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The Unstable Stereotype in Boaz Davidson's Bourekas Trilogy

Abstract: This paper examines the use of stereotypes in Boaz Davidson's Bourekas trilogy (Charlie and a Half, Snooker, and The Tzanaani Family) and argues that these films employ what I term the "unstable stereotype." While Bourekas films have often been dismissed as relying on simplistic and degrading ethnic caricatures, I argue that Davidson's films complicate the conventional function of stereotype by oscillating between cognitive familiarity and estranging excess and incongruence. Drawing on the conflicting interpretations of Bourekas cinema offered by scholars such as Judd Ne'eman, Ella Shohat, and Rami Kimchi, I suggest that Davidson's stereotypes simultaneously facilitate recognition while undermining the viewer's confidence in those very schematic constructions. I identify two central mechanisms through which this instability is produced: excess and incongruence. Excess emerges when stereotypical depictions become exaggerated to the point of intellectual or affective disturbance, often through grotesque corporeality, stylistic overstatement, or eruptions of violence that disrupt the films' comedic register. Incongruence appears through details that resist assimilation into the stereotype itself, such as contradictory character traits, unexpected details, or abrupt tonal shifts. Through close readings of key scenes across the trilogy, I demonstrate how Davidson repeatedly moves viewers between immersion and Brechtian distance. Situating Davidson's trilogy within broader traditions of cinematic Modernism, I argue that the unstable stereotype functions as a distinctly *Modernist* device, an insight that enables me to trace the legacy of this device in the work of contemporary Israeli auteurs such as Amos Gitai, Nadav Lapid, and Eran Kolirin, whose films similarly employ stereotypes as tools of estrangement and aesthetic disruption.

Keywords: Bourekas films, stereotypes, art cinema, Israeli society.

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Defining Boaz Davidson's Bourekas Trilogy

Bourekas film is a popular group of Israeli films that emerged in the 1960s and remained successful until the late 1970s, known for its blend of commercially attractive tropes (both comedic and melodramatic), and its focus on social and cultural tensions within Israeli society. These films often focus on clashes between Mizrahis (Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds) and Ashkenazis (Jews of European-origin), while utilizing humor, stereotypes, romance, and misunderstandings. The name "Bourekas film" comes from the cheap but filling Israeli street food Bourekas, which symbolizes the association of these films with popular, low-brow culture, while simultaneously denoting the deep-seeded "Israeliness" of these films (similarly to how the Spaghetti westerns' association with a pasta dish indicates their "Italianness") (Elkariv).

While dismissed by the cultural elite, many of the Bourekas films achieved remarkable commercial success, making this group of films one of the most socially and culturally influential in Israeli film history. Taking my cue from Israeli film scholar Rami Kimchi, I do not define Bourekas films as a genre nor as a sub-genre, but rather as a cycle, because different Bourekas films pertain to widely different genres (most often shifting between comedy and melodrama), while they are all connected through shared themes and recurring character-types and events (Kimchi 3).

My focus in this paper is a trilogy of Bourekas films made by Israeli filmmaker Boaz Davidson in three consecutive years: *Charlie and a Half* (1974), about the heartwarming relationship between the crooked yet good-hearted Charlie and the street kid Miko; *Snooker* (1975), about the Identical twins Gavriel and Azriel and the complex love triangle they form with the daughter of a strict Rabbi; and *Tzanani Family* (1976), about the rivalry between two neighboring families, one Jewish-Yemenite and the other Jewish-Persian. Though the contours of the Bourekas corpus are somewhat disputed (ibid. 28-34), these three films are ubiquitously defined as Bourekas films. Furthermore, they are among the most beloved and successful products of the cycle.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that in Davidson's trilogy, the stereotypical depiction of characters (Mizrahi men, Mizrahi women, Ashkenazi Jews, Persian Jews, Yemenite Jews, etc.) becomes an *ambiguous* cinematic device because of the stereotypes' *unstable* quality. It has been widely argued that stereotypes permeate the Bourekas world, for these films present characters identified with exaggerated traits of their ethnic and social group, in a manner which compromises psychological realism and individuality. Davidson's films are no exception to this rule. But as will become evident, the complexity of these stereotypical depictions has not been sufficiently analyzed. Furthermore, Davidson's use of stereotypes has sometimes been dismissed as vulgar and offensive, making an approach to them limited to their assessment as politically and socially harmful. This paper aims to

contrast these approaches, while giving a full account of the unstable stereotype in Davidson's Bourekas trilogy—its definition, aesthetic and political significance, reception, and legacy.

Approaches to Stereotypes in Davison's Bourekas Trilogy

Before analysing the trilogy and presenting my approach to its stereotypes, I outline the different approaches scholars have taken to this subject. As will become clear, two main conflicting approaches to characterization in Davidson's films emerge. It has been argued that Davidson's Bourekas films employ stereotypes extensively as tools to convey oversimplified information so as to facilitate immersion and comprehension. In contrast, it has also been argued that these films design characters in ways that ultimately produce complex configurations of identity requiring sustained interpretive attention—what might be seen as anti-stereotypical depictions. Most writers discussed in this section address the Bourekas cycle generally and do not focus exclusively on Davidson's trilogy. However, because the trilogy is so emblematic of the cycle as a whole, these approaches remain highly relevant to the present study.

