

Danielle Kaganov

ALPHA CHANNEL

II

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*Over to Annabella: Oral and other fantasies
(in and out of power)*
John C. Welchman

If there is a leading premise that supplies recent work in media-performance and film of Danielle Kaganov it is that signal aspects of Israeli rightist politics have been organized for more than two decades by an oddball congregation of media managers, producers and acolytes who are fortified by complicated and explicitly, often crudely, visualized fantasies of violence, sexuality, irony and submission. Such formations are, self-evidently, antithetical to the implicitly puritanical, pro-family counter-urban-bohemian mantras of other right-leaning regimes whether in the US, Russia, Hungary or elsewhere — encoded in reflex Blut und Boden xenophobias layered with scrambled enervations of moral rectitude.¹ One aspect of these more standardized constructions is emblemized by Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu's excruciatingly long, one-take video posts tracking of banal routines in his home and office captured by a fixed cam that precisely relinquish not just the allure of what is elsewhere erotically charged but also the jump-cuts and shifting POVs that animate it. As Kaganov's auteur-cum-documentary-style in person 'voice-over' put it, these streams were 'filmed in a very simple medium shot. He was repeating the same message again and again. It was a classic indoctrination on the one hand, but on the other hand, there was something a bit too exposed about them, and you could see some cracks.'²

1. See, Corey Robin, 'Family Values Fascism: From Vichy to Donald Trump,' *Crooked Timber*, August 16, 2015; at <https://crookedtimber.org/2015/08/16/family-values-fascism-from-vichy-to-donald-trump/>
2. Danielle Kaganov, script for *Alpha Channel II* (2023), as presented at HISK [Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten/Higher Institute for Fine Art], Brussels, September 18, 2023; unpublished, np.

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If the narcissistically-tinged rhetorical diminuendo of Netanyahu's video-feeds presents one pole of the rightwing media spectrum in Israeli politics, the other side has been supplied with a language of undeclarative tendentiousness by Senia Waldberg, the 'Russian esoteric geek'³ who achieved notoriety in the earlier 2000s with his blog 'Holy Senia' and by the even more slippery figure of Srulik (a nickname diminutive of 'Israel'), who worked for Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of Israel Beiteinu, a non-religious far right party and then for Netanyahu, before, like Waldberg, going into advertising and marketing. A would-be denizen of the art and club scenes at the turn of the 21st century as well as of the emerging www, Srulik took up with performative camouflage dressing up in a burqa in one instance and in others performing as DJ Cockdonning a yellow, plastic penis-form outfit and joining a gay parade.

He thus games with the two putative extremes of corporeal declaration — the religious-inflected 'prudery' of the burqa and the manic prurience of the all-genital self-display; the former got up to stage a cynically racist, sexually charged misogynistic up-skirt sneak-pic; the later an overt infiltration purposed to compete with and outflank the libidinal theatricality of a LGBTQ+ festival. Srulik's mannered self-consciousness even extended to deflective parodies of anti-right, politically tinged satire when he entered into dialogue with Sascha Baron Cohen's send-up of the 'swollen, testosterone Israeli pro-gun advocate' Colonel Erran Morad in the 'Kinderguardians' segment that concluded the first episode of his 2018 Showtime series Who Is America?⁴

3. Ibid.

4. Sophie Gilbert, 'Who Is Sacha Baron Cohen Satirizing?' *The Atlantic*, July 19, 2018; at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/who-is-sacha-baron-cohen-satirizing/565397/>

Waldberg, we might note, is the PR contact cited by Yahoo. Finance in notice published on March 13, 2023 about the launch of Annabella 'the world's first breast pump to simulate a baby's tongue during the pumping process.'⁵

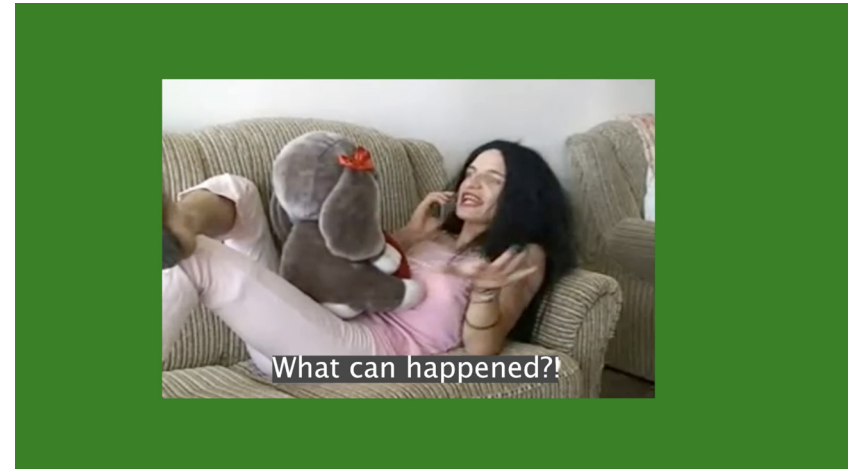
A second condition for Alpha Channel II follows on. For this primal scene predicated on a mutant conjunction of the erotically gratuitous and administrative nostalgia is complicated from the outset by Kaganov's self-insinuation as a citizen, voyeur, desiring subject, and, importantly, as a savvy (and sassy) social and new media creator and producer in her own right. Kaganov activates — and simultaneously questions — her own agency by soliciting first (and unsuccessfully) the larger and more formally ordered campaign and PR operations of Netanyahu and then infiltrating the more informal networks of Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu a context in which her Jewish-Russian roots played quite centrally to the audience and policy strategies of the Soviet-born politician who served as Minister of Finance between 2021 and 2022 and twice as Deputy Prime Minister of Israel (from 2006 to 2008 and 2009 to 2012).

