nomadic Kazakh drug dealers who shelter themselves in tents of living felt. Garin accepts a taste of their “latest product,” a weightless, translucent pyramid that induces hallucinations when heated—in Garin’s case, of being boiled alive in a cauldron of sunflower oil as the townspeople cheer his helpless cries. “Brilliant!” he enthuses, and buys two for the road.

No idols are spared: Garin is left reeling in an ecstasy that recalls—and mocks—Dostoyevsky at his most mystical. “All people are brothers,” the doctor tells a bewildered Crouper. “What a miracle is life!” he goes on. “The Creator gave us all of this, gave it to us unselfishly…. He doesn’t ask anything of us in return for this sky, these snowflakes, this field!” The rapture lasts until their sleigh gets stuck again (another gully), and the little horses catch scent of wolves and become too frightened to proceed. Garin tries to whip them, slugs Crouper, loses hope. “Our life is nothing but a pile of shit,” he concludes, then breaks out the rubbing alcohol for a drink.

I won’t tell you how the voyage ends, except that they don’t make it to Dolgoye. Tolstoy and Blok would have both been let down. No savior hides in this blizzard, nor any non-narcotic path to redemption. There’s only “the snow, the endless snow,” and Russia yawning on. It’s not a void, exactly; it’s not so pure as that. Wandering off alone, maddened by cold and despair, Garin comes across an enormous snowman, two stories high, with cobblestones for eyes. A frost-packed tree trunk protrudes from its middle, “a huge, erect phallus of snow.”

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The very next year, Netanyahu was elected president Shimon Peres gives way to news footage of the November 4 rally and then to a re-creation of the video that captured the assassination, the latter images jumping without transition into a dramatization of the action inside Rabin’s car, with a bodyguard frantically compressing the prime minister’s chest and blood spurting everywhere. You see very quickly the different materials Gitai will use; you prepare to be wrenched from a helicopter shot to a claustrophobic close-up, from measured conversation to frenzied shouting, from fact to not-quite-fiction. As if this weren’t enough to pull you in, and at the same time

Short of the Messiah
by STUART KLAWANS

It was the most politically effective assassination in modern history. On November 4, 1995, a young man named Yigal Amir, steeped in the messianic zeal of Israel’s religious right and the settler movement, killed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, punctuating with three gunshots the aftermath of a mass rally in Tel Aviv. The central square had overflowed that evening with joyous support of Rabin’s policy of exchanging occupied territories for peace with the Palestinians—a policy that was literally anathema to Amir and others in his camp. In the weeks before the attack, they had chanted furiously in the streets for the death of the “traitor” prime minister, parading with a coffin bearing an effigy of Rabin dressed as a Nazi. You might have imagined, in the days after the murder, that a large portion of the Israeli public would recoil from this virulent rejectionism, which Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party had not merely countenanced but helped to incite. Israel’s internal violence had been exposed; the peace movement that Rabin had animated, and for which he was now a martyr, would surely gain strength. Yet the rejectionists were not rejected.

The very next year, Netanyahu was elected prime minister. The Israeli left slowly recoiled from this vexing rejectionism, which a large portion of the Israeli public would recoil from this virulent rejectionism, which Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party had not merely countenanced but helped to incite. Israel’s internal violence had been exposed; the peace movement that Rabin had animated, and for which he was now a martyr, would surely gain strength. Yet the rejectionists were not rejected.

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knock you back on your heels, Gitai follows this opening sequence with a second prologue, acted out on a gloomy set of uncertain, dreamlike dimensions. Three elder statesmen pore over documents, the actual video of the assassination plays repeatedly on a screen, and two lawyers for the commission of inquiry take testimony from the man who recorded the images. The camera travels slowly across this imagined scene and then glides back again, covering a lot of ground but, like the inquiry itself, getting nowhere.

By now you might already be exhausted—but Gitai is just getting started. Moving into the core of his film, he cuts back and forth between re-enactments of the commission hearings and dramatizations of the lives of Yigal Amir (Yogeve Yefet) and others on the Israeli far right. You see scenes of scruffy young settlers setting up a trailer near Hebron and later being dragged away by Rabin’s army; an ultra-Orthodox group conducting a ceremony to curse Rabin; a psychologist delivering her diagnosis—absolutely unquestionable—that Rabin, God help us, is schizophrenic and utterly cut off from reality; a rabbi, charged with the education of Amir, darkly instructing his pupil to study a passage of the Talmud concerned with justifiable homicide and then draw his own conclusions. Speaking at the screening of Rabin, The Last Day at the 2016 New York Jewish Film Festival, Gitai praised the restraint of his actors’ performances; but in the scenes depicting the right-wingers, his judgment can be understood only within the normative range of Israeli behavior. The subtle actors do everything short of tearing out their hair while hanging their heads on the furniture.