I associate the first approach, identifying Bourekas films with a stereotypical depiction of Mizrahim and other ethnic groups, with Judd Ne'eman, who led the Modernist critique of Bourekas films (Kimchi 28-31). Ne'eman reads the Bourekas films as mirroring and enhancing the malaises of post six-day war Israeli society, and this enhancement is highly reliant on what Ne'eman sees as the films' constant return to stereotypes. According to Ne'eman, The humorous stereotypical depictions make the Mizrahi characters easy to detect and highly compelling, leading viewers to trust in the false solutions (inter-racial marriage, financial success, etc.) the films supply for the deep social, economic, and cultural divide in Israeli society. Ne'eman puts it simply: "Films of this genre (Bourekas films, ML) affect the viewer in a simple way: the characters are stereotypical and easy to identify with [...] and the protagonist's main action is based on a socially false model" (21). Ne'eman, Yigal bursztyn and Nissim Dayan, all future filmmakers writing in leading Israeli film journals of the 70s, share a similar claim with regards to Bourekas cinema: the stereotypical depictions found in these films were not only artistically questionable (a common, unremarkable opinion at the time) but also representative of ethical and social decadence (Shohat 114, Dayan, bursztyn 156-158). Ne'eman's approach was later developed by Nitzan Ben-Shaul, who argues that the defining characteristic of the Bourekas film is the capitalistic competitiveness which grows to absurd heights inside the film's community (Ben-Shaul 236-237). Like Ne'eman, Ben-Shaul's claim is based upon the assertion that easily detectable ("vulgar", in his words) stereotypes are used in these films, for they function as tools enabling clear and simple differentiation between the clashing social "competitors".

But as I claimed above, the view presented thus far constitutes only half of the picture. Ella Shohat, a leading voice in the postcolonial critique of Bourekas films (Altshuler 126), argues that characters in the Bourekas cinematic world can be understood as embodying more complex and layered identities than earlier scholars and critics had recognized. In her pioneering book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Shohat presents the Bourekas films as degrading depictions of Mizrahi Jews, promoting a false and escapist narrative of social assimilation in service of the Ashkenazi hegemony (on this point she seems to be in full agreement with Ne'eman). Nevertheless, Shohat adds a nuance to this claim—she argues film critics and cultural elites completely dismissed these films on their release mainly because they were focused on Mizrahi characters. The racist bias of these critics led them to disregard the more complex qualities found in this cycle—particularly its use of Carnivalesque humor, parody, and inter-textuality, which are all reflected in design of the characters in these films (Shohat 115-116).

Following in the footsteps of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal text *Rabelais and his World*, Shohat shows that stereotypes relating to Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews are often flipped in the Bourekas world in a carnivalesque spirit—the dim-witted Mizrahi manages to outsmart the cultured Ashkenazi. This is an unexpected shift in the stereotypical expectations which explains the appeal of these films to Mizrahi audiences and adds an (admittedly limited and dull) subversive edge to them (Shohat 122). Several scholars have expanded on Shohat's insights. Rami Kimchi's research on these films, for instance, meticulously relates their origins to classic Yiddish literature. Though the intuition that Bourekas cinema has its roots in the stories of classic Yiddish writers like Sholom Aleichem and Mendelei had been voiced earlier by Dayan, Kimchi provides an in-depth analysis detecting particular themes and tropes that these films have borrowed from the classic Yiddish literature (Kimchi 87-107). Kimchi unveils that the stereotypical Mizrahi Jew of the Bourekas community is actually the bastard of the 19th century Ashkenazi Jew found in the Shtetl literature—in his neglected appearance, insatiable competitiveness, ironic stance towards religion, etc. The unexpected revelation that Bourekas films merge Mizrahi appearance with culturally Ashkenazi characteristics strengthens the feeling that, contrary to what the writers above claim, there is nothing simple or straightforward about the character design in these films. Nugit Altshuler's research radicalizes Shohat and Kimchi's arguments, by claiming that the carnivalesque quality of the Bourekas films make them fully subversive. In her view, the constantly changing and fluctuating identities of the Bourekas characters "raised central questions", leading to a promotion of the "ideas of flexibility, openness, and the creation of something new, which over time became increasingly subversive" (Altshuler 11 [my translation, ML]). Joining Altshuler, Dorit Naaman has argued that the mismatched casting in these films (recognizably Ashkenazi actors depict stereotypically Mizrahi characters) can actually lead to Brechtian distancing and to a thought-provoking and politically influential viewing experience (36).

What approach, then, should one adopt? Are the characters in Davidson's trilogy constructed primarily through stereotypes that simplify the viewer's activity, or do they instead culminate in complex collages of identity which, at least to some extent, make the engagement with these films an intricate process? The difficulty lies not only in the fact that different scholars interpret Davidson's characters in different ways, but also in the fact that individual writers sometimes seem to shift between these positions without acknowledging the tension between them. Dayan, for example, argues both that the films depict Mizrahi characters according to easily-digestible stereotypes of the orient, and that these roots of these characters are to be found in Yiddish culture. I suggest that the tension I detect within the scholarship cannot be resolved by fully endorsing either camp, nor by unproblematically assimilating one approach into the other. Instead, the two effects of the character construction (simplifying and challenging) must be brought together into one comprehensive account. In other words, engaging with Davidson's trilogy requires a reconsideration of the way stereotypes' function in them as a cinematic device.

Basing myself on existent scholarship as well as on close analysis of Davidson's trilogy, I hope to demonstrate that an important insight lies somewhere in between the two approaches presented in this segment: the films encourage audiences to recognize stereotypical representations while simultaneously complicating and undermining them, constantly shifting between these cognitive positions.

The Unstable Stereotype

An unstable stereotype—what, precisely, is it? To begin, I clearly state my definition of stereotypical cinematic depiction: In film, a stereotypical depiction is a simplified, predictable, and somewhat exaggerated portrayal of a character based on its relation with a social or cultural group. Such a depiction compromises the believable depiction of the character as a fully developed individual, and can be used for strong comedic or dramatic effects (Schweinitz 276). Stereotypical characters are built on familiar "types" that audiences instantly recognize—like the "tough cop," the "dumb jock," or the "nerdy genius.". As mentioned above, in Davidon's Bourekas films, the stereotypical characters are most often related to social groups and ethnicities in Israeli Society—the ultra-religious Mizrahi, the cold and calculated Ashkenazi, the cheap Yemenite Jew, etc. Nevertheless, these stereotypical depictions are marked by a sense of unfamiliarity and unpredictability. They destabilize the cognitive function of stereotype "from within" without ever fully dissolving it, creating a complex dynamic in which the viewer continually shifts between the cognitive ease provided by stereotypes and the more active mode of engagement prompted by their instability.

