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Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture

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INTRODUCTION

Gunsight, also called Sight, any of numerous optical devices that aid in
aiming a firearm.

—Encyclopedia Britannica

A price list that is prominently displayed at the entrance hall of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, above the box office, may serve as a fitting entry point to this dissertation. In descending order, it lists admission fees to the museum venues. Residents and students receive a mild reduction; children, seniors, and enlisted soldiers pay half price; holders of a specific credit card are sponsored by their credit company; and soldiers in uniform may enter free of charge. The list presents a concise schematization of the social order of those invited to look at art, and in its denotation of the military uniform as a cultural commodity, it discloses a visual preference in addition to a social one. Come dressed in civilian clothes with your military identity card and you receive a reduction in price; come dressed in uniform, looking like a soldier, and you do not pay at all. The admission-fee list thus welcomes the display of military appearance within the museum grounds. In its prominent place at the entrance of an influential cultural institution, located across the street from the headquarters of the Israeli Defense Forces, the list perfunctorily and concisely presents the matter that is under scrutiny in this study: the ubiquitous and naturalized way in which militarism participates in Israeli art and visual culture.

The employment of “militarism” as a framework for the following analysis requires some clarification. My understanding of militarism stems from Alfred Vagts’ classic study, in which he distinguishes between “militarism” and “the military way.” The latter phrase has to do with the military proper: what it refers to is limited in scope, confined to the army’s primary goal of winning specific power objectives with the utmost efficiency and via the application of violence. Militarism, in contrast,

presents a vast array of customs, interests, prestige, actions, and thought associated with armies and wars and yet transcending true military purposes.... Its influence is unlimited in scope. It may permeate all society and become dominant over all industry and arts. Rejecting the scientific character

of the military way, militarism displays the qualities of caste and cult, authority and belief. (Vagts 13)

Vagts' study forms the basis for many of the discussions that follow.¹ In accordance with his analysis, numerous studies address militarism in terms that are synonymous with excess, defining it as an "expansion of the military beyond certain, usually not very well defined, bounds" (Skjelsbæk 81–83). Rather than a static phenomenon, then, militarism is understood to be dynamic condition, characterized by the progressive expansion of the military sphere over the civilian (Klare 36).

The museum's price list is but one example of such expansion where the reverence for military service is reiterated within Israeli civilian culture. The same sort of attitude is reinforced through countless books, songs, films, jokes, news items, commercials, and artworks that feature military-related material. And yet, while the scope of the term is supposedly unlimited, interpreting the museum's price-list plaque as a visual attribute of militarism necessitates further explanation. This is necessary because the plaque, and the culture that it is part of, do not fit the common, praetorian type of militarism, the seizure of power by the army and its supporting elements.² In addition, the plethora of cultural and visual references to military themes in Israel do not consistently propagate the notion that organized violence is the best solution for political problems. They do not necessarily "rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life," nor do they always "carry military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere" (Vagts 17). Some of these cultural and visual references are critical towards military mentalities, and others are indifferent to the relation between the military and the civilian spheres. Nonetheless, I argue, these references are instances of militarism, inasmuch as they participate in the expansion of the military over the civilian through the subtle blurring of the borders between the two realms. The reduced fee for visibly militarized bodies that enter the space of an art institution is a case in point, as it enhances the military appearance of/in civilian spaces. It also works to strip the uniform of its militaristic qualities as it frames the

¹ See for example Regher, who elaborates on Vagts' distinction between "militarism" and the "military way" (127–39).

² The Praetorians were soldiers of the nine cohorts of Rome, who became a powerful political force that installed or deposed emperors at will. In contemporary political science the term denotes the army's possible intervention in politics under the threat or actual use of arms (Ben-Eliezer, *Making* 10).

soldier's body as civil, in terms both of having non-military interests and concerns and of being a civilized, cultured being.



Figure i.1. Entrance hall to Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Tel Aviv, 2009.

