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Israel in audio/visual culture: An (non-obvious) introduction

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Zionism emerged as a political and cultural movement, the main goal of which was to realize the everlasting quest of Jews to return to Zion, a quest expressed in Biblical texts and in daily prayers throughout Jewish history. The Zionist movement was inspired by the 19th century European wave of national aspirations and was fueled by disenchantment from the promises of modern emancipation that failed to end anti-Semitic persecutions and pogroms. The waves of Zionist immigrations from late 19th century to the 1930s lay the foundations for the Jewish state, with agricultural and urban settlements like the Kibbutzim, or the "first Hebrew city" Tel Aviv, social and political institutions, defense forces of underground organizations, along with impressive body of original cultural and artistic works that revived the Biblical Hebrew language. Zionist leaders had also engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to achieve international recognition for the quest of Jewish independence in the Land of Israel. In 1920, the League of Nations sanctioned a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1947, the United Nations decided on the establishment of a Jewish state, along with an Arab state in Palestine. Whereas the Arabs rejected the UN partition plan, the Zionist leadership declared the creation of Israel in May 1948, a move followed by diplomatic recognition from numerous countries, led by the USA and the USSR. In contrast, the declaration of independence was immediately followed with invasion by the armies of neighboring Arab states, whose stated goal was to destroy the new state and "throw the Jews to the sea." Against all odds, the Israelis won in their war of independence.

Since its establishment, the young state of Israel has gained outstanding achievements. The list of Israel's accomplishments since statehood is impressive, and possibly unparalleled, both within the framework of Jewish history, and in the context of the modern world in the second half of the 20th century. In its first decade, the small population of the new-born state (600,000) absorbed more than one million new immigrants, helpless refugees from Arab countries and Holocaust survivors who arrived without property and with no knowledge of Hebrew, the country's language. The new immigrants were almost

immediately integrated into the vibrant society and stable democracy of the young state. Israel also developed a strong army that defended its threatened borders, scoring a brilliant victory in 1967 against its enemies, who planned another attempt to destroy the Jewish state. In less than a week, in the so-called Six Day War, Israel gained control of the Sinai peninsula, following the defeat of the Egyptian army; the Golan Heights, after defeating the Syrian army; and Judea and Samaria, which is also known as the West Bank of the Kingdom of Jordan. In its first two decades of existence, Israel scored several significant scientific achievements, including the cultivation of a nuclear program, launching a rocket into space, and developing agricultural methods that were exported to developing nations in Africa and Asia by teams of Israeli advisors. Israel's development in the last fifty years has placed her in the top ten countries in the world in many categories, including the 8th most powerful behind the United States, Russia, China, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Japan, in that order.

Israeli culture is also present on the world stage, thanks to the significant contributions of Israeli artists to the global art scene. To cite a few recent examples, in the areas of film and television, the Israeli tv series *Shtisel* (which premiered in 2013), about the daily life, social problems and family dramas of orthodox Jews in religious neighborhoods, and is distributed by the online streaming service Netflix, has gained universal popularity; Israeli films have garnered prestigious awards in international film festivals – for example *Synonyms* by Nadav Lapid won first prize (the Golden Bear Award) in the Berlin International Film Festival (2019), and the 2019 Oscar award in the category of Best Live Action Short was given to Israeli filmmaker Guy Nattiv for his short film *Skin*.

Israel is present on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube in diverse texts, posts, messages, films, signs, ranging from video games (*Raid Gaza!* [Marcus Richert, 2008], and *Save Israel* [Ami Hanya Games, 2009]) to popular songs. Neta Barzilai's TOY, winner of the 2018 Eurovision song contest, played more than 111 million times, and Asaf Avidan's personal *Reckoning song* played more than 24 million times on YouTube. Avidan's lyrics are in English, expressing universal sentiments: "One day baby, we'll be old/ Oh baby, we'll be old/ And think about the stories that/ we could've told// Little me and little you/ Kept doing all the things they do/ They never really think it through/ Like I can never think you're true". On August 2nd, 2016, Facebook featured a short cartoon shared inter alia by the profile *Europeans Against Antisemitism*. There are three symbolic elements in this short film: Europe as a castle, Israel as a superhero and ISIS as a big stone. The big stone threatens to destroy the castle, but it is stopped by the superhero, in spite of the fact that the citizens of the castle are anti-Semites who call to "boycott Israel", and shoot arrows at the superhero's back. This short film was on Facebook only between June 1st and August 2nd, 2016, but was viewed more than 1 million times.

At the same time, Israel suffers continuously from animosity and threats of destruction. The old forms of antisemitism that led to the Holocaust have been overshadowed by a new form of anti-Zionist antisemitism, cultivated by several Arab states and Iran, and fueled by radical progressives and neo-Nazis in western countries.