But why does this perceived instability arise? I will present here two dialectical elements Davidson uses to constitute this effect—*excess* and *incongruence*. Beginning

with excess, watching one of Davidson's Bourekas films, one might feel a character is not only stereotypical, but that it is in some sense *too* stereotypical. By this I mean that certain stereotypical depictions seem to go beyond any comedic or dramatic purpose and stand out as marked in the narrative, historical and geographic setting of the film. Take for instance Charli's parents from *Charlie and a Half*. Both the mother and the father have extremely strong accents as they speak a broken Hebrew, and are dressed in clothes which seem completely unnatural in the temporal and spatial setting of the film (the poor neighbourhoods of Tel Aviv in the 1970s). Furthermore, Charli's mother is depicted as a witch who has potion-making abilities, a characteristic that relates to a stereotype of the Orient as primitive and unscientific, but nevertheless seems a bizarre, fantastical addition to the otherwise realistic narrative.

Other characters that function similarly are the Rabbi in *Snooker* and the Yemenite and Persian fathers in *Tzanaani Family*. These characters stand out as excessively stereotypical on the background of the social, temporal, and spatial setting of these films. Most characters in the trilogy, though admittedly stereotypical for the most part, sustain a degree of psychological realism and natural appearance that makes these excessive instances stand out sharply. It is perhaps this stereotypical excess that has led some to describe Bourekas films as folklore (Gross 259)—for the communicative straightforwardness this device entails seems typical of this storytelling style. But this seems to me an inaccurate appraisal: Davidson's Bourekas films do not "behave" like classic folklore tales. True, these films tend towards a degree of psychological simplicity and adhere to age-old narrative formulas, but these devices are situated in modern times, in familiar locations, and within stories that hold a degree of psychological realism. At most, then, these films can be described as drawing from some storytelling tropes associated with folklore, while diverging from the lack of specificity associated with this style (Lüthi 62-80). Considering this, the peculiar edge of the excessive stereotypes can not be dismissed. The excess simply does not fit, and the viewer might expect it to be motivated or explained somehow. In Edward Branigan's terms, the viewer searches for an appropriate schema outside the narrative schema to utilize so as to understand what is the purpose of the excess in these films (Branigan 13-17). But such a schema is not easily found—these instances of excess are not fully comedic, nor do they add to the melodramatic tone of the films or reference any extra-filmic sources. Instead, the excess remains as a kind of curious element sticking out, troubling the simplicity and straightforwardness of these films.

Another interesting and notable instance of excess is not tied to a single character's personality traits, but rather to Davidson's use of Yemenite visual culture. *Tzanani Family* opens with a traditional Yemenite celebration, filmed in a manner that emphasizes the event's colorfulness and dynamism. The scene may initially prime audiences to expect stereotypical representations of Yemenite culture. Yet toward the end of the sequence,

Davidson makes a curious stylistic choice: while two characters converse at the center of the frame, various people repeatedly pass before the camera carrying traditional Yemenite dishes and decorations, intermittently obscuring and revealing the speakers. This staging appears, on the one hand, to emphasize the scene's connection to Yemenite culture, as the traditional foods and decorations quite literally surround the human interaction. Simultaneously, however, the device is markedly theatrical. By drawing attention to the edges of the frame as borders that "cut" reality, it transforms the image from a transparent "window" onto the world into something closer to a painting or theatrical stage. This conspicuous departure from the film's otherwise realist visual rhetoric is not repeated elsewhere, which further heightens its irregularity and estranging quality. The stereotypical depiction of the Yemenite celebration thus becomes strange and defamiliarized through its own excess.



Thus far, I have discussed moments of excessive stereotypes which halt the viewers' intellect. I now turn to moments of excess stereotypical depictions which create a disturbance which is not intellectual, but rather affective—moments which are stereotypical in an excessively corporeal manner. I define corporeality here not as simply relating to physical attributes, because any and all stereotypes somehow relate to the human body. Instead, I focus on moments of excess which lead to corporeal repulsion, relating to traits of the body which disrupt the distinction between the body and the world. These moments might

encourage a feeling of unease, and even disgust, complicating and disrupting the viewer's engagement with the film. Mikhail Bakhtin description of "the Grotesque Body" will help me communicate the type of cinematic moments I detect in Davidson's trilogy (26):

> The stress [in depictions of the Grotesque body, ML] is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world [...] the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.

Such moments as described by Bakhtin are common in Davidson's trilogy, and contribute to a physically repulsive excess. I emphasize that this quote from Bakhtin should not signify that I am simply continuing the discussion on the Bourekas cycle's carnivalesque qualities, initiated by Ella Shohat and continued by Nugit Altschuler and others. This is because while I am referring to similar moments to those Bakhtin highlights, I diverge in my interpretation of the way these might affect audiences. For Bakhtin, moments of corporeal excess are "deeply positive" (19), in the sense that they can deepen the viewer's immersion, and lead to moments of cathartic and liberating laughter. Contrarily to this approach, I am much more interested in the way these excessive and boundary-shifting bodily processes rooted in the films' stereotypes might lead to the feeling of abjection so keenly described by Julia Kristeva (1-5), or to what literary scholar Reuven Tsur defined a a loss of emotive orientation (113). In other words, I am interested in the way Davidson exploits moments of bodily excess rooted in ethnic stereotypes in a manner that contributes to the de-stabilizing quality of his stereotypical depictions.