Admission / מחירי כניסה		מחיר הכרטיס מקנה כניסה גם לבינת היגנה ובניגושין	
Adult	₪ 42 NIS	מבוגר	
Tel Aviv Resident With Resident Card	₪ 34 NIS	תושב ת"א והנשא תעודת תושב	
Student With International Student Card	₪ 34 NIS	סטודנט והנשא תעודת סטודנט	
Child Up to the age of 18	₪ 21 NIS	ילד עד גיל 18	
Senior Citizen	₪ 21 NIS	אזרח ותיק	
Enlisted Soldier	₪ 21 NIS	חייל בשירות חובה	
In Uniform	Free-of-charge	חייל במדים	
Holder of Gold MasterCard OF BRACARD ONLY	₪ 0 NIS	מחזיקי גולד מסטרכארד של חברי ישראלכרד בלבד	
Library Entrance		כניסה לספרייה	

Figure i.2. Entrance hall to Tel Aviv Museum of Art (detail). Tel Aviv, 2009.

For Vagts, militarism and civilianism stand in opposition to each other. He coined the term “civilian militarism” to describe a sub-category of militarism, in which civil servants without an explicit military background or affiliation pursue militaristic policies. Decades later, the Israeli sociologists Uri Ben-Eliezer and Baruch Kimmerling have each broadened the term to define a cultural phenomenon in which conflict and war are understood as self-evident parts of everyday life (Ben-Eliezer, *Making 7*; Kimmerling, *Invention 201*). Their studies challenged the basic assumption of their predecessors, who asserted by and large that there was no militarism in Israel.

In the first works of Israeli political science, Israel was considered an exceptional case, in which the permeable borders between the civil and the military spheres help to balance the two domains and allow for democratic rule to exist alongside a powerful military apparatus. These earlier studies focused on examining why (rather than if) there was no militarism in Israel, even when there were such optimal conditions for it to develop.³ The more recent, critical approaches of Ben-Eliezer and Kimmerling have reformulated the question, redefining “militarism” in ways that allow it to be understood as having a convivial relation with democratic

³ Overviews of such studies can be found in Peri, *Battles*; Schiff; and Kimmerling, “Militarism.”

rule. The repercussions of the problematic union sketched out by their studies should not be underestimated. As Ariella Azoulay recently observed, the implementation of a continuous warlike reality in Israel locates war outside any constellation of political decision-making. It leads to a “constitutive civil malfunction” where citizens are not able to intervene and demand the transformation of this continuous warlike reality, even as they participate in public debates about the moral and political aspects of war (“Declaring” 168-69, 185).⁴

In his seminal essay “Militarism in Israeli Society” (1993), published in English under the title “Patterns of Militarism in Israel,” Kimmerling offers a consolidated presentation of “the Israeli militarism thesis” (Peri, “Radical” 240). He argues that “Israeli militarism tends to serve as one of the *central organizational principles* of the society” whose symptoms include institutional and cultural practices that are organized around the management of a protracted external conflict (“Patterns” 199, emphasis in text). Kimmerling identifies three dimensions of militarism: the violent-force dimension, the cultural dimension, and the cognitive dimension, which he also terms as civilian militarism, since

its main bearers and implementers are the social center, the civil government, civil elites and all or most of the members of the collectivity. With respect to this type of militarism, it is not necessary that the military, as an institutional structure, governs in the political sphere; nor is the army necessarily stationed at the center of a statist cult. In contrast, the civilian militarism, or what might be called *the military mind*, is systematically internalized by most statesmen, politicians and the general public to be a self-evident reality whose imperatives transcend partisan party or social allegiances. (Kimmerling, “Patterns” 207; emphasis added)

Kimmerling’s account centers on civilian militarism as being paradigmatic of the Israeli situation. Following the publication of “Militarism in Israeli Society,” numerous studies have addressed the topic, and have attempted to enhance awareness of the issue by outlining and analyzing various aspects of the collective’s military

⁴ Azoulay elaborates on the concept of “civil malfunction” in her book *Constituent violence 1947-1950*. See also Azoulay, *Contract*, especially ch. 1.

mind.⁵ In what follows I too adhere to the definition of civilian militarism as a basic element of Israeli society and a prominent attribute of Israeli culture, a “civil malfunction” which manifests itself through cultural codes, attitudes, habits, and customs. My interest lies in militarism as excess, and in its manifestations in the realm of the visual. More specifically, I wish to examine the ability of visual art to articulate this excess to its audience. My point of departure is the assumption that art is a valuable partner in the production of critical discourse.

