violence. A religious woman as the film’s main lesbian love interest renders impossible a simplistic correlation between gay and secular. Moreover, the on-screen couple is meaningfully reflected in the identities of the filmmakers themselves. Braun is a secular Jewish Israeli, while her life partner and collaborator, the film’s cinematographer Avigail Sperber, is religious—the founder of Bat Kol, an Orthodox lesbian group, and the daughter of a prominent Jerusalem rabbi. As Braun related to me in an interview, the film was inspired partly by the outrageously homophobic *pashkevilim* (community posters) plastered all over the Haredi neighborhood through which the couple would pass on their way to visit family.

Furthermore, while *Gevald* often presents queers and religious Jews in opposition and is unwaveringly critical of religious Jewish antigay violence, the film’s use of cross-cutting and sound serves at times to draw parallels between the two groups. Both, for example, are shown engaging in creative, performative protests. In one such protest, religious Jewish men lead a host of animals through the streets in a disturbing mock pride march, dubbed the “Beast Parade.” We see donkeys and goats in a sort of gay human drag, wearing pink clothes that say “proud,” as the human protesters leading them sing, laugh, and shout out homophobic remarks. A religious Jew explains that in Hebrew numerology, the word “homo” is equivalent to “the beast.” His friend bleats like a sheep. Cut to a smiling human drag queen at the club, bedecked in bovine drag, who sings, as the religious men did at their protest, “Uncle Moses had a cow” (the Hebrew version of “Old MacDonald”). The voices of the Beast Parade protesters can still

be heard over the drag queen's song: "Stop the abomination! Jerusalem is not Sodom!" This recurring use of soundbridging in the film has the effect of comparing the two communities shown, sometimes emphasizing their differences, but sometimes—even if unintentionally—drawing out their commonalities.

In a striking scene documenting a 2005 interfaith summit meeting in Jerusalem, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religious leaders—each fancily bedecked in his particular ceremonial attire—join hands and raise their voices together against a gay pride march in the Holy City. This almost surreal scene of unlikely brotherhood reads like a cynical manifestation of the prophecies of the End of Days. "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," quips His Beatitude Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, the Armenian patriarch, in his black dresslike vestment and prominent black headgear. Looking at him, one is reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's question, "Does the pope wear a dress?"⁷ From the performers in the gay club to the Haredi Jews in their traditional garb, from the religious leaders in their elaborate robes and hats to the poor animals led against their will in a mock pride parade—in *Gevald*, everyone is in drag.

The battles over gay pride in Jerusalem and portrayals of religious Jews as violent homophobic zealots are also interesting in that they play against the image of Israel as a supposed oasis of tolerance and democracy in an allegedly "fundamentalist Middle East." Israel's so-called tolerance toward LGBTI folk—for example, they, too, can serve in the occupier's army—is often cynically used as a fig leaf to cover the atrocious human rights violations committed by the Israeli state against Palestinians, including LGBTI Palestinians. When studying secularism or Islamophobia in an Israeli context, one must also consider Islamophobia's historical ties to anti-Semitism, as well as Zionism's historically contested relationship to rabbinic Judaism.⁸ The supposedly oppositional figures of the "degenerate" homosexual and the "backward" religious man are in fact two aspects of the same figure of the *Ostjude*, the Yiddish-speaking unmanly East European diasporic Jew, whose rejection and attempted obliteration by Europe and Zionism alike has been a tragically crucial part of modern Israel's attempts to construct itself as a "Western" state. The other part, of course, has been Israel's devastating erasure and oppression of the Palestinian people, cast as "East" to Israel's imaginary "West."⁹

The Gay *Shaheed* and His Beloved

“And now, for a passionate love song — please welcome to the stage the devastatingly good-looking Youssuf and Jabbar!”

Hussein Al Jamsi’s music begins to rise over the crowded club. All queer eyes turn to the tiny stage: Standing there is a tall heartthrob drag king, in just black slacks and a chest binder, with his back to the audience. Affixed to his chest binder are metallic strips representing an explosive belt. The performer puts a black dress shirt on, and then wraps a black-and-white checkered Palestinian quffiyah scarf around his shoulders. He is preparing to be a shaheed, a martyr for the Palestinian national struggle.