An Iconic example of corporeal excess found in Davidson's trilogy are the popping eyes so identified with Hanuka, one of the main characters of *Snooker*. Hanuka, played by Ze'ev Revach, is extremely conniving and money-driven, as the stereotype of the Mizrahi Jew dictates. Significantly, this trait is expressed not only through his actions in the film, but also through his glaring eyes, which seem to be popping out of their sockets. This creates an image which is rather disturbing, even in its comedic, light-hearted setting. This example shows how Davidson takes a stereotypical trait (greediness) and turns it into an unnervingly excessive corporeal manifestation, which might disturb the viewer's immersion.

Another example of this technique comes from *Charlie and a Half*, in a scene where the two antagonists force Charlie to eat an obscene amount of food. Here, Davidson takes the rather innocent stereotype which asserts Mizrahi Jews love food, and turns it into a revolting and cruel ceremony. Charlie is forced to gulp down dozens of hard-boiled eggs, and watching Charlie as he begins to get sick and as he fights the urge to vomit, viewers might feel an uncomfortable identification with poor Charlie, leading them to detach themselves from the diegetic pull of the film. The sickening, alienating sensation is replicated in a later scene



where Charlie gets back at his opponents by replicating this cruel ceremony and forcing them to eat innumerable boiled eggs.

What has been demonstrated is that Davidson takes stereotypes and exaggerates them to moments of excess, which challenge audiences both intellectually and affectively. These moments cannot be easily assimilated as satirical or parodic, because of their alienating and even Brechtian effect. But excess, be it intellectual or affective, would not be enough to create the perceived instability I detect in Davidson's stereotypical depictions. Things become more interesting when excess is paired with incongruent elements—details which seem to egregiously contradict or misalign with the stereotypes presented in the films. Referring again to Charlie's parents, I focus on the set design of Charlie's family home. As already described, Davidson goes to great lengths to depict Charlie's family as a stereotypical Mizrahi family. Nevertheless, when we enter the family home, for no apparent reason, a still life painting of sunflowers, somewhat reminiscent of Van Gogh's sunflower painting, is framed on the wall. On another wall, a Turneresque landscape painting is displayed. Although these paintings are at no point shown in close-up, they are clearly seen in the background. This might lead





the viewer to wonder—why in the world are these European cultural artefacts found in this stereotypically depicted Mizrahi household?

Incongruence is evident not only in the film's set design but also in its costume design. This is particularly apparent in Charlie's attire. While Charlie conforms in certain respects to stereotypical representations of the Mizrahi male, his wardrobe communicates an entirely different image. He frequently wears wide-legged jeans, stylish fitted shirts, and his distinctive Derby hat. In this sense, Charlie appears closer to figures such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, or Alain Delon than to the conventional images of Mizrahi masculinity. This contrast becomes even more striking when Charlie is compared to other male protagonists of the Bourekas film cycle: Sallah Shabbati (the eponymous hero of *Sallah Shabbati* [Ephraim Kishon, 1964]) is dressed in loose, worn, and dirty clothing, while Kazablan (another eponymous hero of a classic Bourekas film—*Kazablan* [Menachem Golan, 1973]) wears a simple, inexpensive jean outfit. Yet the tension between Charlie's fashionable appearance and his working-class Mizrahi background is neither acknowledged nor explained by the film. As a result, the viewer might remain perplexed by this apparent mismatch and the meanings it may be intended to convey.





A similar incongruence occurs when Davidson merges different traits in a single character's design. For instance, the character of Salvador, *Snooker*'s antagonist, is stereotypically Mizrahi in his extreme traditionalism and loyalty to family values—he flies from the United States to Israel to help his nephew marry the woman that was arranged for him many years prior. But simultaneously, at several points in the films it becomes clear that Salvador is someone who has turned away from his ethnic background, for he is a shrewd American businessman married to a non-Jewish woman. The same can be said of the Tzanaani children: although all conform in accent and appearance to stereotypical representations of Yemenite identity,

they differ markedly in personality. One daughter is a free-spirited teenager, another a more educated and reserved young woman, while the eldest son is a family man engaged in an affair with his aunt—none displaying stereotypically Yemenite characteristics, in other words. The point is not strictly that these conflicting traits exist, but that they seem to stand out in contrast with the expectations of stereotypical depictions encouraged and exploited by the trilogy, and that the films do not supply the audience with any framework to assimilate them.

I would like to pause here and clarify that the incongruence I am attempting to define is not one that can be reduced to one of the two theoretical frameworks commonly used in discussions of the Bourekas cycle: Orientalism and the Carnivalesque. Firstly, I stress that the incongruence I am describing here goes beyond the dualistic nature of Orientalist depictions. Briefly summarized, Edward Said famously argued that the defining characteristic of the Orientalist depiction is that it is an *imagined* depiction which is constituted as part of a wider cultural and social project of domination. This act of imagination might result in a depiction of the oriental subject as cunning, evil, and besatial, or as exotic and intriguing, representing the "magic" of the orient. Importantly, Said argues these incongruent or contradictory depictions of the orient can work together, for they are unified by their discursive role (56-57). Though the duality described by Said can be integrated into my claim, I believe the incongruence Davidson utilizes in his depiction of Mizrahi characters goes far beyond Said's Manichean split and includes details which are not clearly positive or negative, but rather simply unassimilable or unusual—the paintings in Charlie's house demonstrate this perfectly.

