



## The Millennial Antinostalgic: Yoav in Nadav Lapid's *Synonymes*

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### Abstract

In contemporary, transnational exilic cinema exile an artist is made in an exilic journey. The 21st century journey departs from entirely opposite premises than those of the ancient journey, namely with the desire to escape one's birthplace. The aim of the exile has also transformed: from a necessary step to secure one's livelihood or even life, it has become one of exploration. Rather than the desire to settle elsewhere or to eventually return home, the exile sets on an open-ended, exploratory journey the premise of which is finding oneself. In this, the physical journey has come to resemble the metaphysical one of the artist. The exile departs from a physical place and journeys into a metaphysical space, geography becoming secondary while still being necessary. This journey is best recounted in the film *Synonymes* (2019) by Israeli director Nadav Lapid, an autobiographical tale that chronicles the director's own exile from Israel to Paris and captures his journey toward becoming an artist. The paper references two prominently antinostalgic authors: 20th century Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz and Polish-Jewish writer Henryk Grynberg.

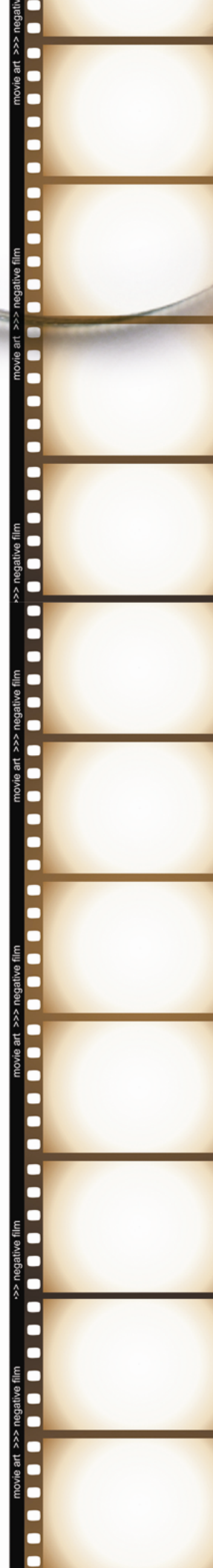
**Keywords:** Antinostalgia; millennial exile; modern exile; jewish exile, allegorical thinking



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Introduction

Nadav's Lapid autobiographical film *Synonymes* (2019) is the story of Yoav, an Israeli youth who arrives "in France to flee from Israel," (Lapid, 2019, 18:15) entirely unaware that he has brought Israel along with him. While Yoav's sole aim when he arrives in Paris is the total severance of ties with Israel, his experience in the city begins with a near death experience, as he all but freezes to death on his first night in Paris. Saved by a couple of neighbors, Emile and Caroline, Yoav is reborn, hopeful in his future in France, only to find that France reserves unpleasant experiences and relationships for which Yoav is unprepared. Caroline and Emile do not remain the two-dimensional saviors he meets in the beginning, but morph into fully-fledged human beings, products of an alien culture to Yoav, people with flaws and a tendency to use Yoav for their own purposes. The streets of Paris remain hostile to Yoav, and his inherent ties to Israel serve to further exacerbate an unsustainable life Paris. French culture, though initially an antidote to the Israeli society Yoav viscerally rejects, cannot accommodate Yoav as he is. Rather, his life in France threatens to deform and exploit him beyond recognition if he continues on his aggressive campaign to renounce his past, culture and family. Yet, while he ignores his family's

please, Yoav is pulled back to his homeland in another form, when he finds employment in the Israeli Embassy in Paris. The opposing cultures of Israel and France serve to create a jarring experience for Yoav, full of both comic and tragic juxtapositions and seemingly insurmountable contradictions, leading to the culminating hybrid Israeli-French Yoav. Yoav's exile is one of constant confrontations of the expected kind, but the differences between the two cultures cause a heightened experience. For instance, Yoav's personality appears neither sufficiently traditional nor aggressive for the machismo and military culture of Israel. Yet, Yoav's pathos is excessive in Paris, often taking the shape of combativeness. As his relationships to Emile and Caroline take shape, become increasingly intimate and eventually dissolve, Yoav finds himself in the same solitude as in the beginning of the film, albeit with a new, more sympathetic perspective on Israel, which, through his employment at the Embassy, supported his stay in Paris. Ultimately, this unsustainable exile which comes to an abrupt end, grants Yoav a confrontation with himself as it suspends him in a homeless exilic space, neither in France nor Israel.

The film is based on the director Nadav Lapid's own attempt, at the age of 26, to cut all ties with his birthplace, his language and family. Yoav serves as the contemporary link and antithesis to the ancient Odysseus, in whose epic tale the condition of nostalgia is a consequence of exile.

In contrast, the 21<sup>st</sup> century exile's journey is caused by an already existing antinostalgia. Lapid's

antinostalgic tale of a departure from Israel also contributes a contemporary, and quite confrontational, page to the medieval myth of the Wandering Jew, wherein the wandering is voluntary, rather than a form of punishment. Yoav's journey is a unique hybrid of the spontaneous, contemporary type of travel as a method of personal growth and the traditional, nostalgic-ridden type of emigration which is triggered by necessity. This particular hybrid may have to do with being Jewish, according to Van Alphen (1998). Rather than a person interested in another culture, Yoav exemplifies what Van Alphen, referring to Maurice Blanchot's text "Being Jewish," describes as the "Jewish experience," wherein "Judaism is able to take on meaning for Jews in relation to the idea of exodus and exile" (p. 229). The kind of truth that Yoav seeks is "not to be pursued by trying to identify and *place* it, as traditional ethnographers do" (Van Alphen, 1998, p. 230). In Jewish culture, exile becomes a duty to oneself and one's origin, encompassing thusly both modern exploratory travel in search of truth and the ancient patriotic journey and its inextricable attachment to birthplace:

Exile and exodus become a vocation as soon as one begins to see the relation of strangeness as an adequate relation in which to exist. Uprooting becomes a requirement, because it is the only way of positioning oneself 'in relation to,' instead of as part of, origin-bound identities. For Blanchot, the Jew is someone who relates to the origin, not by dwelling, but by

distancing himself from it. Separation and uprooting are the acts in which the truth of origin can be found. (Van Alphen, 1998, p. 230)

“Exile as vocation” places the focus on the experience, rather than any means to an end. Indeed, Yoav’s arrival in Paris has less to do with Paris than Israel, in that the former merely serves as a setting for Yoav’s “conversation with what one is not part of and what one cannot understand, but *not* with the purpose of understanding it” (Van Alphen, 1998, p. 230). For Yoav, as a Jewish exile, this visit to Paris is not about the “self-identity of a group of people as an experience, but also about the identity of experience as the basis of truth” (Van Alphen, 1998, p. 230), a truth which can only be found when one engages a relation with the other. It is this both fortunate and unfortunate inherited trait<sup>1</sup> that urges Yoav to flee Israel. Fleeing will expose him to truths he cannot fathom if he were to stay home. According to Van Alphen (1998), this approach to things one “does not know or understand” is very “Jewish” (pg. 232).