A paradox arises here: how can the same art, which I have just declared to be participatory in Israel’s civilian militarism, be part of the production of a critical discourse that attempts to undo, or at least unpack, its effects? This entanglement of complicity and commitment is constitutive of any object (and subject) that aims at deconstructing the cultural codes of its (her, my) society. As Theodor Adorno makes clear, culture and criticism are intertwined, for better or for worse. His texts on the matter make it impossible to ignore the “dazzled and arrogant recognition that criticism surreptitiously confers on culture” (“Criticism” 153). Adorno indicts the cultural critic who positions himself as being superior to the culture that he scrutinizes, but at the same time he points to the dangers of losing oneself to self-reflection. Similarly, in his discussion of commitment in art, he points to the dangers of an autonomous work “that wants nothing but to exist” as well as to that art which is reduced to propaganda by advocating a particular partisan position (“Commitment” 240, 242). These double binds arise from the situation of inherent complicity, where criticism is “imprisoned within the orbit of that against which it struggles” (“Criticism” 147).

Later writings, such as Gayatri C. Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, offer a tentative solution to this entanglement by repeatedly calling for a productive acknowledgment of complicity (xii, 147, 244, 309). Following Spivak, a recent

⁵ Some of these studies will be introduced in following chapters in more detail, in relation to my analysis of specific sub-themes within civilian militarism such as gender, geography, and memory. The expansive literature on the topic includes studies on militarism in Israeli politics (Ben-Eliezer, “Nation”; Peri, *Generals*), militarism in education (Harel; Gor), the effects of militarism on the socialization of youth (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport; Lieblich), its economic aspects (Levy, “Militarizing” and *Different*), gendered aspects (Klein, “Gender”; Brownfield-Stein; Sasson-Levy, “Constructing”), geographical aspects (Oren and Regev), and more. Azoulay interprets the very declaration of the state of Israel as a victory of military logic over a civil one (“Declaring”). For an overview of military topics in the social sciences see Rosenhek, Maman, and Ben-Ari; for a comprehensive collection of essays on militarism in Israeli society and culture see Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari, and for the militarized aspect of Israeli visual culture see Kantor.

volume dedicated to the topic of commitment and complicity suggests that the *recognition* of the complicit mechanisms involved in practices of commitment may lead to a sense of responsibility, turning complicity into an enabling force (Firat, De Mul, and Van Wichelen 3, 9). In what follows, I wish to build on these insights and offer the suggestion that images in particular allow for such an enabling recognition. For, as W. J. T. Mitchell convincingly argues, the power of images lies in the way they awaken in us a desire to see exactly what they cannot show (“Pictures” 78).

Similar arguments are offered by Judith Butler, who defines the critical image as that which should “not only fail to capture its referent, but *show* this failing” (*Precarious* 146; emphasis in text), and Jacques Rancière, who argues that critical art is capable of speaking, in part, on the basis of its illegibility (*Aesthetics* 46).⁶ Ernst van Alphen explains how artworks attract viewers through their ability to

present that which withdraws from our cognitive power.... [Artworks] offer an articulation of issues we live by but that, precisely for that reason, we cannot know. (*Art* 9)

This impenetrable, ungraspable essence of images in general, and of images of art in particular, fuels the desire to expose the scopic regimes that construct their visibility.⁷ That is why I turn to images in an attempt to perform what Mitchell eloquently describes as “showing seeing,” to consider the frames that enable viewers to see or ignore meaning in the cultural, social, and political cultures that they are part of (“Showing Seeing” 178). Mitchell offers “showing seeing” as a didactic exercise that allows the visual scholar to reflect on theories of visibility through their embodiment. I use the term in a different but related way as part of my attempt to pinpoint a time- and place-specific (militarized) form of seeing and knowing.⁸

More than a decade ago, Mitchell coined the phrase “the pictorial turn” to indicate a shift in academic discourse in which visual objects were gradually gaining renewed centrality (*Picture Theory* 12–13). Although that turn has since been

⁶ Adorno, too, calls for a focus on “the shock of the unintelligible” in the appraisal of artistic commitment (“Commitment” 243).