Regarding the framework of the carnivalesque as employed by Shohat, Kimchi, and Altshuler and discussed above in detail, I find it highly relevant to my claims about incongruence. Nevertheless, I do not believe incongruence can be reduced to the carnivalesque alone. As noted earlier, Shohat observes that Mizrahi characters in Bourekas cinema are not always confined to simplistic portrayals; at times, they are depicted as intellectually sharp and perceptive. Such moments produce a carnivalesque reversal in which the Mizrahi character outwits the Ashkenazi one. Similarly, Kimchi identifies a blurring of boundaries between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi figures, pointing to a thematic continuity between Bourekas films and classical Yiddish literature, a claim that Altshuler extends even further. The incongruence I identify in Davidson's trilogy, however, is not limited to moments in which Mizrahi characters display distinctly "Ashkenazi" traits (or vice versa). Rather, it refers to a broader aesthetic principle: the presence of details that stand out from their stereotypic context and thereby invite heightened critical attention from the viewer. In this sense, the carnivalesque elements in Davidson's trilogy can be understood as particular manifestations of the broader artistic device of incongruence in character design employed by these films.

It is crucial to stress the fluctuating nature of the unstable stereotype as one of its defining features. While identifiable cultural and social tropes are utilized in countless films in a manner which is consistently distancing and non-traditional, in the Bourekas trilogy,

stereotypes oscillate between serving their traditional simplifying function and operating as distancing, cognitively activating devices in the sense described above. To better understand this instability, I turn to a close analysis of a climactic scene from *The Tzanaani Family*. In this scene, Tzion, the patriarch of the Yemenite family, spies alongside Roza, the wife of the Persian patriarch, as Ben-Naim flirtatiously courts Tzion's wife, Tziona, much to her apparent delight. From the outset, the scene foregrounds the stereotypical depiction of the Mizrahi man as governed by overpowering emotions. Ben-Naim is entirely consumed by his passion, comparing the magnitude of his love to "the mountain of Persia," while Tzion is driven by uncontrollable rage, culminating in a violent confrontation with both his wife and her suitor. The portrayal of the Mizrahi community as ruled by heated emotion rather than rationality is further reinforced when the two wives, Roza and Tziona become embroiled in their own quarrel, escalating the scene into chaotic comedy. Up to this point, the stereotypes operate in a conventional comedic register: they entertain the audience while also clarifying the central conflict and making its trajectory easily legible.

At a certain moment, however, the stereotypes are pushed into excess, altering their perceived effect. This shift occurs when Tzion, led by his blinding rage, fires an army rifle (stolen from Ben-Naim's son, an army officer) at Ben-Naim. Although this act remains consistent with the emotional volatility established throughout the scene, it crosses into a level of violence that disrupts the comedic tone and complicates the audience's identification with Tzion. In simple terms, this climactic moment seems to go "too far". Davidson ultimately reveals that Tzion has not actually shot Ben-Naim, but only shattered jars of red sauce above his head. Yet even after this revelation, a sense of distance due to the movement of the stereotype towards excess remains and cannot be entirely undone. This intellectual distancing effect is accompanied by an affective excess produced by the grotesque image of Ben-Naim drenched in thick red sauce, visually evoking blood and other bodily fluids. While the explosive ending of the scene creates a moment of estrangement, the following scene restores the stereotypes to their more familiar comedic function. This oscillation between excess (as well as incongruence, which is prevalent in other scenes in the film) and Stereotype's classic functions recurs again, and again, and again, throughout *The Tzanaani Family* and, more broadly, across the Bourekas trilogy.

Summarizing this segment, what has become clear is that the stereotypes in Davidson's Bourekas trilogy are defined by their incorporation of both excessive and incongruent details, which lead to a perceived instability. If "stereotypes are shortcuts humans use to make sense of a complex world" (Bos & Madonia 806), then the stereotypical depictions found in *Charlie and a Half*, *Snooker*, and *The Tzanaani Family* are certainly unusual ones. While they exploit the viewer's tendency to identify simplified representations as stereotypes, they constantly obstruct and complicate these schematic constructs, shifting the viewer between the comfortable stance afforded by stereotypes and the unstable position where the stereotype



itself turns against itself, cutting off the viewer's immersion and possibly even leading to a Brechtian distance. This distance is dialectically dissolved once the classic functions of the stereotype are restored, and so the complex and intriguing cyclical movement continues.

The Unstable Stereotype and Art Cinema

In this section, I argue that the unstable stereotype as described in the previous segment is situated within the broader cinematic tradition of art cinema, due to its positioning of the viewer in a state of ambiguity. This will inevitably lead me to discuss a central question often posed with regards to Davidson's Bourekas films: Are these films politically reactionary for their reinforcement of social prejudices, or can they instead be understood as subversive works that challenge and deconstruct social categories? (on this question, See Naaman 41-46, Altshuler 134, Zimmerman 134-135)

It seems a given that Davidson's Bourekas films are commercial films—an Israeli take on the tradition of exploitation cinema. This is true both textually and historically. Textually, these films employ many devices associated with lowbrow, audience-pleasing cinema (physical humor, clear narrative progression, a distinct protagonist and antagonist, etc.). Historically, the Bourekas trilogy achieved immense commercial success. Considering this, it is notable that the unstable stereotype does not fit neatly into the commercial filmmaker's toolbox. Rather, what becomes evident when contrasting the commercial aspects of Davidson's trilogy with the discussion above is the remarkable fact that, at the heart of Davidson's entertaining and commercially oriented Bourekas trilogy, lies a distinctly *ambiguous* device.

I define ambiguity simply as an instance in which several different paths of comprehension and interpretation present themselves to the viewer, all appearing equally plausible. When an

incongruity is detected within a stereotypical depiction, the viewer begins to oscillate between different ways of understanding it: are the details insignificant and therefore irrelevant to the information conveyed by the stereotype? Or should the incongruity be understood as a meaningful departure from the stereotype, signaling a transformation in our understanding of the character and narrative? Or perhaps these details should be interpreted as comedic in an absurdist sense? A similar opening of interpretive possibilities occurs when a stereotypical depiction begins to seem excessive. In such cases, the viewer wonders whether the excessive details should be assimilated into the stereotypical framework or whether the excess signals a movement into the realm of satire or parody.