Perhaps most importantly, however, Yoav’s voluntary path toward truth, through self-inflicted suffering, is one which mirrors the journey of the artist, a path Lapid follows in real life through the creation of the film. Boym (1998) refers to this process as “estrangement as a lifestyle” (p. 241) where the exile puts the focus on the second part of the word “nostalgia,” the “algia” (longing) rather than the “nostos” (return):

This nostalgia is ironic, fragmented, and singular. If utopian nostalgia sees exile, in all the literal and metaphorical senses of the word, as a definite fall from grace that should be corrected, ironic nostalgia accepts (if it does not enjoy) the paradoxes of exile and displacement.

Estrangement, both as an artistic device and as a way of life, is part and parcel of ironic nostalgia. (Boym, 1998, p. 241)

As such, Yoav's antinostalgia echoes the nostalgia of those exiles who have learned to find pleasure in it. His self-induced exile echoes the origins of the condition, that of the traditionally torturous banishment from one's birthplace and culture. Yet, by the same token, it affirms modern exile as a striving for the "other," perhaps for the "higher." In other words, more than involuntary banishment, modern exile represents a voluntary seeking of oneself, a desire for isolation, a place of inspiration and creation. Indeed, the idea of exile as a figurative space of creation has its roots as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Since Dante Alighieri, banished from Florence in 1302, "made exile and inherent component of his intellectual and poetic oeuvre" (Josenhans, Bozovic, Koerner, & Luke, 2017, p. 16), exile was no longer solely associated with punishment, longing, futility but gradually gained in reputation as a "condition of art making" (Josenhans et al., 2017, p. 16). During this time, "exiled artists began to subvert the negative implications of banishment and instead consciously embraced it for personal or political gain"

(Josenhans et al., 2017, p. 16). The “existential trauma resulting from persecution and alienation” (Josenhans et al., 2017, p. 15) that formerly was brought on by exile, has in many ways become an aim for the exile, as it is this result of exile that “can also provoke a personal and artistic metamorphosis” (Josenhans et al., 2017, p. 15). Indeed, exiles followed in “the footsteps of some the greatest writers of all time, like Dante Alighieri” (Hanne, 2004, p. 2) because they sought to communicate “something of their experiences to readers who had had no such experiences” (Hanne, 2004, p. 2). By the time James Joyce penned his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, the artist not only sought but, it appeared as if, could only fathom life in exile. Rather than the location of punishment, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exile had become an asylum. Exile represents not only the preferred space of the artist but it becomes an active tool in asserting one’s independence and identity. In the famous words of Joyce’s fictional alter ego, Stephen Dedalus:

I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use -- silence, exile, and cunning. (Joyce, 2011, p. 255)

This is the portrait of the artist who is, by definition, exiled, and whose dedication to the understanding and exposure of the truth, of both himself and society, requires increasing, unending observation, observation which can only be communicated through the silent method of art. “One can’t talk about oneself” (Brodsky, 1983, p. 47), as Brodsky, one of the greatest proponents of exile as a shortcut to knowing oneself, has said. “Exile brings you overnight where it would normally take a lifetime to go” (Brodsky, 1983, p. 10), writes Brodsky and, because of this accelerated journey into “outer space,” exile should have “more takers” (Brodsky, 1983, p.10). Brodsky’s (1983) view that exile “accelerates tremendously one’s otherwise professional flight-or drift-into isolation, into an absolute perspective: into the condition in which all one is left with is oneself and one’s own language” (p. 10) is particularly relevant to Yoav’s conflict with language, precisely the struggle to find his own. It is this struggle, between French and Hebrew that leads to Joyce’s “silence,” the language that leads to art. Echoing Joyce, Brodsky, referring to his exile in the United States, declares: “The freedom in this country meant a lot to me. I began to realize the possibilities open to me. I experienced a terrific sense of exhilaration at being left alone” (Katz, 1983, p. 52). Cunning is what fiercely preserves a newfound, ever-threatened freedom from the external world, from the origin, from those who do not comprehend the artist’s journey.



The situation illustrates is a far cry from the more traditional or recognizable response to exile, which entails an inherently nostalgic and, at times, patriotic, attachment to the birthplace: “For some writers and creative artists, forced to live away from their place of birth, the first priority is to maintain their original national and cultural identity as fully as possible. Their subject matter, their audience, and, in the case of writers, their language, are almost exclusively linked to the place and, frequently, the time they have been cut off from” (Hanne, 2004, p. 8). Others, go as far as forging a “new, hybrid identity for themselves” (Hanne, 2004, p. 8) which often entails writing and communicating in the language of the adopted home and adopting an identity. Yoav falls in the second category, albeit his adopting of a new identity initially involves an attempted, though unsuccessful, total renunciation of his previous one. By the conclusion of the film, Yoav has involuntarily become the hybrid he rejects in the beginning. Yoav’s exile from Israel reflects a necessity to preserve his identity, precisely by detaching it from home, similar to Joyce’s *Dedalus*. His stay in France, however, promises to alter it before Yoav has attained the certainty that characterizes *Dedalus*. Yoav employs *Dedalus*’ tools – exile, cunning, silence – and exhibits the same resolve, but he lacks both awareness and experience. Lapid hints at the artist in Yoav but the latter does not become one in the course of the film. By the conclusion of the film, however, Yoav has experienced a transformation. When Yoav arrives in

Paris, following an initial death and rebirth, Yoav selects the images of Kurt Cobain, Vincent Van Gogh, and Napoleon Bonaparte from a postcard rack (Fig. 1-3), a Russian Roulette of identities which appear disparate from one another and from Yoav but which reveal potential sides of him, for in this moment Yoav opens himself to new identities, detached from his former. Yet, he is as unfamiliar with who he has been thus far as he is with who is to become. The selection of the figures, more than representing who Yoav is or would like to become, reveals his impatience to create a new identity which will magically trump his former one and sever all bonds with it. Yet, it does hint at Yoav's simultaneous lack of self-knowledge and curiosity, his openness and naive determination, as well as to a possible artistic nature, though he appears to be unaware of it and is living within this shifting contradiction as his personality takes shape. The roulette implies, as well, both the fatal carelessness and the optimistic open-endedness of his exile in France. Yoav's convenient aim to quickly become French is clear from the very beginning, evident in his request to purchase "a good but light dictionary" (Lapid, 2019, 17:31), the tool he believes will help him construct his new life. Yoav's beginnings in Paris mimic those of a child whose dreams are entirely incongruent with reality: "the counts, the countesses, the dukes, the duchesses, the princes, the princesses" (Lapid, 2019, 16:02), he repeats as he walks along the streets of Paris, early in the film. This echoes Polish author Witold Gombrowicz's insistence "to be addressed as 'the count' even when he was in such monetary need that he