⁷ The term “scopic regime” was introduced by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* to denote specific ways of seeing that are manifestations of culture. The term has been elaborated on in Jay, “Scopic.”

⁸ See Bleeker, *Visuality*, especially the introduction, for a clear schematization of vision as an embodied, subjective experience.

problematized and complicated (above all by Mitchell himself), the notion that knowledge is envisioned in predominantly visual terms remains pertinent, as is the understanding that ways of seeing are historically determined and culturally mediated. Martin Jay makes this point explicit in the opening paragraph of his book *Downcast Eyes*, which includes more than twenty terms that stem from the realm of vision.⁹ An important outcome of the pictorial turn, regardless of its anxieties and fallacies, is the awareness that

we always see more or less than what is there and that, therefore, seeing is always affected by with ideals, values, presuppositions, fears and desires.
(Bleeker, *Visuality* 18)

Understood in this way, vision is entangled with visuality, the distinct historical manifestation of a visual experience (Bleeker, *Visuality* 1). Visuality, in turn, shares with civilian militarism qualities such as vagueness, obscurity, and excess. What we see is conditioned by what we know, the effect of interpretation against the backdrop of a frame of reference (Bleeker, *Visuality* 2). In what follows I look at objects from the art world in search of an articulation of a double, simultaneous matrix of “ideals, values, presuppositions, fears and desires”: that of aesthetics, and that of civilian militarism.

This study, then, attends to the relation between images and frames of vision in the contexts of militarized Israeli national identity and Israeli contemporary art. I look at a variety of artworks (paintings, photographs, sculptures, and installations) as well as art-related objects and events (catalogue texts, exhibitions, creative acts of resistance) that communicate a number of visual and epistemological aspects of civilian militarism, using the tools of contemporary theory, critical sociology, art history, and cultural analysis. I do so in order to answer two separate sets of questions. One set belongs to the politics of visual culture, and questions the militarized aspect of its Israeli incarnation. The other belongs to the politics of visual art more generally, and examines its potential to expose and comment on its own construction.

⁹ Mitchell critiques what constitutes to his mind the main fallacies of the Pictorial Turn in his article “Showing Seeing.” A recent special issue of *Culture, Theory and Critique* (50.2 [2009]) was dedicated to a renewed reflection on the topic.

It should be clear by now that this study does not understand art to be an unequivocal crusader in the war for de-militarization. In this, I follow Mitchell's call to "scale down the rhetoric of the 'power of images.'" Images, Mitchell tells us, though not powerless, are a lot weaker than we would like to think ("Pictures" 74). I would add that images are also a lot less moral, or just, than I would like them to be. The artworks that I have chosen to examine work with and through a double weakness: their limited ability to affect discourse and their inherent complicity with that discourse. The problem, as Mitchell goes on to explain, is to refine and complicate our estimation of the power of images and of the way it works. I would like to follow his lead and suggest that the potential of visual art lies in its tendency to reflect its own premises and power, which then invites viewers to reappraise their perception of their socio-cultural surroundings.

