

## Difference, contamination, and absence: *The Cakemaker* (2017)

Reviewed by Jacob Engelberg

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Ofir Raul Grazier's drama *The Cakemaker* (Schwerbrock & Tamir, 2017) follows Oren (Roy Miller), an Israeli man who frequently visits Berlin on monthly business trips. We first meet Oren during one of these trips, when he returns to a bakery that has become the first port of call whenever he arrives in the city; his wife Anat (Sarah Adler) is a fan of the bakery's cinnamon cookies, which he regularly brings back to her as a gift. When Oren strikes up conversation with German baker Thomas (Tim Kalkhof) a connection sparks, and what begins as a hesitant evaluation of one another develops into a tender affair between the two men.

After one of his Berlin visits, Oren leaves behind his keys and his wife's cookies at Thomas's apartment, prompting Thomas to telephone him repeatedly, each time being redirected to Oren's voicemail. Time passes and the irked Thomas visits Oren's company under the pretense of delivering the cookies. When the receptionist informs Thomas that Oren has died, Thomas is impelled to visit Jerusalem. In the historic city, he wanders into Anat's café where he strikes up conversation with his deceased lover's wife, who had been unaware of Oren's extramarital tryst. When Thomas begins working at Anat's café the two develop a friendship; with his baking skills, Thomas increases the café's popularity.

During an evening cooking session, sexual tension develops between the two and—once again, ever so hesitantly—the two share a kiss and proceed to have sex. When Anat discovers Thomas's prior relationship to her late husband, the truth of what drew Thomas to her café is revealed. Consequently, Anat's belligerent and religious brother Moti (Zohar Strauss) physically threatens Thomas and orders him to return to Germany. Sometime later, Anat visits Berlin where she finds Thomas's bakery. Standing on the other side of the street, Anat watches as Thomas exits the bakery, mounts his bike, and rides off into the distance. *The Cakemaker* is an ambiguous tale of desire, displacement, and dissimulation – themes that befit the narrative conventions of what has been termed 'art cinema.' Filippo (2013) argues that "Art cinema's characteristic narrative ambiguity and character opacity paradoxically allow

for bisexuality's clearer enunciation" (p. 42). For her, art cinema's often nonlinear approach to narrative – as well as its preponderance towards characters whose decisions are often illogical or ambiguous – enable “a substantial critique of compulsory monosexuality with its willingness to probe the [p.134] dilemmas of desire” (p. 48). *The Cakemaker* provides a germane example of the trend she describes. Thomas's motivations in going to Jerusalem and working for his deceased lover's widow are never revealed and Anat's feelings towards Thomas are characterized by a similar ambiguity. Although a viewer might surmise the rationale behind both characters' actions (e.g., Anat's final decision to visit Berlin), these actions can only ever be interpreted, not definitively explained. This hermeneutic resistance is no more present than in the film's nonteleological conclusion, also a convention of art cinema, one which San Filippo argues “compel[s] us to regard individuals' orientations and attractions as continually in flux” (p. 32).

Through *The Cakemaker*'s narrative structure, explorations of bisexual desire thus have the potential to be rendered intelligible. The film communicates its characters' sexualities through narrative-temporal modes that Roberts (2013) identifies as “concurrent” and “serial” bisexualities. The former describes when a person has relationships with people of different genders “within a space of time,” whereas the latter describes when a person has relationships with people of different genders “at different points in her life” (p. vii). Oren's bisexuality is represented concurrently: he is cheating on his wife with Thomas and travels between these differently gendered lovers over a period of months. The ability to read Oren as bisexual is complicated by his status as a “cheating husband,” a mainstay of familiar monosexualized narratives around closeted gay husbands. Oren's sexual interpellation is thus left in a space of sexual agnosticism. A bisexual reading can certainly find relevant and resonant expressions of his character's desire, but this representation will also be precarious in the face of a monosexist reading that may activate the narrative ingredients of closetedness.

Thomas's bisexuality is explored over a greater stretch of time, his relationship with Oren occurring many months, perhaps even years, before his sexual encounter with Anat. Roberts (2013) argues that, within a monosexual spectatorial tradition, serial bisexualities are read as sexual journeys of “conflict and resolution, often utilizing tropes associated with the narratives of Coming Out or Going Straight, depending on the ordering of her partners” (p. viii). However, *The Cakemaker* resists such a reading in its formulation of Thomas as grieving

his male lover. Although Oren might be dead, his specter – the specter of the male object of desire – lingers in Thomas, all the while being symbolically yoked to Anat, with whom he makes love. The residual presence of Oren is augmented still through the analeptic moments depicting Oren and Thomas's relationship, which populate the film's latter half. The ghost of the male object of desire hovers above the body of its female counterpart. *The Cakemaker* thus constructs Oren and Thomas in ways that have the potential to resist the implementation of monosexist readings onto their character journeys, especially in the [p.135] case of Thomas. Yet, interestingly, it would seem that bisexuality – almost by osmosis – seeps into other areas of the film, namely, through the overriding themes of difference and contamination.

