

Benjin Pollock on *The Disappeared*

*What's clear? Nothing is clear in this country. Do you understand? Black is white and white is black, but for you, everything is just black.*

This dialogue, taken from Eli Cohen's Israeli war film *Shtei Etzbaot Mi'tzidon* (1986), is an appropriate starting point to consider Adam Kaplan and Gilad Baram's latest film, which utilises various textures and tones of black and white to revisit another Israeli government-funded feature film, *Hane'elam (The Disappeared)*.

Directed by aspiring filmmaker and military commander Michael Yoray, *Hane'elam* was commissioned in 1998 as a box office successor to *Shtei Etzbaot Mi'Tzidon*, with a purpose to raise public awareness of soldier suicides within the Israel Defence Forces. Despite being made in-house by the IDF and allowed a considerable budget, the film was inexplicably censored just weeks before its release and was never seen by the public.

More than two decades later, Kaplan and Baram reimagine *Hane'elam* through the recollections of those involved in its creation. Far from a nostalgic look back at the ill-fated production process, this striking film offers a considered and thoughtful comment on absence and memory, as well as cinema's often complicated relationship with the military in Israel.

In all but the opening and closing frames, the sound plays out against a black screen, alternating between a digital black image and the analogue black signal of erased VHS tapes. But everything isn't just black or white. Over time, the white subtitles become characters in the film, offering illumination as interviews with the cast and crew are deftly interwoven with script readings. In the darkness, we are left to immerse ourselves in the audio and create our own images relying on the memories – however subjective – of the people who were part of the making of *Hane'elam*. This internal process at once comments on the spectacular power of the moving image and allows us to collaborate with Kaplan and Baram in the act of recovery; one that is felt and heard but remains unseen.

Just as Baram's previous work, *Koudelka: Shooting the Holy Land* (2017), explores how Israeli citizens are taught *not* to see the apparatus of State control which surrounds their everyday lives,

*The Disappeared* forces us as an audience to consider absence as a compelling presence. In doing so, this innovative film uncovers the multiple ways that cinema can be experienced and how censored images continue to live on, despite their official erasure.

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