In the following analysis, I read artworks and exhibitions in search of potential moments of intervention in the naturalized assumptions of the Israeli psyche. The focus on what images do rather than what they show follows the methodology of cultural analysis as developed by Mieke Bal in the early 1990s. Cultural analysis stems from a semiotic reading of art and treats the objects that it analyzes as signs that take part in the social production of meaning.¹⁰ It does not set out to interpret artworks in the traditional sense, but explores the processes in which they become intelligible to those who view them (Bal and Bryson 184). As Saskia Lourens clearly explains,

Cultural analysis takes off from the assumption that the cultural artifacts produced within a community reveal much about the ideologies upheld within that community. A critical reading of such artifacts therefore often provides clues with regard to the inconsistencies of presumptions made by these ideologies. (14)

The critical reading that Lourens advocates necessitates a critical eye: the Tel Aviv museum admission fee list presents an example for an image that unfolds the story of civilian militarism, and communicates that story, if it is triggered by the right set of

¹⁰ Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, and Keith Moxey make a case for semiotic analysis of artworks in their seminal essays "Semiotics and Art History" (Bal and Bryson) and "Semiotics and the Social History of Art" (Moxey). A critique of their approach can be found in Elkins, "Marks"; see also the discussion between Elkins and Bal on the matter (Bal, "Semiotic"; Elkins, "Pictures").

questions. But in this study, I narrow my analysis to a number of artworks that, in different forms, *solicit* critical reflection on the cultural codes and ideologies that construct their visibility. In so doing, I explore the critical image as that which discloses the regime of visibility in which it is seen and comprehended.

Cultural analysis stands for an interdisciplinary, discursive, and participatory research practice, in which objects are interpreted in relation to their situatedness in the present. For all of these reasons, I regard it as the appropriate home for my endeavor. The interdisciplinary character of cultural analysis takes shape in the “recourse to various archives . . . forging new relationships between elements in them in the attempt to account for an object that, for the sake of analysis, is permitted not to belong” (Aydemir, “A Reaction” 39). Its discursive aspect is foregrounded by the privileging of intersubjectivity over objectivity, as well as by the “interaction with and through meaning” as what constitutes the relationship between the cultural analyst and her object of analysis (Bal, *Travelling* 44; *Practice* 12–13). Finally, cultural analysis is participatory in the sense that it emphasizes the “active presence of the object in the same historical space as is inhabited by the subject” (Bal, *Practice* 12). This emphasis leads to an engaged dialogue that attempts to read the object on its own terms and to destabilize the relation of authority and mastery between the analyst, the reader, and the object under scrutiny (*Practice* 10).

Most importantly, cultural analysis follows Spivak’s call for a productive acknowledgment of complicity insofar as it advocates self-reflexivity, based

on a keen awareness of the critic’s situatedness in the present, the social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past, objects that we take to define our present culture. (Bal, *Practice* 1)

The cultural analyst is implicated within the culture that she wishes to examine. Her situatedness is actively acknowledged within the analysis, so that interpretation itself becomes part of the meaning it yields (Peeren 2). This awareness for embedded viewing or embedded interpretation is essential for my project, as is the realization that my analysis of the artworks is a result of the singular, sometimes even contingent, encounter between us. This awareness, however, does not mean that what follows should be understood as an accumulated account of creative writing. Rather, I follow

Van Alphen's conception of artworks as theoretical objects that address trans-historical questions within the parameters of specific historical contexts (*Art 3*). In my case, the transhistorical questions pertain to frames of vision, while the specific historical context is that of civilian militarism in Israeli visual culture. Put differently, this project is decisively subjective; indeed, such subjectivity is part of its methodology as well as of its inquiry.

A few disclaimers are in order. This study does not offer its reader a historical overview of soldiers and military objects in Israeli works of art, nor does it present a contemporary survey of the topic. Instead, the objects selected are presented as cultural agents, as partners that formulate, together with me, their viewer, the problem of civilian militarism through an engagement with its diffuse, vague, and excessive character from various angles. Chapter one, "Canons of Israeli Society," serves as a preamble to the chapters that follow. I conduct a close reading of an exhibition catalogue devoted to representations of soldiers in contemporary Israeli art in order to touch upon the predicaments that arise when one approaches the topic. In this chapter I also offer a historical survey of the study of "things military" in Israeli academia and develop the concept of civilian militarism as the framework for my analysis. Chapter two, "Bodies of the Nation: Eroticized Soldiers" contends with the embodiment of militarism through Adi Nes' *Soldiers* series, which portrays the Israeli soldier as an erotic object of inquiry and critique. I read Nes' work against theories of sexuality, aesthetics, and nationalism to inquire how its rendering of the body of the soldier destabilizes and/or reinforces hegemonic masculinity and citizenship in their Israeli militarized incarnation.