An Israeli-German coproduction, *The Cakemaker* is a hybrid text, both in the two locations in which it is set—Berlin and Jerusalem—and the binational context of its production. Cinematic relations between Germany and Israel began in the aftermath of the 1952 Reparations Agreement in which the German Federal Republic paid Israel reparations for Jewish murder and suffering during the Shoah (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2018). The countries' decades-long approach to reconciliation has been remarked upon favorably by diplomats and international relations scholars alike, but Wittlinger (2018) believes this relationship to be more a result of pragmatism than morality. For her, amity between the nations has served the mutually beneficial purposes of Germany helping to assert Israel's "right to exist" and Israel helping to enable Germany's postwar rehabilitation in the international community. It is within the context of this history of diplomatic, political, and cultural cohesion through which *The Cakemaker* emerges.

National difference is a dominant theme in the film, focalized and augmented through representations mediated by characters navigating lands foreign to them. As most of *The Cakemaker's* narrative takes place in Jerusalem, it is through Thomas that we come to experience national difference in his juxtaposition against the landscape of Israeli society. Thomas cannot speak Hebrew; he is unfamiliar with his spatial surroundings and the cultural customs of Israeli society. His Germanness does not simply signify "foreignness" *sensu lato*, but the memory of the Shoah, especially for Israel's Ashkenazi population. When Anat tells Moti that Thomas is German, he responds, "Of all the places in the world, you bring a German into your kitchen?" Moti's anti-German sentiment leads him to treat Thomas with

suspicion and sometimes antagonism, the former's perception of the latter forever marred by the Shoah's lingering memory.

Like his ignorance of Israeli culture, Thomas is also unaware of Jewish customs. As a Jewish-owned café operating in Jerusalem, a *hekssher*—a certificate of kosher status—is important for ensuring custom. When Thomas makes the faux pas of using the café's oven to bake cookies, he is brusquely reprimanded by Anat and Moti, who inform him of the Jewish law that forbids Jews to eat baked goods prepared by gentiles or to use ovens previously used by gentiles. It is important that this law—*pat akum*—has been interpreted by rabbinical commentators as safeguarding against intermarriages between Jews and gentiles (Mishnah, Avoda Zarah, 35b), thus infusing the concept of Jewish food law with anti-exogamous or antimiscegenous associations. These associations are not simply limited to [p.136] theological enquiry or observant Jewish practice, but can be seen to extend to Jewish culture more generally. As Rosenfeld (1949) writes:

It is sad evidence of the sexual displacement in Jewish living that the sexual forms in the popular Jewish conception should derive ... from a forbidden exogamy, symbolized in food taboos. And, worse, in the end, it is not merely the *shaigetz* and the *shiksa*<sup>1</sup> who are taboo; the sexual object per se is treif.<sup>2</sup> (p. 387)

Rosenfeld suggests a symbolic and cultural association between dietary and sexual laws, one predicated upon the comparable sully power of food and people considered *treif*. The consumption of *treif* food can lead to miscegenation, and miscegenation can lead to the consumption of *treif* food.<sup>3</sup> When Thomas commits *pat akum*, we can thus understand his peccadillo as carrying miscegenous implications: his gentleness has not only contaminated Anat's oven, but also begun to contaminate her desire.

Here, it is useful to consider Eadie's (1993/1999) theorization of bisexuality as a "miscegenate location" insofar as "it is itself a place where there is a difficult mixing of supposedly incompatible orientations" (p. 133). Drawing upon Bhabha's (1990) theory of hybridization, Eadie summarizes that "Deviance persists in the culture which is trying to expel it, thereby disrupting the myths of any authority's heritage as an always homogenous past, and its persistence as an always identical future" (p. 136). The figure of the bisexual can thus be understood as a hybridized symbol whose fusion of allegedly polarized sexualities contests the binarism of the identities it transgresses. What Eadie signals as the disrupting

effect of the “miscegenate location” against the myth of homogeneity can also be understood in relation to the Jew-gentile binary, which, like the heterosexual-homosexual binary, has long been in hermeneutic flux. The “forbidden desire” between German gentile and Ashkenazi Israeli contests the racialization process that constructs these binaries, Thomas’s simultaneous desire towards man and woman contests the self-affirming hegemony of monosexuality, and the gentile cookie in the kosher oven contests the authority of Jewish food laws.<sup>4</sup>

For a film that concerns itself so directly with themes of hybridization, ethnonational difference, and social transgression, it is surprising to find that a consideration of Palestine or Palestinian people is so very absent. An assessment of this textual privation is essential in analysis of cultural works from a settler colonial state like Israel, but it is especially relevant insofar as the film’s explicit themes belie the hybridity of its context. The majority of the film takes place in Jerusalem, a city which famously has multiple claims to its ownership and whose eastern district has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six Day War. In the film, it is unclear in which part of [p.137] Jerusalem Anat’s café is located and, though Jerusalem is a heavily segregated city (Romann & Weingrod, 2014), it is bizarre that there is no representation of or allusion to Palestinian neighbors. The image presented of Jerusalem and ergo Israel is thus rendered as monolithically Jewish.