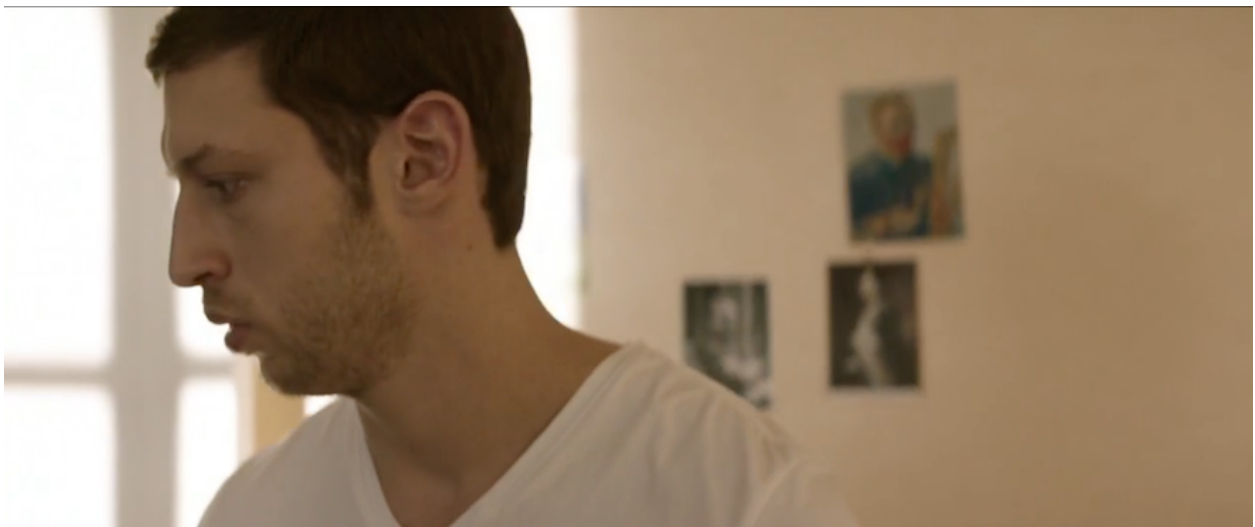
would have to ask to be invited to dinner by friends he pretended to encounter by chance in the streets” (Borinsky, 1998, p. 153). Indeed, Yoav’s life in Paris exhibits this same schizophrenic character. On the one hand, Yoav experiences the heights of French luxury with his French friends while, in his own apartment, he lives in utter poverty. However, unlike Gombrowicz, Yoav does not succeed in managing this double life, as his resolve in detaching from Israel is not as unyielding as he would like to believe.



*Fig. 1. Yoav stand by the rotating postcard rack soon after his arrival in Paris (in *Synonymes*)*



*Fig. 2. Yoav selects a postcard with Napoleon's image (in *Synonymes*)*



*Fig. 3. The postcards Yoav has selected, with the images of Napoleon and Van Gogh, are displayed on the unadorned walls of his apartment in Paris (in *Synonymes*)*

Yoav represents the hero of contemporary exploration, both similar to and the inverse of the ancient hero. Odysseus perpetually resists the allure of his explorations in order to preserve his identity, inextricably tied to Ithaca. His nostalgia is both a consequence of exile and a method of securing the desire to return. It is after his return, that Odysseus is confronted with the conflicting consequences of exile on his identity. Yoav, on the other hand, leaves home precisely in order to

detach himself entirely, insists that he prefers death rather than a return, and awaits the day he will forget about the past and his identity. While Odysseus underestimated the treasures of exile, Yoav is aware of them and, in seeking them, underestimates his ties to his birthplace. Yoav's immaturity, however, reflects on that of the ancient hero, once more revealing that any direct aims, whether they encourage departures or returns are an indicator of innocence, an insistence of the "abdication of personal responsibility" (Boym, 2001, p. 22). Yoav may have the aims and behavior of a modern exile, but his inexperienced behavior betrays him and returns him to antiquity, an antiquated, un-artistic way of being. His antinostalgia indicates a resistance to an understanding of "modernity," to spiritual adulthood. In modernity, Walter Benjamin claims, the present "already stands to the recent past as the awakening stands to the dream. The development of the forces of production in the course of the previous century, shattered that century's wish symbols even before the monuments representing them had collapsed, and before the paper on which they were rendered had yellowed" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 898). As such, if the individual who lives in modernity must accept change as it occurs, relinquish the privilege of time, confront the ruins and fragments of time - of exile, in particular, in Yoav's case – and accept them by not looking back. Yoav's immaturity also points to another issue: regardless of the lessons learned throughout history, learning is not a result of history or the collective but rooted in personal

experience, gained through one's own body. Not having relinquished the hope of wholeness, the antinostalgic exile brings a part of antiquity to modernity, while not entirely existing in either one. Yoav, like Charles Baudelaire's swan, is the embodiment of the co-existence of antiquity and modernity. An Israeli exile in France, he is unprepared to properly respond to both the exilic condition and the modernity of Paris, which, for him, collide simultaneously upon his arrival in Paris. Yoav, as a result, advances and reverts between Tel Aviv and Paris multiple times physically and figuratively, foreshadowing the conclusion of his overly-determined, self-imposed exile.

Antinostalgia may serve as protection from one's traumatic inextricable birthplace, as in Polish-Jewish author Henryk Grynberg's case,<sup>2</sup> who, in his poem "Antynostalgia," recounts the necessity of antinostalgia<sup>3</sup> for his survival both in his native Poland and in exile. Yet, antinostalgia, this active renunciation of one's birthplace, cannot nourish the exile. As a protective mechanism, antinostalgia can support the exile's life away from home, but it cannot sustain this exile if it is its sole cause. Indeed, Yoav's antinostalgia, his temporary renunciation of Israel, is necessary for him in order to flee not to Paris but into his experience of the Other, into becoming the artist that he already is. "The artist in exile," confirms Van Alphen (1998), "is forced to relate to phenomena outside her/himself" (p. 225) and it is this experience that Yoav has chosen, though somewhat inadvertently or not as deliberately as, for instance, Gombrowicz.

When Yoav arrives in Paris, he insists that he will never return to Israel, as if he were the very first exile in history. Because this self-centered response is the inherent one, it is also the most innocent, joining thus in the fate of Yoav, that of the ancient myth of Narcissus before his plunge. The untenable premises of Yoav's stay in Paris are evident quite early. His struggle against one's birthplace does not provide sufficient sustenance in his new life. It is the spartan details of his real living conditions, not the fairy-tale he briefly experiences with the ephemeral French couple Emile and Caroline, that confirms the unsustainability of Yoav's plan: "During the seven months I spent in Paris, I ate the same meal every day. Half a package of mushroom paste at 0.57 Euro per package. A quarter of a can of crushed tomatoes, or pole tomatoes at 0.87 Euro a can. Two spoons of sour cream at 1.26 Euro. For dessert, 200 gr of crisps costing 0.58 Euro" (Lapid, 2019, 26:57). It is not Emile and Caroline who reside in Yoav's space but Yoav who resides in theirs. Like characters in his world, Yoav makes them appear and disappear at will as he is the one who enters and exits their world. The fairytale and reality harmoniously co-exist for a limited, unsustainable period of time as Yoav, naturally if unaware, inhabits a *surreality*<sup>4</sup> where the contradictory dreams and reality are reconciled. When Caroline acts on her will and enters Yoav's living quarters, the fairytale begins to unravel. Innocence is lost, revealing the underground, where the truth, and Israel, remain. This rapture symbolizes the beginning of