The camera turns to his partner, who seems ageless in a white galabiyya (a traditional Arab garment), wearing a red and white quffiyah headdress. He lip-syncs in Arabic, directing his words in despair to the other man, “By God, my life is worth nothing without you!”¹⁰ The would-be shaheed’s love for his partner is palpable, yet he remains steadfast in his resolve; he ties a green band around his head, inscribed with the Islamic Shahadah: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God,” and then kisses the Holy Qur’an. “You promised to share my love!” sings his partner, stroking his beloved’s forehead and pushing away the green headband, weeping into his beloved’s quffiyah. Eventually, he can only offer his blessing: “Go! I will accept your absence.” They hold each other; they kiss.

This riveting, beautiful drag act that appears halfway through the film was originally performed at a Palestinian queer party in Tel Aviv. Hosted by the LGBTQ Palestinian organization Al-Qaws (“the rainbow”), such parties have been taking place every few months and are mixed, with some Jews joining a diverse Palestinian crowd. I asked Saraya, who co-created and performed in the act, how the audience reacted to the original performance. Most people, she said, were excited and moved, some even to tears. A few Muslims, however, were angered that a Qur’an was used in an establishment serving alcohol, while some Jews were angered that a suicide bomber was depicted at all.

Such criticism is indicative of the radical nature of this act, which takes two oppositional hegemonic narratives and marries them together, thus subverting both. The names Youssuf and Jabbar parody the popular Israeli gay film *Yossi and Jagger* (dir. Eytan Fox; 2002), a sort of local *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee;



Drag kings Youssuf and Jabbar. *Gevald*, 2008

2005), that tells the love story of two male Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officers stationed in Lebanon, of whom one, Jagger, dies in battle.¹¹ The drag act brilliantly recasts this very mainstream (and implicitly Zionist) gay love story into a mainstream Palestinian narrative of resistance, embodied by the *shaheed*. A Jewish Israeli audience is made to see the suicide bomber as a lovable human being and to question the assumed moral superiority of the fallen Israeli soldier (e.g., the beloved, grievable Jagger) over that of the Palestinian martyr. At the same time, the assumed heterosexuality of the Palestinian freedom fighter is also called into question, and gay Palestinian love is shown as part of, not separate from, the struggle for Palestinian liberation. That this is all performed in drag by two Palestinian lesbians introduces yet another layer of depth.

Colin Jager points out that secularism is not neutral, as it tends to present itself, but coercive, “authoriz[ing] certain kinds of subjects and marginaliz[ing] others.”¹² The categories religious and secular are not opposites, he explains;

rather, “secularism *produces* the distinction between the religious and the secular, and then naturalizes it. . . . Religion appears as marked, set against the neutral or unmarked background of the secular.”¹³ For example, Talal Asad argues that the Western tendency to ascribe religious motivation to certain suicide attacks serves to mark such violence as irrational and morally undeveloped, as opposed to the secular—and therefore allegedly reasonable and just—violence of Western military operations.¹⁴ The very question “Is queer secular?” thus assumes a binary division into secular and religious that is a false dichotomy.

Gevald's “Youssuf and Jabbar” drag act is laden with religious imagery and language, such as the kissing of the Holy Qur’an, the Shahadah spelled out on the headband, and the numerous references to God in the song’s lyrics. Yet these should not be read through the lens of a religious/secular dichotomy, which does not account for the way religious vocabulary is used in many Palestinian (and Israeli) contexts to express nationalist ideas. The would-be *shaheed* in the drag act, for example, is an activist fighting for Palestinian liberation and marks this by donning the Islamic Shahadah around his forehead.

