down. Many of those they interview question their interviewers, criticizing their long absence from Israel, asking when they are coming back for good. This is the great strength of the film: whereas for McGregor his journey and adventure is an opportunity to other an exotic orient; for Borenstein and Weiss it offers a means of questioning their own presumptions, and the documentary affirms its own self-consciousness. But this self-consciousness can also become excessive: such frequent and hesitant discussion of the very motives behind the film and its approach leads to a sense of directionlessness. Although the link with McGregor’s expedition provides a concrete thread for the downstream journey to follow, it is in fact not often foregrounded in the film. There is also a strangeness to the perhaps intentional absence of any dialogue with the Arab/Palestinian citizens. McGregor mentions the Berber Arabs who harry him, but Borenstein and Weiss at no point engage with the transformations that might have occurred to these inhabitants of the region.

The film is aesthetically striking, often providing breathtaking views of a beautiful side of Israel that a Western media discourse (perhaps understandably) rarely shows. Equally, and perhaps befitting the artistic background of the filmmakers, there is an unexpected playfulness in the cinematography. But sometimes this ironic detachment from any conventional sense of narrative or direction can stray too far, a jacuzzi scene in the couple’s hotel room verges on the self-indulgent. The film offers an intriguing and pertinent interrogation of Israel and those who have emigrated from it (a controversial and oft-denigrated group within Israel), and articulates their sense of (post-) nationality, while also managing to effectively stage interviews where the interviewer and interviewee can question each other.

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Behind the registers of a nondescript supermarket in suburban Tel Aviv stand a group of working-class women, mostly of Russian origin. As customers file past, the women nod, peddle specials and scan. When business is scarce, the women talk: of their children, of their pasts, of their pay cheques. So goes Yael Kipper and Ronen Zaretzky’s 2013 documentary Super Women, whose title plays the cliché of the superhero against the distinctly unglamorous profession of supermarket cashier.

Amidst the monotony of intercom announcements and beeping registers, these women share stories of their migration from Russia, families and financial woes. In front of the store, in the lunch room, on cigarette breaks next to the garbage compactor, they speak of desperation, loss and relationships. They joke and laugh. They shed tears. Much of the time, they stare into space, their faces betraying little but boredom. The women curse their job, which pays little and garners no respect,
yet recognize how much they rely on their paltry source of income to keep poverty at
bay and provide for their children. In this environment, there is no place for ambition
or luxury, despite the loudspeaker announcement promoting the discounted Britney
Spears perfume available for purchase.

Winner of the Best Cinematography Award at the Doc Aviv International
Documentary Film Festival in 2013, Super Women’s cinematographic style is subdued,
yet graceful. As the women work and talk, trolleys clatter and slot into one another
and rain patters rhythmically on asphalt. The cashiers gaze ahead as though the
restrictive surrounds of the store were wide, open spaces. The shots are simple and
symmetrical. Almost the entire film takes place within the supermarket confines, and
any natural light is framed by sliding doors and distorted glass. Throughout the film,
cinematography and narrative sit in dialogue; as walls surround the women, they
joke about being ‘monkeys in a zoo’. As the camera lingers on glossy, multinational
advertisements, one woman laments to another ‘I thought I’d have a different life’. Evoking a subtle sense of claustrophobia, there are almost no long shots in the film,
but rather close-ups of tired faces matched with middle-ground glimpses of the
unremarkable workplace.

As the title suggests, men have almost no role to play in Super Women. To be
sure, the store manager punctuates the film’s soundtrack with his robotic recitations
of daily specials via loudspeaker, and his flippant threats of downsizing cast doubt
over the women’s financial stability. One timid yet well-liked cashier is male. Another,
more intriguing, employee, a black man charged with cleaning and stocking the store,
ever utters a word. Yet these men are background figures; for the most part, the film
focuses entirely on the women. The environment is one of feminine friendship, of
commissarion and counsel in which male voices have no place.

If Super Women leaves us somewhat frustrated, longing to know more about
these women, it is nonetheless a delicate reflection on the feminine working class
experience, a work of relevance to feminist and Israeli film scholars alike. Though the
film is undoubtedly a documentary, there are no voice-overs, superimposed text or
talking heads in sight. Instead, Kipper and Zaretkzy offer up a graceful contemplation
on financial despair, familial devotion and what it means to be a woman who has no
one to rely on but herself.

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