The ambiguity I describe is important to note because it is an aesthetic trait that links Davidson's trilogy to the tradition of art cinema. Though highly varied in style and subject matter, art cinema has often been defined by its tendency to place the viewer in a state of ambiguity. The scholar most closely associated with this approach is David Bordwell, who, in his seminal article on the nature of art cinema, writes that the appropriate slogan for art cinema viewership is: "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity" (156). This emphasis on ambiguity as a defining feature of art cinema has proven remarkably influential and useful, and it continues to inform many discussions of art cinema as a corpus.

Two clarifications regarding the connection drawn here are necessary. First, as already mentioned, when surveying the rich landscape of art cinema, it may be more accurate to speak of art cinemas in the plural rather than delineating a singular art-cinema tradition (Kovács 51-56). With this in mind, I should not be understood as arguing that the unstable stereotype resembles the devices employed by auteurs such as Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, or Ingmar Bergman. Rather, it seems to me that Davidson's unstable stereotype bears a closer affinity to the entertaining and humorous devices found in the art cinema of auteurs such as Federico Fellini (who Davidson explicitly identifies as a major influence ["Boaz Davidson", 2026]), Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Emir Kusturica. This parallel should not be understood merely as a theoretical proposition but as a concrete connection that can be extended to scene-level similarities. For instance, the egg-eating scene from *Charlie and a Half*, discussed above in detail, is remarkably reminiscent of the cheese-eating scene in *La Ricotta* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1963).

A second point should also be made explicit: I am not arguing that Davidson's Bourekas films are art films on the whole. Rather, I argue that they contain a device—the unstable stereotype—that relates to art cinema. In other words, I view Davidson's films as combining a style typical of classical commercial cinema with a particular device related to art cinema. This is by no means an unusual combination. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that art cinema has never functioned as an "island," clearly delineated and separated from other cinematic modes operating alongside it. Rather, there has always been movement between the entertaining and the artistic, the commercial and the disruptive, as exemplified by films

made by directors such as Quentin Tarantino, the Coen Brothers, Luc Besson, and Pedro Almodóvar (for discussions of such combinations, see Kovács 30-47, Klecker, Campora).

What could this discussion mean with regards to the political ideas conveyed by these films, or more explicitly: do these films contribute to racial and ethnic prejudices or do they challenge them? Davidson's Bourekas films have been both condemned as racist, because of their stereotypical depictions (Shohat 133-134), and deemed subversive because of their unexpected diversions from viewer expectations (for instance, the choice to end *Charlie and a Half* with a scene where the young Miko leaves his grim future in Israel for a brighter future in the United States [Munk & Graetz 51-53]). As the discussion about the unstable stereotype and its ambiguous nature shows, both these arguments are somewhat simplistic because they search for a stable "statement" made by these films. The truth is that the unstable stereotype cannot really transmit to us any clear, unequivocal message. In other words, these films are not straightforwardly politically "good" (conveying a message that stereotypes are simplistic and should be overcome) or politically "bad" (fortifying stereotypical views), because the unstable stereotype is an aesthetic device bound up with a perceived ambiguity and confusion. As described above, this device leads to the unique effect where the viewer feels a constant movement between cognitive ease and ambiguity. The only functions that can clearly be attributed to this device is that of disrupting any coherent comprehension by constituting a cyclical movement between recognition and distance. In this sense, and in accordance with thinkers like Brecht, Althusser, and Rancière, Davidson's films are part of the deeply political project of art cinema: educating and reeducating the audiences primarily through the artwork's form and not through its content.

Concluding this segment, I suggest that critics and scholars engaging with Davidson's work and dismissing it for political reasons were lacking what British poet John Keats called "negative capability" (admittedly, I am borrowing this term from a very different context). In my opinion, they did not realize that the unstable stereotype is a device whose DNA is to be found in art cinema, demanding a fundamental suspension of value assessment, and a constant reorganizing of the viewer's stance towards the stereotypes viewed on screen.

The Creation and Reception of Davidson's Bourekas Trilogy

After analyzing the use of stereotypes in Davidson's trilogy, it is time to move from a strictly textual perspective to a sociological context which aims to account for the production and reception of these films. Considering my account of the unstable stereotype in Davidson's trilogy and my claim that it is an inherently ambiguous device related to the mode of art cinema, two important questions arise: If the Bourekas trilogy was made by a filmmaker with strictly commercial goals (a claim often made with regards to Davidson), how did a device

relating to the tradition of art cinema find its way into them? And another, related, question, regarding the critical reaction to the trilogy: if aesthetically complex, why were these films so harshly received by critics of their time?

Regarding the first query, the problem it poses appears to be merely theoretical, because its premise is not true to Davidson's actual aims and sensibilities as a filmmaker. Admittedly, the historiography of Israeli cinema seems to tell a simple story: during the 1970s there were two groups of filmmakers—the modernist, "New Sensibility" filmmakers (Judd Ne'eman, Uri Zohar, Igal Bursztyn, etc.), who created high-brow artistic, avant-garde modernist cinema, and the profit-driven filmmakers (Boaz Davidson, Menachem Golan, etc.) who made lowbrow and artistically unrefined films, largely aimed at pleasing mass audiences with not care for artistic merit (Altshuler 125-126, Shohat 114). Yet as several scholars of Israeli cinema have argued, and perhaps most convincingly Nitzan Ben-Shaul, this dichotomy is a misguided simplification, for both the new sensibility filmmakers and the Bourekas filmmakers were responding in their cinematic projects to the deep changes Israeli society went through during the 1960s. This change led both film cycles to turn from heroic stories of the nation to more personal and individualistic narratives (Ben-Shaul 128-130).