The figure of the gay *shaheed* also resonates with the image of the gay man as terrorist, someone who “desires death,” supposedly infecting himself and others with AIDS, who has no children, or who spreads moral decay.¹⁵ Antigay rhetoric surrounding the Jerusalem pride parade, for example, employed a vocabulary of terror: “We are talking about an explosive belt with the capacity to shake the entire Middle East,” wrote Eli Yishai, head of the Haredi Shas government party and, at the time, Israel’s vice prime minister, in his formal appeal to the high court of justice to cancel the 2006 parade.¹⁶ Hillel Weiss of Bar Ilan University, a religious messianic Zionist who was charged last year with incitement to violence against homosexuals, has said: “The matter of gender and queerness . . . is like a terrorist organization against the entire world.”¹⁷

Similar undoubtedly racist and Islamophobic scare rhetoric is also used by liberal secularists. Uri Zaki, then head of the Left-liberal Meretz Party youth faction, called for curfews to be placed on the Haredi neighborhoods in Jerusalem after Haredi antigay rioting: “This is terrorism, plain and simple, and terrorism should be dealt with the way any terrorism is dealt with: curfew and arrests.”¹⁸ While it is disturbing that Zaki supports enforced collective punishments and restrictions on both Haredi and Palestinian communities, it is not surprising that Haredis, gays, and terrorists are so frequently rhetorically associated. The “scarieness” of the figure of the terrorist lies not only in the threat of explosion but in the queerness of the suicide bomber’s body itself. Like the “degenerate” body of the homosexual and the “sickly” body of the Jew, the suicide bomber’s hybrid body

(half human, half weapon) is queer.¹⁹ In *Gevald*, this is literalized in the arresting image of the drag king's inseparably entwined chest-binder and explosive belt.

Love without Borders?

Gevald is set on November 9, the eve of the 2006 Jerusalem pride parade. The parade was originally scheduled for August, when it was to be the highlight of the InterPride's five-day Jerusalem World Pride event. Activist groups from around the world called to boycott the event, denouncing the celebration of freedom and gay rights in a divided city under occupation. Especially unfortunate and misleading was the decision to name the event "Love without Borders." How could a pride event blatantly excluding—through border control—LGBTI people from Palestine and most Arab countries be called "Love without Borders" or "World Pride"? Does global queerdom—if there is such a thing—not include Arab queers?

In the end, the parade was postponed—because of Israel's summer war on Lebanon—and rescheduled for November 10. The weeks leading up to the November parade were fraught with tension, as the Haredi community upped the intensity of their protests and fought hard to cancel the parade, which they felt would bring catastrophe to Jerusalem. On November 9 a surprising decision was reached by the parade organizers, the Haredi leaders, and the Jerusalem city council: the pride parade would neither march nor be canceled, but instead take place in a closed stadium. This was presented as a delicately worked-out "compromise" that appealed to the needs of all communities involved. The truth, however, was different.

In the early morning of November 8, 2006, twelve Israeli shells landed on and around a row of houses in the northern Gaza town Beit Hanoun, killing nineteen people and wounding over forty.²⁰ Nearly all of those killed were from a single family; most were women and children, and many were killed in their beds. Israel announced that the attack had been a "technical error." Fearing Palestinian revenge attacks, on the one hand, and Haredi violence toward pride parade marchers, on the other, the Israeli police force faced a shortage in manpower. The solution? Blockade all Palestinian villages around Jerusalem, keep the pride event in a closed, contained space, and encourage Haredis to stay in their neighborhoods, as there would be no parade for them to protest. The topography of state-enforced physical segregation as a way to control public space is an apt metaphor for how the state pits minority groups against one another, to deflect attention from its own violence.

Our lesbian heroines sit together at the bar in painful silence after a fight. Three drag queens on stage are lip-synching to Lesley Gore's feminist anthem "You Don't Own Me": "I don't tell you what to say / I don't tell you what to do / So just let me be myself / That's all I ask of you." One of our heroines gets up and starts walking away, but her lover goes after her, holds her, and they start to slow dance to the song. "You don't own me . . . Forever young and free . . ." Their faces draw nearer and nearer and they begin to kiss . . .

The deafening sound of an explosion and shattering glass interrupts the word "forever," as the screen turns to black. After several seconds of silence, a beautiful drag queen with a tear-stricken face and a lit cigarette in her hand emerges out of the blackness. "Why?" She lip-synchs, channeling Annie Lennox. She begins to disrobe, taking off her wig, pulling down the top of her dress, removing her falsies and bra. "Why?" As the credits roll, we are left with a close-up of her face, which now looks more like that of a white gay man, looking straight into the camera, weeping and whispering bitterly, "you don't know how I feel."