awareness for Yoav, a push forward, a new departure which counterintuitively begins Yoav's journey toward himself. He realizes the perpetual nature of exile, the failure inherent in hiding, and the incessant, and not only physical, movement it entails. The exile "moves forward even when he returns; he continues to seek what he has found again; he incessantly learns what he already knows, constantly becoming what he already is" (Jankélévitch, 1974, p. 385). This particular part of the film signals the beginning of the eventual disappearance of Emile and Caroline. Their eventual phantom-like disappearance is foreshadowed in the beginning of the film by the manner in which they simply appear, revealing the ephemeral yet formative role of France in Yoav's life. In the final scene of the film, Caroline, Emile, and France vanish behind closed doors, on which Yoav finds himself banging (Fig. 4), unable to see if there is, indeed anyone behind them. So noiselessly and imperceptibly does the couple vanish that one wonders if Yoav's experience in France occurs at all. The silence, a kind of failure, is interrupted by the loudness of Yoav's body banging on the door, an act that signifies his attempt to turn exile, as Brodsky suggests, into a "success" of his own. "I think it's a noble activity to bump into closed doors" (Ehrlich, 2019) Lapid states, suggesting that the end of the film, this "failure" with France is rather a success, for it is a beginning for Yoav. France's closed doors, the ephemeral nature of his visit, lead the more experienced Yoav toward a reconsidering of his circumstances and



history and a more profound understanding of himself. Both Israel and France have, for a moment, vanished, leaving the exile homeless, pointing him toward a new conception of home.



Fig. 4. In the final scene of *Synonymes*, Yoav finds himself banging against the closed door of Emile and Caroline's apartment.

Yoav's eager desire to call Paris his home in the beginning is unraveled by the pull that his former home imperceptibly exerts on him. Yoav's unsustainable strategy in his exile almost immediately leads him back to Israel, as he searches for employment in the country's embassy in France. Yet, while his body directs him toward Israel, his mind remains determined to flee Israel. This persistence ultimately takes him to the studio of an exploitative artist where a degrading confrontation with reality in France takes place. It appears as if Yoav prefers death to a return to Israel, yet his road to self-degradation reveals, paradoxically, how much he wants to live. His ideas of life and death, however, are transformed during his stay in France. Whereas in the beginning, he equates Israel with death, during his time in France he realizes, that the same death

awaits him, especially if he insists on severing all ties to a place that is inextricable from him. Yoav's failure to detach himself from Israel is revealed through his inability to undo the formative influence the legend of Hector of Troy has had on him since childhood. Yoav's attempts to rewrite history by having Hector evade death by escaping echo his exile to France. Indeed, by rewriting the hero, Hector, as an exile who survives, Yoav attempts to justify his actions and bring the story to the present. Yet, he unknowingly defines exile as deception and cowardice. Yoav's proclivity to rewrite history, manipulate facts, simplify complexity in order to serve his current aim takes many forms. For instance, he lends the hatred of his home various synonyms in order to represent it, simplify it, and to render it manipulatable. Indeed, Yoav's attempts to convince himself and others that there is something particularly terrible or inhuman about Israel betrays a tendency toward deception. "No country is all those things at once. Choose" (Lapid, 2019, 17:45). Emile pleads with Yoav, for a more realistic outlook, but Yoav's growth lies in the aftermath of his experience in Paris. He is unable to relinquish control. Similarly, in the manner of a child, Yoav changes Hector's death at the hands of Achilles, in order to make ancient history fit into his present life. Yoav would like to let go of his roots and, with them, of his inherent yet unwanted desire to be the classic hero, but his wish remains as abstract and ineffectual as the synonyms he persistently uses. Unable to profoundly affect his innermost inherent nature, he transforms the hero's story.

Yoav's reluctance to become an "allegorical thinker,"<sup>5</sup> to change history through his life in the present instead of through this retrospective verbal method, is revealed in his attempt to hold on to his innocence. This, regardless of the fact that he already knows how the story's ending, with Hector's dead corpse dragged by Achilles' triumphant chariot. Yoav's frustration with the story's ending is not directed at the story itself but, rather, at his father who fueled this desire to be heroic – to not leave and to face death – since childhood, without divulging the end of Hector's story to his son and, thus, the serious consequences of such behavior. It is also directed at Israel, as the Hector to France's Achilles, as a place of aggressive heroism, mindless patriotism and futile death. When Yoav pictures Yaron dragged, like Hector, in the highways of Paris, he sees his own fate and that of his native land. Yoav, however, would like to live and, coincidentally, he is alive precisely because he refuses all of his childhood lessons. Yet, he is alive as a child rather than an experienced adult who has succumbed to his inevitable fate. It is when Yoav begins losing his faith in France, when it no longer symbolizes an asylum from Israel, but yet another "wicked, obscene, ignorant, idiotic, sordid, fetid, rude, abominable, odious, lamentable, loathsome, detestable" (Lapid, 2019, 18:14) place, when he becomes aware of the equally "ruinous" France, that Yoav begins losing his innocence, his hope that through battle, be the latter spurred by antinostalgia or nostalgia, one can achieve an end and that from

battle, one may emerge triumphant and alive. Yaron, on the other hand, the figure of the classic hero who is “thirsty for action” (Lapid, 2019, 56:00), the one who reminds Yoav of Hector and whom he inevitably admires, has an unwavering allegiance to the idea of the battle. His own exile to France, for Yaron, is synonymous with treason, a belief which pushes him to become involved in violent confrontations against anti-Semites in France. Yaron cannot come to terms with his exile in a different manner than Yoav, who urges Yaron, Israel, and history to follow suit, an impossible feat. This is why when he tells Yaron of Hector’s story, thinking him an ignorant audience and, thus, more accepting of Yoav’s alterations, Yoav offers his new preferred ending which involves Hector fleeing from Achilles, or certain death, by running around the walls of Troy to escape. Yaron, an unaware descendant of Hector and all that he represented, though unfamiliar with the story, naturally refuses Yoav’s tentative depiction of a fleeing hero. “So you were for the coward” (Lapid, 2019, 46:27), Yaron concludes. Though Yoav has left the army behind in Israel, repulsed by it and what it represents, his attachment to and admiration for Yaron, who represents the very thing Yoav claims to hate, belies this aversion. Because Yoav cannot alter his admiration for Hector, and cannot rewrite his own story, he attempts to cause Yaron, the modern-day Hector, to run off the set course. Yet, Yaron refuses, as history itself cannot be rewritten in the way that Yoav would prefer. The ancient hero lives within them both but Yaron is loyal to the legacy, making no effort to later it. It is up to Yoav who, through

antinostalgia as a first attempt to battle against his ancient roots, to continue on his personal journey and to bring the ancient hero in him swiftly to modernity.