The only performers who seem self-possessed to American eyes play the commissioners heading the inquiry and their legal counsel—and even they have a heated moment, when the lawyers argue that the occupation’s effects are relevant to the investigation, and the commissioners refuse to consider evidence on that subject. Their tight focus on the investigation, is to put that willful blindness into historical context. For that, you have to turn to Dorman and Rudavsky and their Colliding Dreams.

It’s as good a feature-length history of Zionism as we’re likely to get: judicious, sophisticated, attentive to a range of viewpoints (both Israeli and Palestinian, as the title suggests), and free from teleology. Among the interview subjects are a few people—representative types—who believe that God created Zionism to return the Jews to their promised land, or that European colonial powers invented Zionism to dispossess the Palestinians; but the majority of the speakers, like the filmmakers themselves, understand that nobody was in charge of the developments that led to the State of Israel, nor did anyone foresee all of the consequences.

Which is not to say that the historical process, undirected and indeterminate, has relieved the Israelis of moral burdens, or made the Palestinians’ reality more acceptable. Here, though, is how it happened, starting from the time when the majority of the world’s Jews, living as a people apart in multi-ethnic European empires, had no territory they could claim as their own and little hope of being accepted by the nationalist groups rising around them. Even before the advent of Theodor Herzl and the project for a Jewish state, Jews were fleeing to Ottoman Palestine, a place with which they felt an ancestral bond, and where they believed they could throw off their humiliation and subservience like an outworn caftan and emerge as a free people. As Kobi Sharett, the son of a former prime minister, recalls for the camera, an early Zionist delegation reported that the land was like a beautiful young woman, endowed with everything you could desire. The only problem, the report added, was that she was already engaged. Or as the activist and journalist Orly Noy puts it more harshly, the Jews jumped out of a burning building and onto somebody’s head.

You hear from some of the people who’ve been jumped on: academics and political figures including Hanan Ashrawi, Sari Nusseibeh, Khalil Shikaki, Saman Khoury, and Said Zeedani, as well as various unnamed Palestinians interviewed in West Bank cafés. You also hear from Jewish Israelis, such as the historian Gadi Taub, whose forebears came to Palestine despite everything, for the unchallengeable reason that they simply had nowhere else to go.

Where Colliding Dreams excels is in tracing the ideologies, ideals, aspirations, and fantasies that these Jews brought to their place of refuge and developed over time. A fascination with biblical archeology helped their imaginations leap backward over rabbinic Judaism, and centuries of living in Europe, to an ancient time and a mythical kinship with the land. An early period of mingling comfortably with their Arab neighbors, sharing in their communal life and adopting their ways, enabled the new arrivals to ignore that they were starting to push sharecroppers out of their homes. In the words of the political scientist and former Jerusalem deputy mayor Meron Benvenisti, this economic displacement was “peaceful violence” but violence nonetheless. And many of the Zionists, caught up in their struggle for existence, could not permit themselves to see it.

Out of everything that might be learned from Colliding Dreams—and there’s a lot—perhaps the most useful lesson is that Israel’s willful blindness dates back at least a century. You spot it at the source in Dorman and Rudavsky’s film, sense the gathering strength of its current, follow its widening course through generations. And in Gitai’s film, you watch its floodwaters wash away any possibility of a public accounting for the murder of a head of state. Why did the peace movement collapse and the left wither? Because too many Israelis—and not just on the right—were used to ignoring what was in front of their eyes. Gitai, Dorman, and Rudavsky make you look.
the best times he ever knew: when he was a
soldier and killed left and right.

The tale of the pursuit of a runaway slave
(Toma Cuzin)—one of the Roma, commonly
and dismissively called “crows,” who were
held as property by the landowners and
monks of Wallachia—Aferim! is a landscape
film of gorgeous variety, which sends Costan-
din and Ionita riding through mountains,
fields, and forests, and a folkloric rump of
increasingly grisly tone. The terrain that
Costandin and Ionita must negotiate is an
obstacle course of stony roads and impass-
able waterways, the social structure a maze
of feudal possessions, and the mentalities a
poisonous web spun of spite and ignorance.
At first, these low thoughts are so outlandish,
and their thinkers so outspoken, that you can
laugh at them, as when a priest—one of the
film’s better-educated characters—improves
Costandin’s journey by cataloging for him
the different inherent vices of all the peoples
of Europe. By the time you get to a market,
where the bounty hunters catch the crudest
Punch and Judy show you’ve ever seen, the
pervasive brutality is no longer so funny.

At the climax, when the slave Carfin falls
back into his owner’s hands, the violence
becomes unspeakable and yet is accepted by
everyone—except, it seems, by Costandin,
who voices the most tentative and subservient
of demurrals before going along like the rest.