The only reference to Israeli occupation occurs in a brief scene in which Thomas wanders through a park and gazes upon a male Israeli soldier. The camera assumes Thomas’s point of view in a slow, inquisitive zoom which, twinned with the scene’s park setting, establishes the encounter through the visual language of cruising. Through Thomas, a viewer is invited to gaze upon the soldier who is visually abstracted from war or occupation and to encounter him against the *tabula rasa* of park greenery. Further, desire towards the soldier is mediated through a queer gaze, signaling the alignment of queer desire with an object of colonial military power. The fact that the gaze is non-Israeli suggests Thomas as a proxy for a viewer from the Global North; the eroticized, objectifying encounter encourages a viewer to abstract the figure of the Israeli soldier from the context in which he has been formed. This moment thus provides a pertinent example of what Darwich and Maikay (2014) have referred to as “Israel’s use of gay culture ... to distract from and normalize Israeli occupation, settler

colonialism, and apartheid” (p. 281), a process that queer Palestinian activists have termed “Israeli pinkwashing.”

Antipinkwashing activism advocates a critical stance towards the images Israel presents of itself. This is especially relevant vis-à-vis *The Cakemaker*'s funding by The Jerusalem Film & Television Fund and the Israel Film Council, both of which receive money from or are part of the Israeli government (Jerusalem Film Fund, 2015; Macnab, 2016), and given that the film was Israel's submission to the 91st Academy Awards (Caspi, 2018). It is telling that Thomas's character is freely able to immigrate to Israel, work in Jerusalem, and obtain housing, without allusion to the bureaucracy and barriers that any non-Jewish immigrant would face in doing so. *The Cakemaker* thus constructs an image of Israel that elides a Palestinian presence, eschews references to the interstices of colonial law, and can be seen, in a poignant moment, to abstract the Israeli soldier from this brutal context and render him queerly desirable. The dissemination of *The Cakemaker* by Israel as a queer film on the international art cinema circuit must be understood in the context of Israel self-presentation as a “queer-friendly” state which, as antipinkwashing activists have noted, works to obfuscate Israel's colonial military occupation.<sup>5</sup>

Bisexual critique implores us to consider not only how bisexualities might be formulated against the hegemony of a monosexual symbolic, but also how these structures interact with other hegemonic forces. With *The Cakemaker*, we find a quintessential example of how the conventions of art [p.138] cinema can resist monosexist narrative conventions, resulting in nonteleological representations of desire that enable bisexuality's fuller realization. The film also establishes cogent parallels between compulsory monosexuality and the myths of anti-miscegenation, whose foregrounding of Jewish-gentile relationships suggests the theoretical potential in further considerations of Jewishness in bisexual scholarship. Yet the film's Palestinian absence and pinkwashing of the Israeli occupation also reminds us of the sociopolitical contexts out of which film texts emerge; narratives with bisexual significance are not immune to homonationalist instrumentalization by settler colonial states. Bisexual critique must situate itself at the interstices of these symbolic, identarian, social, and political structures, attending to the multiplicity of these systems with the same critical nuance it affords sexuality.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Shaigetz* and *shiksa* are disparaging Yiddish terms that refer to gentile men and women, respectively, the latter having connotations of “the temptress.”

<sup>2</sup> *Treif* is the Yiddish word for non-kosher food.

<sup>3</sup> The link between *treif* food and *treif* desire has been observed in many films with Jewish themes (Abrams, 2012), including *A Price Above Rubies* (Bender, 1998), *The Governess* (Curtis & Hibbin, 1998), and *A Walk on the Moon* (Cohen et al. 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Here, it is useful to note that Jewish food law is an example of what Jewish scholars have called *khukim*, for which there is no practical reason in observance; rather, they are a test of one's religious devotion.

<sup>5</sup> For further consideration of Israeli pinkwashing, I recommend Puar and Medien's (2018) essay “Thinking Life, Death, and Solidarity through Colonized Palestine” and the resources available on the website of queer Palestinian organization alQaws: <http://www.alqaws.org/siteEn/>

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