The collision of abstract knowledge and personal experience and their ties to modernity and antiquity, respectively, is an issue Lapid treats through the differences between Yoav, an ancient exile in modernity, and Emile, the representation of modernity in the story. By telling his “epic” stories to his French friends, Yoav hopes to preserve them. Yet, it is the very act of telling his stories that serves to make him realize that he may lose them. While recounting his tales, Yoav begins to sense that he is moving further from the source, Israel, the place whence the stories originate. Already flattened and anecdotal, the stories will soon become echoes of experiences. Yoav sees the fate of his own life turned into a story in a span of months, unlike what Odysseus may have experienced, whose life’s story echoed through the ages. Yoav, becoming both hero and storyteller of his own life, must accept the end of his former life in order to continue. However, it is precisely this extraordinary concurrence of being both ancient and modern, both storyteller and hero that creates a greater understanding for Yoav, specifically that the choices he makes in the present can affect history. As such, being himself shaped by the epic tradition, he is confronted with both preserving this tradition while allowing his life to be shaped by modernity. This same realization of the power of his stories, as he gathers by his fascinated and effectively

story-less audience of Emile and Caroline, serves to root Yoav back in Israel. In the France he experiences, stories have disappeared, and lives represent echoes of experiences, distant from the body and the senses, the origin. Furthermore, stories are communicated in the same words that Yoav is in the process of realizing are insufficient, or become increasingly impotent through repetitive use. Yoav's realization of the power of his stories also represents a loss of innocence which naturally coincides with the beginning of the fading of antinostalgia, in itself a way of preserving one's innocence. The French Emile symbolizes modernity for an ancient thinker like Yoav. He gently pulls Yoav away from his Garden of Eden with his knowledge, his birthright of modernity, as a Paris native, and expands his horizon. Due to the fascinated audience of Emile and Caroline, Yoav begins to see the profound value in his former life, which he comes to increasingly understand, like Hawthorne's Wakefield, by stepping out of it and looking at it from the outside. Lapid's film is the result of this fast-track to modernity that Yoav experiences by his exile in France. Because of his leap into another place and time, Yoav becomes aware of not only the value of his stories but how one's stories can be shaped into the legends of tomorrow: "It was in Paris where I discovered cinema. It's where my friend Emile introduced me to cinema, and where suddenly I discovered cinema as an object of discussion" (Cronk, 2019), Lapid confesses.

The journey from exile to artist is one which has its roots in Nadav Lapid's childhood.

Another Yoav, the little boy of Lapid's previous film *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014), serves to complete the image of the Yoav in *Synonymes* as well as Lapid himself. The poems that the little Yoav recites in *The Kindergarten Teacher*, as he paces around, were written by Lapid himself when he was a child.<sup>6</sup> The older Yoav, in *Synonymes*, similarly paces around while reciting but, at this stage, he is both no longer and not yet an artist. Little Yoav's identity, poetic talent and vision in the *Kindergarten Teacher* are under constant threat by the world, a fate which the conclusion of the film leaves unresolved. Indeed, little Yoav represents the uncertain fate of art, beauty, humanity in a world of ruins, where people's adulthood has become synonymous with the death of artistic sensitivity. It is a similar struggle, that against being contained or destroyed by any specific society, that is picked up by the older Yoav in *Synonymes*, whose fate also remains undetermined. Similarly, the thread that Lapid begins in *The Kindergarten Teacher*, that of potential artists whose maturation does not lead them to art but to both a vampiric absorption and protection of art, a figure represented by the kindergarten teacher, is taken up by the character of Emile in *Synonymes*. Like the kindergarten teacher, Emile appreciates Yoav too passionately, instantly absorbing his life and creative force to fuel his own life and inherited ambition of becoming a writer. It is because of Emile's immediate attachment

to Yoav, and inherent artistic stance, though he lacks inspiration, that it almost imperceptibly dawns on Yoav that his identity and experience are worthy of art. This dynamic between the two is revealed in one of their very first conversations:

Emile: What will you do here?

Yoav: I don't know. I will be French.

Emile: That's not enough.

Yoav: Maybe I'll start writing, too. Why not?

Emile: But, in which language?

Yoav: In French, clearly. I will not return.

Emile: Ever?

Yoav: Israel will die before I will. I will be buried at Père Lachaise. (Lapid, 2019, 20:24)

Yoav absorbs Emile's legacy of storytelling while Emile absorbs Yoav's stories. Through these stories, Emile escapes his reality of an uninspired writer, a prison he has inherited and continues to perpetuate. Emile's book *Les Nuits d'Inertie (Nights of inertia)* is both naïve and wise beyond his years. Yoav's epic, poetic reading of Emile's lines only serves to emphasize Emile's vacuous prose, the absence of real experience, an abstractness lacking in profundity. "Lukewarm?" (Lapid, 2019, 22:09), Yoav asks in wonder, while reading Emile's manuscript. In his attempt to learn French, Yoav looks for a translation, but the meaning of the word which Emile uses to describe an idea, for Yoav can only represent something tangible. For Yoav, exile is a fresh, palpable experience that cannot be abstracted, while for Emile exile is an idea inherited from poets like Baudelaire and the exiles of modernity. His tycoon father's words, "you think you will be half of Victor Hugo? A third of Victor Hugo?" (Lapid, 2019, 22:55), haunt



Emile because he is aware that the journey on which he has embarked is not his own. The reason Emile falls in love with Yoav is because Yoav becomes his journey. In his jarring meeting with modernity, with his earthly, ancient, decidedly non-abstract feelings, Yoav exhibits a privilege of which Emile has been robbed. Emile knows everything about Paris and the world – “Decay and banality, like everywhere” (Lapid, 2019, 19:20) – and is thus fully prepared for a journey he will never have to take. Yoav is the poet without the poet’s demeanor while Emile has inherited the latter but lacks the immediate experience. Emile drinks because that is the demeanor of a writer. He listens to classical music to become inspired. He attempts to fill this void with words and when Yoav arrives, with epic stories of life and death, Emile confesses that he would not die “cœur à cœur” with Caroline but he would do so with Yoav: “I would do it with you,” (Lapid, 2019, 23:51) he confesses. Yoav, on the other hand, is too preoccupied with life.

While Yoav’s exile initially promised life, France does not remain an asylum for long and swiftly becomes as threatening as Israel. “To die, to discover, to discover, to die” (Lapid, 2019, 27:56), Yoav mechanically repeats as he walks along the city streets on one of his first nights in Paris, not yet aware of the verbs’ synonymy. Yet, the discoveries eventually granted, or truths uncovered, by displacement, become rapidly unbearable for Yoav. While his escape to Paris was an act against Israel, the terms begin changing the moment he lands in the city. “Exile covers, at

best, the very moment of departure, of expulsion” (Brodsky, 1994, p. 9) Joseph Brodsky writes. Yoav expects his stern antinostalgic stance to govern a process that constantly shifts and, thus, requires the opposite skill, that of flexibility. Exile, like life, does not submit to the exiled individual’s will or intentions. On his first day in Paris, following his “rebirth,” Yoav envisions himself as one of “the gentlemen of the country” (Lapid, 2019, 11:00). Because his gaze is directed toward Israel, Yoav fails to see what is in front of him. In the first half of the film, Yoav looks no further than his own feet as he walks in the street of Paris. His words of introduction to the Emile and Caroline, “I am Yoav. I have nothing now” (Lapid, 2019, 11:02), more than a confession of his circumstances, represent a hopeful plea and a futile offering of the self as a *tabula rasa* for the French to create anew. Futile, because, though Yoav has no possessions, he still has his name and body and the inheritance they both entail. “Yoav’s body contains his past,” explains Lapid, “it contains his essential nature, which he wishes to decapitate. But the past cannot be changed” (Ehrlich, 2019). Unbeknownst to Yoav, his antinostalgia for Israel already occupies the place which he hopes that France will claim. His lack of awareness takes Yoav to Israel within France, the country’s embassy, only a few weeks following his arrival. While in this Israeli territory, when Mishel, his compatriot, inquires on the reasons behind Yoav’s exile, the latter triumphantly responds “I’ve escaped” (Lapid, 2019, 29:24), to which Michel, witnessing Yoav’s return to Israel while in France, replies by calling Yoav a “moron.” The more defiant