The film leaves the source of the explosion unknown, though it tacitly suggests it was a Haredi hate crime. But in a film that poetically blurs boundaries between fiction and documentary, this explosion eerily recalls the Palestinian drag act, which had earlier set up an explosion that never came.²¹ Moreover, while *Gevald* makes no direct reference to the Beit Hanoun massacre, the film's narrative clearly takes place on the following day. Was the *shaheed* in the drag act possibly motivated by revenge for Beit Hanoun? The question flickers for only a moment, but the film remains haunted by the massacre it elects to ignore.

The weeping gay man is right; we don't know how he feels. Just as he does not know what a heartbroken Haredi man feels, believing that homosexuals are destroying everything he holds sacred. And while the queers and Haredis cry "Gevald!" at each other in Jerusalem, the state is free to execute its own violence unnoticed. "Why?" might a girl ask in Beit Hanoun. No one can possibly know what she feels after eighteen members of her family — mother, grandparents, aunts, and uncles — were killed in front of her just the day before.

Is queer secular? Inspired by Braun's unique film, which took on a life of its own far beyond her original modest intentions for it, I believe in the power of small open things — like questions. I imagine a gentle, open, nonoppositional queer politics of solidarity; one that honors feelings and questions ideas; that nurtures delicate coalitions everywhere while questioning what such coalitions might

look like; a politics that, even in the face of overwhelming institutional violence and coercion, never loses sight of our inconceivable interdependence.

Notes

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1. See Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
2. The film premiered at the 2009 Berlinale and took second place in the Goethe-Institut's International Short Film Competition, "All Human Beings Are Born Free and Equal."
3. Other films on the topic include *Jerusalem Is Proud to Present* (dir. Nitzan Gilady; 2007) and *City of Borders* (dir. Yun Jong Suh; 2009).
4. Peter Debruge, "Jerusalem Is Proud to Present," *Variety*, August 8, 2007, www.variety.com/review/VE1117934377.html?categoryid=31&cs=1.
5. "Gevald" was also the name of a popular Jerusalem drag night at Shushan, the club that appears in the film. Braun documented performances by "Gevald" night regulars and other local drag artists to create the film's semifictional drag show.
6. The act as originally performed can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmBagGJMnFE (accessed April 23, 2010).
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 52.
8. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); and Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of the Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
9. For more on the figure of the diasporic Jew, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
10. Both the speaker and the addressee in the song lyrics are gendered masculine, as in most traditional Arabic love poetry; this performance offers a gay interpretation of such lyrics.
11. The film remains enormously popular with gay and general audiences in Israel and was even given the vote of approval by the IDF for its "positive" portrayal of Israeli soldiers. *Gevald's* Arabicization of the Hebrew names (Yossi becomes Youssuf) can be seen as a wry parodic reversal of the infuriating Zionist trend to Hebraize the

- original Arabic names of Palestinian villages that were occupied by Israel in 1948 (e.g., Bissan was renamed Bet-sh'an).
12. Colin Jager, "Is Critique Secular? Thoughts on Enchantment and Reflexivity," 3, townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/pubs/Jager.pdf (accessed March 30, 2010).
 13. Jager, "Is Critique Secular?" 3.
 14. See Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 8–9, 45.
 15. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xxiii.
 16. Aviram Zino and Efrat Weiss, "Yishai Appealed to High Court: Pride Parade an Explosive Belt" (in Hebrew), *Ynet*, November 7, 2006. Available at www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3324921,00.html.
 17. Yaniv Halperin, "Homosexuality a Danger to Humanity" (in Hebrew), *Gogay*, August 14, 2008. Available at www.gogay.co.il/content/article.asp?id=7343.
 18. Halperin, "Homosexuality a Danger to Humanity."
 19. See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 37–39; and Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 216.
 20. United Nations General Assembly, "Human Rights Situation in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories: Report of the High-Level Fact-Finding Mission to Beit Hanoun Established under Council Resolution S-3/1(A/HR/9/26). Available at www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/VDUX-7JLMVK?OpenDocument (accessed May 10, 2010).
 21. Especially as the lovers' embrace at the end of the act recalls the end of *The Bubble*, a sort of *Yossi and Jagger* "sequel," in which the Palestinian suicide bomber and his Israeli gay lover embrace and explode together.