I would take Ben-Shaul's claim further and argue that these films not only present a shared social function, but that they are sometimes united by cinematic style. I have argued above that world cinema provides countless examples for productive mergers between commercial cinema and art cinema, and Boaz Davidson is a living proof of this unity of "low-brow" and "artistic". Though in several interviews Davidson has accepted the description of his Bourekas films as simple-minded entertainment, in others he expresses his feeling that these films were a most intimate personal expression of his childhood in multi-cultural Tel Aviv, and cites Chaplin, Lubitsch and Fellini as his influences ("Boaz Davidson", 2026). One must not forget that Davidson was a well-educated man who studied film in a leading cinema school in London. Furthermore, some of Davidson's films made in the early 70's (created before the Bourekas trilogy have been described as Modernist films strongly influenced by the French New Wave (*Shablul* [1970], for instance). Rather than arguing for a complete break and change in Davidson's cinematic trajectory, it seems more reasonable to present a complex development where art film techniques prevail but adapt to the new context of comedic and commercial films.

Instead of a dichotomy, or a kind of "battle" of artistic styles where different films and filmmakers can easily be assigned to one of the two camps (Bourekas films or New Sensibility films), I find it more useful to think of Israeli cinema during the 1970s as a cinematic "ecology", where filmmakers are influenced from different sources and from each other, transgressing any clear separation and grouping (for expansions on the idea of conceptualizing a period of artistic production as an ecological space, see: Lipsker). In this ecology, where different artistic techniques can freely move from one film to another, it seems completely reasonable

that Davidson would incorporate an art film device into commercially oriented films. As emphasized above, Davidson's Bourekas films are not art films *in toto*, but their commercial success should not be understood as contradictory to the idea that they incorporate ambiguous art film devices.

After addressing the trilogy's production, the question that remains unanswered concerns its reception. As noted above, critics were almost unequivocally dismissive of Davidson's Bourekas trilogy upon its release. One particularly harsh example can serve as an example (Shamgar, quoted in Birenberg [my translation, ML]):

> Every time an Israeli film sinks to new depths, the miserable viewer hopes: 'That's it, it can't possibly get any worse from here.' But in this field, there are always surprises. It *can* get worse! It is like an ocean in which deeper and deeper pits are constantly being discovered. After *Charlie and a Half*, directed by Boaz Davidson, one might have assumed that the man would internalize what had been said about his cinematic standards and make a sincere effort to avoid dragging audiences into such depths. But reality proved otherwise. Did "Charlie" torment us with whips? *Snooker* torments us with scorpions.

This review, though shocking in its apparent contempt, is quite representative. Although these films were later re-assessed by several Israeli film critics (Raveh, Sharir), the challenge to my argument remains: If Davidson's trilogy employs art film devices which work to create ambiguity and produce a complex viewing experience, why did film critics reviewing these films upon release so unequivocally overlook this aspect, which in my eyes is quite prominent?

In my opinion, the answer to this question is not to be found in an analysis of Davidson's films, but rather in two factors which strongly affected the critic's engagement with these films: the social situation at the time and the artistic taste dictated by cultural elites. Beginning with the subject of social climate, because Davidson's films directly depict and comment on the social tensions permeating Israeli society during the 1970s, Israeli critics' responses at the time of release reflected their own positions on these matters, particularly their sentiments towards the Mizrahi population, which was gaining substantial cultural dominance at the time and challenging the existing hegemony. Some have put things more explicitly and blamed critics for bashing Bourekas films due to an unacknowledged racist bias (Shohat 114-115, Perlov). In this sense, a certain critical distance from the films' immediate social context may be necessary for a fairer analysis of their artistic qualities (Altshuler 138).

Together with a heated social climate, certain cultural standards dictated by taste-makers led to the way critics misrepresented Davidson's trilogy. As Ariel Schweitzer has shown, the Israeli cultural elite during the 1960s and 70s were highly influenced by the French New Wave (88-91). To them, the artistic conventions used by the new wave films were the standard for what quality art cinema should be. But as I have argued above, the cinematic

Modernism exemplified by the films of Godard, Truffaut and Resnais is only one kind of Modernism existing in a plurality. The ambiguous device embedded in Davidson's films is closer to the ones found in the Italian art cinema of the time (Landy 168-171), and due to this, a complex cinematic tool found in Davidson's cinematic toolbox remained unseen by many critics.

Comparing the reception Davidson's films received in Israel and in other countries might strengthen my argument. Though I have not found reviews of the Bourekas trilogy written outside of Israel, I believe it is telling that Davidson's film made immediately after the Bourekas trilogy, *Lemon Popsicle* (1978), which is Bourekas-adjacent in style and themes, was poorly received by Israeli critics while enjoying considerable critical and commercial acclaim abroad (Oren). In other words, while negative responses to Davidson's films reveal much about their fraught relationship with Israeli cultural elites, they should not be regarded as contradictory to my argument that Davidson's film utilizes a device related to ambiguity and art cinema. In other words, the critical disapproval towards Davidson's trilogy should not be regarded as a destructive challenge for my argument, but rather as an invitation for further analysis.

The Unstable Stereotype in Contemporary Israeli Auteur Cinema

After defining the unstable stereotype, exploring its significance and accounting for its creation and reception, I turn to examining its intriguing "afterlife" in contemporary Israeli cinema. Although it is hard to believe any Israeli filmmaker is unaware of Davison's Bourekas trilogy due to its immense popularity, I emphasize that in the proceeding paragraphs I will not be arguing for a direct and confirmed line of influence. Though this is a possible route for research (certainly, several scholars have analysed Israeli films and demonstrated that they were clearly influenced by Bourekas cinema [Kimchi 127-147, Zimmerman 136-140]), it is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, my aim here is to use the analytic tools I used to decipher Davison's use of stereotypes and demonstrate that they can help to engage with numerous films made by Israeli auteurs. My framing of this segment is careful and deliberate: I am not referring to Davidson's influence, but rather to an intriguing and noteworthy parallelism.