And yet, it’s not the bloodshed that makes
the conclusion of Aferim! so horrifying. It’s
the helpfulness of one of Carfin’s fellow
slaves, who steps forward to offer the land-
owner a better tool for his job. Costandin
has, as it turns out, the gentlest conscience
in the movie.

In Our Orbit
Less Royal

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

No literary genre is more ephemeral
than art criticism. Mostly that’s a
blessing, but sometimes writing
of genuine value disappears from
view. The 1960s and ’70s were years
of tremendous vitality for American art
criticism, as they were for American art.
Yet today, when writers mention the
debates of those days, they often focus on a
handful of voices: Donald Judd, Michael
Fried, Rosalind Krauss, maybe some late
grousings from Clement Greenberg as
his pen was running dry. The criticism
of many others seems to have been un
justly forgotten. Among them I would have
counted, until recently, Lawrence Alloway,
who wrote regularly for this magazine be
between 1968 and 1981. To me, he remains
the great intellectual resource among the
art writers of that period, so I am happy
to point out that a small revival of interest
in his work is under way—an essay here,
a conference there, and now a useful col
lection of scholarly papers, Lawrence Al
loway: Critic and Curator (Getty Research
Institute; $40), edited by Lucy Bradnock,
Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody.

Many of the essays are based on archival
research in the Alloway papers housed at
the Getty Research Institute, where there
is clearly a lot of fascinating unpublished
material. They cover topics ranging from
Alloway’s evolving views of museums to his
ideas on the relationship between art and
photography; from his love of movies (not
“film” or “cinema”) and fascination with
science fiction to his mutually enriching
exchange of ideas with his fellow sci-fi fan, the
artist Robert Smithson. I particularly appr
ciated Michael Lobel’s essay on Alloway as cu
urator and his “global turn”; Jennifer Mundy’s
account of his art-criticism course at SUNY
Stony Brook; and Julia Bryan-Wilson’s ex
ploration of his “self-reflexive” approach to
criticizing the institutions of which he was a
part. But important topics are missing here,
including Alloway’s work as a critic in the
years when he was most active writing for The
Nation, and also the impact of his marriage to
the painter Sylvia Sleigh. It must have been in
part thanks to her that Alloway became one of
the first male critics to make a point of writing
about women artists, and especially those
who were feminists.

The book leaves me hungry for a full-
scale intellectual biography. Born in the Lon
don suburb of Wimbledon, in 1926, Alloway
became a lecturer at the National Gallery
(without having earned a college degree), then
joined the Independent Group, an association
of artists, designers, and intellectuals who
were responsible for a series of groundbreaking
exhibitions at London’s Institute of Con
temporary Arts. He first visited the United
States in 1958 and soon resolved to move there;
a teaching job at Bennington College
made that possible in 1961. He wrote, cu
rated, lectured, and taught widely until 1981,
when a neurological disorder made it difficult
for him to continue. He died in 1990.

It was during his London period that
Alloway coined the term “Pop art.” He was
referring not—as critics later would—to the
work of painters and sculptors who borrow
the imagery of mass culture, but rather to the
actual products of commercial culture, what
Clement Greenberg dubbed “kitsch” and
Theodor Adorno scorned as “the culture in
industry.” Alloway never conceived of cultures
in opposition or in a hierarchy; for him, as he
later put it, “Unique oil paintings and highly
personal poems as well as mass-distributed
films and group-aimed magazines can be
placed within a continuum.” He wrote
about “artists as consumers” and wanted
“an approach that does not depend…on the
exclusion of most of the symbols that
people live by.” In practice, this meant
taking a calmly quasi-sociological view of
art as one of many information systems at
work in the world, itself capable of housing
many different, seemingly incompatible
tendencies. He sought a criticism that
would be “less royal”; that is, less prone
to unsupported authoritative pronounce
ments based on highly partial narratives of
historical development (or what he called
“drastic simplificatory strategies to reduce
the hectic scene to congruence”). Above
all, he always wrote with genuine curiosity
and an eye for quality.

Unlike critics who were concerned with
identifying art’s one true path into the fu
ture, Alloway could write with equal perspi
cacity and empathy about a Pop artist like
Roy Lichtenstein, an Abstract Expression
ist like Norman Bluhm, a realist like Isabel
Bishop, a minimalist like Agnes Martin, and
a conceptualist like Sol LeWitt. Moreover,
he could take a similarly sympathetic criti
cial stance toward the functioning of institu
tions like the Venice Biennale—where he
identified the importance of what we’ve
since learned to call “globalization”—as
well as art magazines, commercial and co
operative galleries, and museums. He cel
brated the ever-widening reach of culture
and the growth of its audience to include
all classes and conditions of people—and
therefore many categories of taste. Never a
detached observer, he was always opinion
ated. As he wrote of art criticism in general:
“The individuality of the critic, not the
universal handiness of his ideas, is a real
point of value.”