Yoav becomes, the more his antinostalgia reveals his attachment to Israel. This glaring lack of indifference, echoing the impotence of the inability to flee from one's body, is reflected in his repetitive attempt to flee through language, which, though it cannot change reality, he can learn to command: "I've arrived in France to flee Israel. Flee this wicked, obscene, ignorant, idiotic, sordid, fetid, rude, abominable, odious, lamentable, loathsome, detestable country" (Lapid, 2019, 18:14). The repugnant country, however, is permanently preserved in Yoav's body, which fails to respond to his words. In his attempts to grow closer to France, Yoav attempts to verbally communicate his affection to Emile and Caroline, but his physical aloofness belies what he truly feels. As much as he tries to verbally communicate his affection to Emile and Caroline, his physical aloofness betrays him. He cannot communicate an abstract notion, such as gratitude, through physical affection and can do nothing to feign a natural affinity or attraction that is not felt. It is the French couple who constantly long to touch him, to have physical contact with Yoav, who seems to be desirable precisely because his body does not succumb to his mind, representing the very opposite of the French couple. In stark contrast, with Yaron, Yoav is effortlessly affectionate, even excessively so, as is evidenced by his warm embrace and tone of voice when he greets him (Fig. 5). Yoav's body seems to know the truth before Yoav does. In this physical response to life, Yoav is profoundly Israeli. This is precisely why Lapid often

juxtaposes Yoav's nude body, a "Roman Israeli statue" (Trapunski, 2019), representing his real and ancient identity, with the protagonist's contemporary French persona, constructed by a uniform of a mustard-colored coat and the tool of the French language.



*Fig. 5.* Yoav hurries in the rain to meet Yaron and embraces him (Note: This scene in *Synonymes* is subsequent to one where Yoav quietly sits with Emile and Caroline in the latter's living room. The juxtaposition of these two particular scenes underlines the stark difference in Yoav's manner, body language, and natural affinities with his French and Israeli friends).

Emile, a Parisian who has everything but lacks Yoav's vitality, forces Yoav to confront the idea of "death" in France, redirecting Yoav proverbial weapon from Israel to France. Emile's acceptance that his girlfriend Caroline betrays him with Yoav introduces the latter to a kind of hypocrisy for which he finds himself unprepared: "This situation disgusts me" (Lapid, 2019, 1:43:03) he confesses to Caroline. Whereas in the beginning of the film, Yoav barely looks at his surroundings, repeatedly telling himself to not lift his head as he walks around Paris, hesitantly and swiftly glancing at the Notre Dame as if afraid to confront a reality that does not match his

imagined fairy tale, by the end Yoav, no longer afraid, aims an imaginary machinegun and shoots at the iconic cathedral (Lapid, 2019, 1:46:27). In this act, Yoav reconciles the Israeli and French cultures, becoming a hybrid of the two. His “shooting” of the Notre Dame (Fig. 7) – when he finally lifts his gaze from the ground to confront it (Fig. 6) – echoes his military days in Israel but, in the absence of a gun, only the intention and idea remain, making Yoav’s reaction an echo of André Breton’s surrealist act.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Yoav has become French in the moment that he most despises France. Indeed, Yoav is attempting to put “an end to the petty system” (Breton, 1969, p. 125), as he aims his phantom machine gun at a French society he finds unbearably hypocritical. In addition to reclaiming his identity with this silent act of aggression, Yoav retroactively replies to the patronizing statements of the French instructor of a class of immigrants who are preparing for their eventual integration into French society. The instructor urges the members of the group to forget their gods because France is a secular republic and “because there is no religion, because there is no God, because God does not exist” (Lapid, 2019, 1:44:55). She seems to suggest that, unlike the group’s more primitive cultures, France is a place of free, democratic and peaceful expression. The hypocrisy of these statements is further heightened as students are made to sing the outmoded, nationalistic, and somewhat insulting lyrics of La Marseillaise: “Let an impure blood / water our furrows!” Yoav’s final act of offense

against France is specifically aimed at Caroline. Her musical performance that, to Yoav, transmits an absence of sensitivity that leaves him estranged, leads him to mock Caroline and her culture: “The music you played is unacceptable in an unacceptable manner” (Lapid, 2019, 1:47:39) he states, purposefully adapting an “admissible” French phrase to a confrontational Israeli tone. The orchestra members’ lack of confrontation only fuels Yoav’s own: “Fight for your music” (Lapid, 2019, 1:48:17), he screams at a shocked but passive crowd. “Speak without fear. Say everything that comes to your mind” (Lapid, 2019), he continues, mocking the French ideas of openness, sincerity and free speech. In this final confrontation, Yoav inadvertently accepts his losses, his failed attempt in France, and chooses to reclaim his experience, a life he feels he is losing. This scene represents Yoav’s response to an earlier scene in the film, wherein Yoav is excluded from a greeting that turns into a wrestling match between two Israeli men, and thus, successfully exiled from Israel. Yoav realizes his firm stance on differentiating himself from other Israelis has succeeded. They do not treat him as one of their own, claiming he is made of “precious material” and cannot be involved in such aggressions. This fulfillment of his aim brings Yoav no pleasure. Yoav, who follows the playful aggression from the sidelines, wrestles with the air, becoming an echo of himself and, in this, coming to resemble the French. Yoav’s provocation of the French orchestra members, thus, is less of an attack than an aggressive attempt at preserving his identity. Yoav realizes that his antinostalgia has distanced him from

Israel while not only not securing, but actually preventing, his integration into French society.

Yoav's antinostalgia has led him to betray himself.