My discussion revolves around three Israeli auteurs whose films seem largely detached from the style of Davidson's trilogy: Amos Gitai, Nadan Lapid and Eran Kolirin. Gitai (born 1950) is an Israeli filmmaker known for his politically engaged and often experimental cinema that explores themes of conflict, memory, and identity. Trained as an architect, his films, such as *Kippur* (2000), *Kedma* (2002) and *Free Zone* (2005), blend documentary and fiction with a contemplative, often fragmented style. Nadav Lapid (born 1975), represents a younger generation, creating bold, provocative films like *Synonyms* (2019) and *Ahed's Knee* (2021) that challenge national identity and cultural norms through intense performances,

sharp dialogue, and a raw, kinetic visual language. Eran Kolirin is a filmmaker best known for blending dry humor, emotional restraint, and social commentary in his work. He gained international recognition with his debut film *The Band's Visit* (2007), which won major awards worldwide and was later adapted into a successful Broadway musical.

All these directors, whose films could be grouped as a film cycle of sorts, have become remarkably successful auteurs on the international stage, while remaining controversial figures in Israel (Ghys, Sterinberg, Smith). This, I would argue, is at least partially due to the manner by which these directors populate their films with stereotypes of varied groups in Israeli society. Gitai, for one, has been criticized for depicting different sects of Israeli society without gaining intimate knowledge of their culture and lifestyle, thus leading to a flat stereotypical depiction (in *Kadosh* [1999], for instance, which focuses on an ultra-orthodox community). Lapid incorporates in his films characters which seem to represent a vulgarized version of Israeli society, for instance, in his film *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014), where he depicts IDF soldiers not as believable, fully psychologically realized characters, but as symbols of obedience and grotesque masculinity. Kolirin utilizes a caricature-like depiction of a poor Mizrahi town in his debut feature, *The Band's Visit*, and his next film, *The Exchange* (2011), was criticized for presenting a main character who was merely a stereotypical Ashkenazi man, with no apparent psychological depth (Debruger).

The discussion above affords a more nuanced and gratuitous approach to the way these filmmakers use stereotypes. The stereotypical depictions in these films should not be regarded as demonstrations of a lack of artistic competence or as "detours" from the complex and challenging nature of their style into a terrain of simplicity and straightforwardness. Rather, I suggest viewing these stereotypical depictions as instances of unstable stereotypes. To elucidate this argument, I turn to a concrete example from *The Kindergarten Teacher*. The film's protagonist, Nira, finds solace in a poetry-writing workshop at her local library. Among the workshop's participants is a young female soldier. Although she attends outside of her service hours, the female soldier is consistently depicted in uniform, with her hair tied up in accordance with military regulations. She is invariably the first to answer the instructor's questions and maintains the same rigid, upright posture throughout the class. In these respects, the solider appears to embody a stereotypical image of the Israeli female soldier as disciplined, obedient, and emotionally restrained. At times, this is precisely the impression the film conveys, particularly through Nira's critical gaze toward the soldier. Yet the character's stereotypical portrayal occasionally becomes excessive so that it opens up multiple interpretive possibilities. Might the soldier constitute a satire of the Israeli military ethos, or perhaps a parody of the ways female soldiers have historically been represented in Israeli media? The audience is situated in an ambiguous stance, uncertain whether to respond with dismay or amusement, and whether the stereotype ultimately targets the Israeli military itself or the media conventions through which it has been represented.



As I have argued above with regard to Davidson's trilogy, the function of such depictions shifts between communicating simplified information to audiences and creating a Brechtian distance due to ambiguity. These stereotypes, then, are not in conflict with the modernist, sometimes experimental, approach Israeli arthouse filmmakers are identified with, but rather an integral and organic part of it. Gitai, Lapid and Kolirin use stereotypes not only to simplify the act of communicating information to the viewer, but to disrupt this communication. The very notion that there is a cinematic device bringing together Davidson's Bourekas films and Israeli Auteur cinema is a surprising and intriguing one, though, as I hope has been shown in the discussion above, not an impossible one.

The recurrence of the unstable stereotypes in the Bourekas trilogy and in Israeli Auteur Cinema, two film cycles which seem different from each other on every possible count, begs the question of where else in the rich corpus of Israeli cinema this device might recur. Furthermore, a broader socio-cultural perspective can be relevant to ask: what is it in the unique characteristics of Israeli society that make this device so attractive and useful for varied Israeli filmmakers? These two questions are outside my scope, and I propose them as avenues for further research.

Conclusion

An examination of the stereotypes in Davidson's Bourekas trilogy invites us to reconsider the very foundations upon which these films have often been judged. Rather than dismissing them as crude or ideologically suspect, a closer, unbiased examination reveals in them a complex, ambiguous device in which stereotypes are rendered unstable—both excessive and incongruent. This instability not only complicates the viewer's engagement but also aligns

these ostensibly commercial works with broader traditions of art cinema that seek to unsettle perception and resist fixed meaning. In this light, the trilogy emerges not as a cultural artifact of limited value, but as a rich site of formal and political ambiguity that challenges both critical assumptions and audience expectations.

Moreover, recognizing the legacy of this unstable stereotype in the work of Israeli Auteurs Amos Gitai, Nadav Lapid, and Eran Kolirins underscores the lasting relevance of Davidson's trilogy. Though separated by style, context, and critical reception, these directors similarly deploy stereotypes not as reductive tools, but as means of disruption and inquiry. This continuity suggests that Bourekas cinema, far from being a marginal or purely popular phenomenon, participates in an ongoing cinematic exploration of identity, representation, and spectatorship. Reframing Davidson's films within this lineage ultimately enriches our understanding of Israeli cinema as a dynamic and internally dialogic field.

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