In chapter three, "Looking Through Landscape," I turn to artworks by Larry Abramson, Meir Gal, Roi Kuper, and Gilad Ophir that attempt to challenge the apparatus of civilian militarism through the portrayal of landscape imagery. I analyze the way these works attempt to visualize the epistemological blind spot of civilian militarism, and examine to what extent they reflect (on) the way in which military landscapes engulf the viewer within their frame. Similar questions regarding the constructed essence of visual, spatial, and political knowledge arise in chapter four, "Kebab in Theory: Mapping Vision," where I engage with the still life genre and the mapping view through a close reading of a single artwork, *Lebanese Kebab* by David Goss. I focus on the challenges that the painting poses to interpretation as a way to clarify my understanding of the critical image.

Chapter five, “Greetings to the Soldier-Citizen: Consuming Nostalgia,” moves from landscape and mapping to memory as it examines the relationship between militarism, visual culture, and national memory in present-day Israel. I look at the exhibition *40 Years to Victory* by Honi Hame’agel and investigate the ways in which it challenges conventional narratives of the transformation of Israeli identity through the years. Finally, in chapter six, “Fence Art: Re/Framing Politics,” I investigate the performative aspect of the popular-resistance movement in the occupied Palestinian village of Bil’in, juxtaposed with an art exhibition based on the early stages of this movement. Through comparing the two events I examine the diverse roles art can play in a political struggle. I conclude by considering the way in which the critical image was conceptualized in this study.

I have entitled my project “Shifting Sights” in order to mark its place in the anthology of civilian militarism, as well as its attempt to engage with that anthology critically, to modify and reevaluate its premises. “Shifting Sights” alludes to the process of adjusting sights, where the sight of a gun, the optical device that allows the shooter to hit her target, is adjusted according to air resistance and gravity. The sight apparatus is also related to other, non-military viewing machines, such as telescopes or cameras, and thus includes a general reference to vision and visibility in its function as seeker of a focal point. Both “adjusting” and “shifting” relate to a movement or a reorganization of the senses in this context, but “adjusting” is linked to the tuning, adaptation, or modification of something so that it can fit within a specific structure, while “shifting” is more readily connected with readjustments, transformation, and change.

The allusion to military maneuvers at the very beginning of this study, however indirect, is meant to negate distance or independence and to expose my position as complicit in the culture of civilian militarism, in which knowledge is understood in military terms. After all, my interest in the subject stems from my daily, mundane, and unconscious encounters with instances of civilian militarism throughout my childhood and adolescent life in Israel. Yet, I do not mean to signal my surrender to a civilian-militarist frame of mind. Rather, I hope that this study will join ongoing attempts to shift the focus from the target’s mark at the center of the composition to the composition itself. I wish to examine the “sight” of civilian militarism – that diffuse, vague, expansive quality that blurs the borders between the

civil and the military – as a site in itself, and, in this way, to create a space for intervention.

In addition, the Hebrew word for gun-sight, *kavenet*, is etymologically related to the word *kavana*, which can be literally translated as “aim” but also as “intention.” The social connotation of the Hebrew equivalent to the original “adjusting sights,” *te’um kavanot*, exceeds the mere fine-tuning of a visual device and refers to coordination in the sense of the clarifying of intent, or the negotiation of meaning among members of a community. Opening the present study with a call for the shifting, or re-adjusting of sights is thus an invitation to acknowledge the cultural and social devices that guide our comprehension of the present, and to open them up for careful and conscious renegotiation. If this study can be compared to a sight, to a device that aims my argument in a certain direction, it is one that wishes to point first and foremost at its own presence at the edges of my field of vision.