5. See, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/annabella-first-breast-pump-simulate-122700190.html>

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an Israeli krav maga expert

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Kaganov orients herself to her work in a manner that deliberately echoes the issue-evacuated political disingenuity of Srulik: 'The way I portray myself in the work,' she noted in a recent conversation, 'is also like this' — for the most part knowingly. The work of the artist is thus founded as a staged misrepresentation within the campaign-like charade of a rightist media imaginary. Part of this address is clearly 'a fantasy space of prurience' (JCW) that emerged when Kaganov first encountered Waldberg's blog as a Tel Aviv teen. But it is formatted as a fantasy-cum-delusion predicated on a knotty weave of fascination and disgust. Never a purely 'sexual fantasy, [it was] more [like] a power [trip]' driven-on in one dimension by a bid for imagistic and directorial control and in another by fitfully shared compulsions around the production of and encounter with 'excess' (DK).⁶

6. Danielle Kaganov in conversation with John C. Welchman, HISK studio, Brussels, September 19, 2023. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent quotes from Kaganov (DK) and Welchman (JCW) are from this unpublished discussion.

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A third platform on which Alpha Channel II builds is historical, figured around two contiguous blocks of time. The most obvious chronology tracks the some quarter of a century from around 2000 to now, coterminous with the artist's own formation, in which internet-abetted 'new' and social media (and now AI) developed into mass-distributed, omnivorously addictive consciousness-sculpting forces. In her research and thinking however, Kaganov, reaches back another twenty-five years to around 1975, a moment in which commentary — by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Susan Sontag, Gianfranco Sanguinetti, among others — engages with the 'end of the 1960s,' the depredations of consumer culture, the dominion of neoliberalism, and the ghastly perseverance and reformatting of fascist polity. These discussions are both symptomatic and premonitory.

Attending to the signs of fascist continuity, Sontag, for example, points to the adumbration on the cover of a volume under review on SS Regalia of a 'breviary of a sexual fantasy,' predicated on formations of 'innocuousness... practicality'⁷ that clearly anticipate the more anxious and latently deviant leavening of sexual inertia and political aimlessness in the media declamations of Waldberg and Sruлик. Less than a week earlier Pasolini had published his eco-political allegory 'Il vuoto del potere in Italia' (often referred to as 'Where have all the Fireflies Gone?') in the Italian daily Corriere della Sera.⁸ Sublimating the sexual allusion fomented in the image of points of light animating the courtship rituals of fireflies — creatures that were disappearing under the inexorable pressures of pollution

7. Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism' in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage, 1981), p. 100; first published in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XXIJ, No. 1 (February 6, 1975).

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and suburbanization — Pasolini inveighed against the depredations of consumerism, conformity and linguistic and other mono-cultures engendered by the quietly savage continuum that conjoined contemporary Christian-Democrat politics with fascist antecedents. Kaganov has, I think, engaged with the apparent paradox pointed to in one of the most challenging discussions of Pasolini's lament: 'culture is not what protects us from barbarity and what must be protected from barbarity; culture is the very space in which the new barbarity's intelligent forms flourish.'⁹

Images

- 1 Performance at Needcompany, Brussels 2023
- 2 Video still
- 3 Avigdor Lieberman, video still
- 4 Campaign for Avigdor Lieberman, video still
- 5, 6 Video stills with homemade videos by Senia Waldberg
- 7, 8 Video stills
- 9, 10 Campaign for Avigdor Lieberman, video stills
- 11 Video still
- 12 Video still from a support conference of Israel Beiteinu party
- 13 Video still
- 14 Srulik dressed up as a palestinian woman in an Israel Beiteinu campaign
- 15 Srulik dressed up as DJ Cock
- 16, 17 Video still with a homemade video by Senia Waldberg

8. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Il vuoto del potere in Italia' [The Power Vacuum in Italy] *Corriere della Sera*, February 1, 1975; trans. Ruth Pérez-Chaves, *Comparative Cinema*, Vol. VII, No. 12 (2019). The essay was republished in *Scritti corsari* as 'L'articolo delle lucciole.'

9. Alain Brossat, 'De l'inconvénient d'être prophète dans un monde cynique et désenchanté,' *Lignes* 18 (2005): 47–48. Brossat's thought is cited in another useful disquisition on Pasolini's 1975 essay: Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Hells? (On Pier Paolo Pasolini)' in Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); available at <https://my-blackout.com/2022/05/11/georges-didi-huberman-hells-on-pier-paolo-pasolini/>

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