



**Joanna Ostrowska**

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**“Polskie burki —  
*Polish Bourekas*”**



Residence No. 4

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**TAMARA MOYZES & SHLOMI YAFFE**

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POLIN  
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OF POLISH JEWS



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*"Bourekas films" are a film genre. A genre from which there was no escape. In this country, the potential audience that comes to see films constitutes an intersection of people coming from different countries... so many kinds and types of people... in order to reach such a public... you must have some common denominator... The films I made dealt with these people and spoke to this audience. These films are entirely local, although they partially succeeded abroad... "Bourekas films" deal with our local folklore in its different colorings. Then came journalists and... wise and beautiful souls who said that "ethnic" is "bad." Why is it bad? Why is it bad to deal with ethnic groups and ethnicity? After all, this is our situation. There are Ashkenazim and Frenks [colloquial pejorative for Sephardim] and they don't like each other. Period. This is a fact and there is nothing we can do about it.*

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— Boaz Davidson **(a)**

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**(a)** Boaz Davidson — b. 1943, Israeli director, creator of the "bourekas films", author of the name of that film genre, which refers to the subgenre of "spaghetti western" (westerns produced in Italy). In both cases the point is a reference to a traditional meal from the particular country.

Selected filmography: *Charlie Ve'hetzi* (1974); *Hagiga B'Snuker* (1975); *Lupo B'New York* (1976). Today Davidson primarily works as an executive producer for "American blockbusters", such as: *The Black Dahlia* (2006, directed by Brian De Palma), *Trespass* (2011, directed by Joel Schumacher), *The Legend of Hercules* (2014, directed by Renny Harlin), *The Expendables 3* (2014, directed by Patrick Hughes).

## THE BOUREKAS

Bourekas are pies made from, for example, filo dough, and stuffed with various fillings — from spinach through potatoes or meat to cheese. The fillings are enfolded in dough, hence the name that refers to the action of wrapping and twisting. Bourekas resemble pitta, a multilayer pancake, and are one of the most popular snacks in the Middle East — a traditional fast food.

Films from that genre, made in Israel mainly in the 60s and 70s (the two “waves”), were associated with a snack because of the ethnic references and the desire to point to something traditional, something widely recognizable. Just like a fast food, the “bourekas films” were supposed to be easy, light and enjoyable. Their goal was to make the audience happy (comedies), to bring respite in times of war and political crisis (i.a. the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War). The additional objective was to create a popular, recognizable, mainstream genre that would answer the needs of the Israeli film production market. After all, practically since the beginning of the 60s it was the audience that through the box office decided which films were subsidized. The ones made were those that sold well and the audience wanted to see.

The film that announced the genre, and at the same time exposed its basic narrative patterns, was *Sallah Shabati* (1964) directed by Efraim Kishon and with Chaim Topol (**b**) in the title role. *Sallah* plot is based on a simple story of an immigrant, a Mizrahi Jew, who arrives in Israel with his family and is brought to live in a transit camp. He tries to survive at any cost even though he obviously “does not fit” into modern Israeli society. Difference, alienness, otherness and inability of the Mizrahim to assimilate into the new, Zionist reality are one of the main jokes topics in the bourekas films. The comedy is born at the intersection

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**(b)** Chaim Topol played the leading role in *Fiddler on the Roof*, a Norman Jewison's musical based on a classic novel *Tevye the Dairyman* written by Sholem Aleichem.

of images of two communities: the Ashkenazim — local, modern, well organised — and the Mizrahim — “alien,” “backward,” coming from the “outside.” The key to the creation of the world of these imbalances, and to having people laugh at them, is the stereotype and the persistent cultivation of disparities.

### THE FILM

*Polish Bourekas* directed by Tamara Moyzes and Shlomi Yaffe is a film project in which a genre of the Israeli popular cinema from the 60s and 70s is used as a “costume” — a recognized structure that allows us to spy on social inequalities. The division between the Ashkenazim and the Mizrahim, so often highlighted in the bourekas, can be historically associated with the symbolic, diasporic division into the assimilated Jews (Haskalah) and those “who remained in the shtetl.” In both cases the most important are the difference and hierarchy that allow one social group to feel superior to the other one.

- › In *Polish Bourekas* Moyzes and Yaffe make use of three historical events. They appropriate them and try to tell them anew. In all of them appear “the excluded,” namely the Mizrahim, who in spite of the “bourekas” tradition are not passive individuals — they influence the history of the state.
- › The first episode is “the attack on Yitzhak Rabin.” **(c)** Rabin meets Yigal Amir in a black, empty space. They talk to each other in Yiddish, which is supposed to evoke the effect of alienation, to recall the diaspora and additionally indicate that the experience of the “exile” / emigration is common for both the Ashkenazim

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- (c)** The episode premiered in Warsaw (21.09.2014) in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews as a summary of the artists’ residency. The remaining episodes were realized / filmed during Tamara Moyzes and Shlomi Yaffe’s stay in Warsaw but have not been shown to the public (they are at the stage of montage and animation).

and the Mizrahim. Rabin grandiloquently speaks about the need to forget and to leave the old order (the diaspora) in favour of the new, Zionist world. There is no other way. Amir from the very beginning holds a gun in his hand. He says plainly: “What was is what will be, and what happened is what will happen again.” At some point he switches a gun to a bourekas — a treat that he offers to Rabin. He interrupts the prime minister’s speech by offering him food. In the end he puts a hand on Rabin’s shoulder, moves him aside, and uses the boureka like a gun — pointing it toward an invisible enemy.