*Fig. 6. Yoav looks up at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Synonymes*



*Fig. 7. Yoav aims an imaginary machine gun at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Synonymes*

Jankélévitch has suggested that one's movements in space are both necessary, as movement in space neutralizes the irreversibility of time, and mere wanderings, temporary escapes. As such, one's desire to leave one's birthplace, in modernity, has come to represent greater desires,

a thirst for knowledge and that of freeing the self from form. Gombrowicz refers to this process as “the ferocious battle between man and his own Form (that is to say his battle against his way of being, feeling, thinking, talking, acting, against his culture, his ideas and his ideologies, his convictions, his creeds...against everything by which he appears to the outer world”

(Gombrowicz, 1973, p. 51). Yoav’s antinostalgia, then, is part of a larger protest, something that merely begins as a movement against - or anti - Israel but, in gradually becoming a similar protest against the French culture he initially attempted to infiltrate, reveals itself to be Yoav’s own “drama of the human Form” (Gombrowicz, 1973, p. 51). According to Lapid, Yoav is:

fighting against the actual moment and its boundaries, which means when you wait for him inside, he will be outside. When you wait for him to sing, he’ll keep quiet. When you wait for him to shout, he’ll whisper. He’ll talk normally and then suddenly, he’ll shout and dance. Also, if you ask him what’s his problem with Israel, he could speak to you in all the negative synonyms he could find in the French dictionary, but he won’t be able to give a precise argument. (Saito, 2019)

Yoav cannot give a precise argument because, regardless of how vehement his antinostalgia may be, he can neither destroy an inextricable link nor preserve the completeness of what has been fragmented, not yet able to accept the “ruins,” or fathom the allegorical life of fragments. Yet, Yoav finds himself at a loss for arguments also because the words he uses merely create the need



for more words, which, through their increase in number lose their ability to capture any essence. This may why allegorical thinking is characterized by silence. As Gombrowicz confirms, one's form is not easily captured:

If I was followed step by step and spied on, my every contact with people could easily show just how much of a chameleon I was. According to the place, the people, the circumstances, I was good, stupid, primitive, refined, taciturn, talkative, self-effacing, arrogant, superficial, or profound. I was agile, heavy, important, unimportant, bashful, shameless, bold or shy, cynical or idealistic. What was I not? I was everything. (Gombrowicz, 1973, p. 51)

Gombrowicz puts a halt to what may become an endless list of adjectives because, he concludes, one is everything. He brings up the opposite question: What is one not? By asking it, he suggests that because one is everything, one is also nothing. It is one's "indefinite" existence that paradoxically creates the need for definition, but definitions fail to capture the indefinite. This is the journey that every exile is eternally in the process of completing, where, through an experiencing and understanding of the world, the insufficient yet useful tools it provides, such as language and travel, which nonetheless must be used and experienced, one understands the self, precisely by accepting one's fragmentation and lack of definition. When Yoav attempts to describe Israel, to himself and then to Emile, his list of synonyms represents a closed circuit of

meaning, one which would continue endlessly without ever reaching, indeed, moving further from, precision. On the contrary, counter to Benjamin's suggestion of the perpetual allegorical interpretation necessary in modernity, this process, while requiring more time and moving one further from the present moment, leads to more confusion. Rather than simple definitions,

Yoav's synonyms would perhaps offer more meaning if they were to become poetry:

odious

repugnant

fetid

obscene

vulgar

lamentable

sordid

crude

bestial

ignorant (Lapid, 2019, 17:44)

Yoav, however, is both far from being a poet and organically becoming one. He learns a language in order to communicate but lacks any real desire to integrate into French society. Like Gombrowicz, "whose Spanish remained noticeably awkward throughout his life in Argentina" (Borinsky, 1998, p. 153). Yoav reveals, more than a lack of proficiency at learning languages, a decreasing desire to communicate in any traditional method. He learns the language, not in order to function in French, but to no longer speak Hebrew and, through this very act, he hints at a future where his language will not be used in its basic traditional form.

On the particular phase in which his protagonist finds himself, Lapid argues that “Yoav is still a full auteur. He's still living his art” (Koslofsky, 2019). Yoav is in the midst of experiencing life, which he cannot yet capture. In the course of the seven short months he spends in Paris, Yoav will find that he embodies all of the synonyms he associates with Israel. Yoav certainly does not purposefully seek this truth, but, his constant listing of synonyms, reveals an inherent desire for truth, a genuine curiosity, a search for accuracy. Lapid explains: “the first [synonym] is the closest [to the original meaning] and the more the synonym is advanced, the more distance is created with the original words, so this is the key thing for [Yoav]” (Saito, 2019). As Yoav learns the language, he comes to understand how it can both bring him closer and distance him from the truth, the origin of meaning. Fundamentally, language takes one further from the body, and, in Yoav’s case, the body is the experience. Yoav’s “Israeli identity is embedded in his body, which is very Israeli in itself,” Lapid explains, “that’s perhaps why he tries to destroy it from the very beginning: first by freezing it, which is almost like a symbolic death, then by starving it, and finally, by prostituting it. But his body refuses to disappear and once he has degraded it, strangely, Hebrew words start to come out of his mouth again” (Prot, 2019). Here, Lapid refers to Yoav’s final degradation by a French artist who is intent on exploiting all that Yoav represents - body, language, culture, - for his own aims. Yet, this degradation, though painful to experience,

serves Yoav well in that it instantaneously extracts him from French, and his superficial existence in France, and returns him to his origin, his body and Israel. Entirely nude, in a degrading position and forced to speak in Hebrew, a language he had until then renounced, his mustard-colored pea coat and French vocabulary a distant memory, Yoav is transported back to his identity: “What am I doing here? Run away. Run, save yourself!” (Lapid, 2019, 1:23:30)

Yoav screams in Hebrew, a visceral tone suddenly replacing his former mechanical and monotonous repetition of French words. What the French artist assumes are words of sexual desire, are Yoav’s words of salvation. “For in the midst of the conscious degradation of the object the melancholy intention keeps faith with its own quality as a thing in an incomparable way” (Benjamin, 1998, p. 225), writes Walter Benjamin. In not entirely destroying Yoav, this conscious degradation of his own body, redeems him. This redemption comes both from a lack of resistance to truth and a truthful response to an experience. For instance, when the artist tells Yoav that it is not important what he says, only that he express himself in Hebrew, thus nullifying the significance of the content of language, he overturns Yoav’s assumption of what he had assumed he could accomplish with language, that is renouncing his origin and becoming French. It is in his natural acceptance of the impotence of language and his own, rather than an insistence on preserving assumptions, that Yoav triumphs. It is also by degrading his body, and accepting the truth that comes as a consequence, that Yoav experiences a new rebirth within

exile. He sees, through his own body, France as the aggressor, the exploiter of Israel, through his body, develops the empathy for his country that he had long lost. This exploitative relationship will perpetually and infinitely manifest itself if Yoav does not run from its falseness. Yoav's conclusions hint at the beginnings of an allegorical existence, of an awareness which leads one away from innocence and/or faith toward awareness and the self. Yoav becomes an exile who begins his journey towards becoming an artist, for it is the moments of recognition of one's own fragmentation and ruin that represent the starting point of the journey. "All art remains in the most intimate contact with decay," writes Gombrowicz, "it is born of decadence, it is a transmutation of illness into health. All art, generally speaking, borders on silliness, defeat, degradation" (Robinson, 1994, p. 153).