### THE ANIMATION

Moyzes and Yaffe’s film is dominated by a paratheatrical convention. Empty, black space; the stage; two actors; no scenography. Impression of artificiality is intensified by a 3D animation made by Vilém Novák. The stage remains unaffected by the effects. Only the bodies, the faces to be specific, are going to be animated. That effect is supposed to act as a suspense. In the beginning we see the actors’ faces, **(d)** which suddenly change into animated countenances of Yitzhak Rabin and Yigal Amir. For a moment we see the “historical figures” and then we are back to the actors’ faces — that action is repeated several times.

Introduction of 3D animation, temporary concealment of the faces exposes their historical identity — points out the direction of interpretation of the image, and simultaneously confirms figurativeness of Moyzes and Yaffe’s spectacle / film. Using special effects the artists’ additionally exaggerate the characters, and perhaps show the manipulative role of medium, which in case of popular cinema is often perceived as a radical “reflection of reality.”

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**(d)** Actors from The Ester Rachel Kamińska and Ida Kamińska State Jewish Theater in Warsaw — Sylwia Najah, Henryk Rajfer, Kobi Weitzner — performed in every episode filmed by the artists’.

It does not only fulfil the informative and entertainment functions, but also preserves stereotypes and divisions, maintains hierarchies, and ultimately affects a gigantic audience. The viewers accustomed to the rules of film genres have certain narrative, aesthetic, and — inevitably — political expectations. In *Polish Bourekas* these expectations are not met, and the fault lies in a traditional snack that resembles a big dumpling.

### THE POSTER

Two other episodes from Tamara Moyzes and Shlomi Yaffe's *Polish Bourekas* series refer to biographies and historical figures of Tali Fahima and Mordechai Vanunu. They both come from Mizrahi families (Algeria and Morocco). Beside the descent the characters from all episodes have in common the fact that they are considered both heroes and traitors. Their status depends on the reaction of a particular society. In the case of Tali Fahima — a leftist, pro-Palestinian activist converted to Islam — decides the opinion on the respective sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mordechai Vanunu is a participant of Israeli research on nuclear weapons, conducted in a nuclear facility near the Dimona city in the Negev desert, who revealed the Israeli nuclear programme to the world. He had been sentenced to eighteen years in prison for the act, and to this day has problems with the authorities. His contacts with foreign journalists have been restricted. On the one hand he is regarded as a man of peace, and on the other — as a traitor of Zionist state.

On the poster of Moyzes and Yaffe's film the episodes with Fahima and Vanunu are merely hinted at. In the foreground we see Yigal Amir aiming the bourekas. In the background there is Tali Fahima with the Bund flag in her hands, and further a young blonde woman standing backwards and carrying the flag of Israel. References straight from the European diaspora "sneak" into modern historical events. The systems of social divisions

from different periods of history, which shaped the Israeli identity, are mixed in every episode. All of that is accompanied by the pop-cultural staffage of a film poster stylised on a mainstream hit, which — similarly to the bourekas films — should be seen by millions. In reality no one will see it — the viewers' pleasure will not be satisfied.

### THE FINALE — A PREMIERE

*Polish Bourekas* is a film project that does not draw only from the history of Israeli cinematography, that utilises genre-related film habits of the audience to manipulate it and deprive it of pleasure. Moyzes and Yaffe “promise” a popular cinema, a cultural fast food — easy, light, and enjoyable — in which the recipient is “the master.” By alluding to the bourekas films they give hope for a comedy, a joke, a carefree laugh at implied ethnic disparities, because everyone — following the rule of projection / identification — will identify with the Ashkenazi characters.

Consequently *Polish Bourekas* works exactly the other way around. Episodic structure, in which, in fact, instead of a film there are three scenes assembled together, is a cunning attack on the medium and its language. The choice of theatrical convention and an artificial, consciously “inconsistent” animation have a similar effect. Nothing is easy, nor enjoyable. The audience associates the language of main protagonists with something “backward” and traditional, but is unable to understand them without English (or Polish) translation. They attempt to find a narrative axis in the recalled historical events but at the same time they are bombarded with the symbols straight from the diaspora. The division into others / aliens is called into question, although exclusively through the semantic and narrative chaos, in which there is no place for simple interpretative recipes. What's more, over that traditional, Israeli “visual treat” appears an adjective — “Polish” — which probably should be coupled

with nostalgia for the diaspora, or treated as a reference to the contemporary Jewish community in Poland. In the end, it may be all about refreshing the idea of comeback, or — like in Yael Bartana’s films **(e)** — what’s important is the “Polish invitation”?

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Boaz Davidson’s quote comes from the following book: Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema. East/West and the Politics of Representation* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

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**(e)** *Nightmares* (2007); *Wall and Tower* (2009); *We Shall Be Strong in Our Weakness* (2011) — directed by Yael Bartana (all of them were presented as a “Polish” trilogy in the Polish Pavilion at the 54th International Art Exhibition in Venice: ... and Europe will be stunned)

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Translation: Paweł Falkowski

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