Yoav's turning point has already been depicted in the film, prior to these two final incidents, in a series of contrasting consecutive scenes (Lapid, 2019, 49:23), which reveal both the evidently vast differences between Yoav's life in Israel and his life in France, while also exposing their underlying similarities. The similarities point Yoav toward the realization that his problem is not, and cannot be, solely confined to Israel or France. The first scene (Fig. 8), narrated in voice-over by Yoav to Emile and Caroline, depicts a young Yoav, sweating in the bare and arid landscape of Israel. "My Emile, my love, Caroline who saved my life, did I ever

tell you of how I played with the machine gun and perforated an Arab terrorist?” (Lapid, 2019, 47:10), Yoav asks. This particular scene depicts what Van Alphen (1998) refers to as “a primal scene,” not in the psychoanalytical sense, but in the sense of events in an exile’s life which “function as the basis for all his later observations and experiences” (p. 233). Though a primal scene implies a shocking or atrocious event, in Yoav’s, and Lapid’s, case, it is his service in the Israeli army that has spurred the exile and, as such, it is the scenes of the army that he must revisit. In Van Alphen’s analysis of Dutch artist’s Armando’s “boyhood playground during the Second World War,” and the “immediate vicinity of the Amersfoort concentration camp,” Van Alphen (1998) emphasizes that the primal scene’s “elements of aggression and destruction [...] entangled with elements of boyish adventures” render it difficult for Armando to “grasp, to know or understand” (p. 234). Lapid revealed an understanding of the absurdness of Israel’s military culture pre-departure, the army being the main causing agent of his exile. However, the scene in the film reveals the confrontation with the “primal scene,” as an exile. Yoav’s understanding of it while recounting it, becomes pivotal in the film, as the collision of a self-chosen exile and art. Like Van Alphen’s Armando, Yoav “had to exile himself from the spot where the primal scene took place: his primal watching. This exile was necessary in order to be able to approach the scene” (Van Alphen, 1998, p. 234). In Yoav’s case, the approaching of the primal scene also serves to simultaneously transform it, in order to confront it while reconstructing it, while turning

his life into a spontaneous epic tale. Yoav begins his story in true epic tradition, for the introduction is as grand as Homer's "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns" (Homer, 1997. p. 77), yet the Arab terrorist is quickly revealed to be a cardboard silhouette of a man, used for target practice (Fig. 9). The Israeli story that begins as an epic, quickly comes to its French *dénouement* – "Nothing else. *L'ennui*." (Lapid, 2019, 47:10) – mimicking Yoav's own life, his current position between the two worlds, as unreconciled as they are in the process of his storytelling. In the following scene, Yoav comfortably sits in silence in the company of Emile and Caroline, in a large living room, in the absence of sweat and other signs of life (Fig. 10). The two scenes are as aesthetically different as they are similar. They communicate the differences between Israel and France but their joining through the unifying thread of a French song, once lively now turned mournful, testifies to the continuation of the same story, in a figurative sense. The transformation of the song transmits the underlying idea that, while life in the two scenes, in the two countries, may appear different, it also is the same. Rather, that these two environments are perhaps made of strikingly differing textures but they nevertheless contain the same underlying *ennui*. Whereas in Israel Yoav needed the melody of France to breathe life into an environment of emptiness, forced masculine form, and silence broken by gun shots, in France, he needs the Israeli machine gun to shake the emptiness and unimaginable silence of the dead

French living room, where once-breathing stories are now nicely packaged into vintage vinyl cases collecting dust. The target's torso filled with empty bullet holes, the artificial "dead" man represents the frustratingly senseless psychological trauma that Israel has caused, and will continue to cause, Yoav. The same figure, translated to its "synonym" in the French living room, is a lampshade shedding its light on what could be three ghosts. The chaotic, random pattern of the bullet holes has been transfigured into an abstract painting and life, as Yoav once knew it has been irrevocably transformed. The two scenes are the visual manifestation of what Benjamin's refers to when he cites the "interior" as the "asylum of art" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 9).



*Fig. 8. Yoav recalling his shooting practice from his army days in Israel in Synonymes*





Fig. 9. The “perforated Arab terrorist” from Yoav’s shooting practice in Israel in *Synonymes*



Fig. 10. Caroline, Emile and Yoav (left to right) sitting in silence in the French couple’s living room in *Synonymes*

In the film, exile is clarified as a metaphysical space where the confrontations one would have to do in one’s life, but could potentially miss or successfully avoid if one is not displaced, become impossible to ignore. The figure of the exile is fascinating precisely because he is forced to reconcile contrasting perspectives of life, to revisit old assumptions, to confirm, through movement in space, that the self is inescapable and to use this knowledge to propel the

self into a higher realm, that of art. Yoav understands how the words he uses to describe Israel become equally applicable to him as the story unfolds. Accepting his own loss of innocence, and similarity of both Israel and France, leads Yoav to see and value Israel as the ruin that it is, to understand its history in his present, and grasp how it all may have occurred. The swift precipitation of his own story, his expulsion and fall, eliminates all illusions of a sacred place, of salvation other than in the present moment. While Yoav is not ready to become an artist, the seeds which may have been sown in his childhood, the same desire for life and curiosity for truth that drove him away from home, have been irreversibly germinated. “The truth of this is it took place in the past, but it’s still happening, so it still belongs in a way to the present. It’s a continuous historical film” (Saito, 2019), Lapid confesses. Lapid, through Yoav and *Synonymes*, redeems life’s fragments through art and, having returned to his birthplace of Israel, negotiates his new fragmented identity without relinquishing neither Israel nor France, an identity beyond that of an exile to that of an artist.

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> See Van Alphen (1998, p. 231), where the author explains that, “for Jews, the exilic condition is much more than an epistemological mode of pursuing knowledge: it is a historical reality.”

<sup>2</sup> See Henryk Grynberg's poem “Antinostalgia” in *Antynostalgia* (1971).

<sup>3</sup> Antinostalgia is not the opposite of nostalgia, but the exile's, or victim's, reaction to nostalgia, an antidote to the incurable, irrational disease that is nostalgia. Antinostalgia cannot, and does not, assuage the suffering caused by nostalgia but attempts to render it less potent. Antinostalgia is effectively the silencing of the sirens' songs. It is, like nostalgia, a mechanism of survival in a foreign land and, therefore, equally painful.

<sup>4</sup> See André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1969), p. 14: “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.”

<sup>5</sup> See Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* for more details on allegorical thinking. Benjamin proposes that the sole way of thinking, indeed of living, in modernity is allegorical or artistic. Allegorical thinking, as opposed to classical, traditional or historical understanding (i.e. unartistic), is thinking adapted to the ephemeral nature of living, able to retain the very essence from the fragments of modernity, which, though experienced and interpreted like ancient ruins, do not afford the privilege of time or retrospective understanding. “Allegory views existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin” (330) Benjamin writes, and, as such, ruins become the lens of modernity, through which existence is viewed and interpreted. “The experience of allegory, which holds fast to ruins, is properly the experience of eternal transience” (348).

<sup>6</sup> See “Lapid's Complaint” (October 26, 2019), an interview by J. Hoberman published in *The New York Review of Books* (<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/10/26/lapids-complaint/>).

<sup>7</sup> See Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* for the definition of the surrealist act. “The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level” (p. 125).