In the first seventy years of Zionism, the new settlers developed a distinct culture, reviving the Hebrew language and cultivating a national identity based on collective historical memory and the shared national aspiration to achieve a sovereign Jewish state. Intellectuals, literati and artists have always played a decisive role in fashioning the historical fate of the Jewish people, and they had a crucial role in the formative years of Zionism and the critical years leading to the establishment of the Jewish state. In the history of modern Zionism, poets, novelists, thinkers and artists had a critical role in the articulation and the formation of new national identity based on shared history and tradition, the distinct characteristics of local sights, smells and sounds, and a vision of an independent Jewish state with high moral standards. In Israel today, art is an element of the entire fabric of life, presenting complex situations that verge on tragic contradictions, expressing the range of opinions of all segments of the population, and formulating the memories and dreams, hopes and fears, aspirations and inhibitions of the society as a whole.

Curiously, despite evident successes and national achievements, in the last seventy years of Israeli independence, new voices of critical reflections gradually replaced the cultural engagement with the nation-building project. The continuous struggle with threats of destruction and the rise of vicious anti-Zionism challenge the Zionist premise that altering Jewish history from diasporic existence to national independence will end antisemitism. The conflict with the Palestinian Arabs poses new threats of terrorism to Israeli civilians and serious moral dilemmas associated with the control of territories without peace or political agreement. The haunting shadows of the Holocaust trigger traumatic symptoms, and social problems of conflicting group identities challenge national unity.

In the context of the proliferation of digital media and global communications, dominated by commercial interests and numerous forces of political expressions, how can one find the "text" which might mold a generation's thinking about Israel? One potential answer is the significant works of audio-visual culture, which becomes the "generator" of contemporary myths. The cliché says a picture is worth a thousand words, and for us, the editors of this volume, audio-visual culture is treated as the multilayered system functioning as the "bloodstream" of discourses. Israel in audio/visual culture is actually a process full of questions, investigations, and a will for knowledge and dialogue.

There are three main parts of this volume. The main subject of the issue – *Israel in audio/visual culture* – is presented in seven articles.

Our interdisciplinary volume reveals the dynamics of understanding of Israel presented in meanings shaped and formed by diverse forms of communication, from traditional to digital and to biological. The second part is a Gallery where you can see the images created by Adi Nes, one of the most original Israeli photographers. The third part – Varia – consists of six articles. Two of them are in English and four are in Polish. These original articles become a subtle intellectual "report" from the research focused on film studies in general.

Israel in audio/visual culture

In the article entitled *Synagogue Paintings as Indicating a Developing Conception of National Redemption*, Zvi Orgad compares the interior paintings of two synagogues in the Naḥlaot neighborhood in Jerusalem. Zvi Orgad notes that 50 years elapsed between the adornment of the two synagogues and demonstrates that the differences in the interior paintings reflect the development of a Jewish concept of national redemption. The actual changes in religious representations that are associated with national concepts also reveal the dichotomy and tensions between *sacrum* and *profanum* shared by the creative artists and the devoted congregants.

While Zvi Orgad shows a national concept from the visual perspective of the interior painting in the two synagogues, Ilan Avisar analyzes the changes in thinking about nationalism shaped by a popular culture "aware of" its limits and possibilities.

Ilan Avisar's paper entitled *The National and the Popular in Israeli Cinema* presents the articulation of national consciousness and the development of Israeli films as a national cinema. The paper notes the early stages of cinema development in the Zionist period and the commitment to the nation building project. In the 1980s, however, Israeli films were dominated by sceptical attitudes towards national values, expressing radical visions criticizing Israel political behavior. The critical stance, ironically facilitated by public funding for these films, led to some international awards in Europe mostly, but have alienated Israeli movie-goers. By the turn of the century a number of significant Israeli films, featuring both the problems and the achievements of the national challenges and not marked by radical political criticism, became popular with Israeli viewers, restoring the connection between Israeli films and their local audience and engendering a more positive discourse about national identity.

Carrie Bettel's article entitled *The Success of Adi Nes's Fictional Photographic Portraits: Figures of Alterity and the Utilization of Memories in Visual Self-Portraiture* discusses images from three series – "Boys" (2000), "Soldiers" (1994–2000) and "Prisoners" (2000). Around 1659, Rembrandt painted *Jacob wrestling with the God*. The angel holds Jacob with two hands. One hand attracts Jacob, the second hand repels him. Carrie Bettel's article shows how this wrestling functions in a secular world – how Adi Nes's images display the drama of attraction and rejection in Israeli society. Nes's photographs demonstrate the ways in

which he feels like an outsider in Israel, as both a member of the Sephardic community and as a homosexual. Nes uses the figures of alterity by projecting himself into his images with the use of models in iconic positions and situations. The viewer may question the referentiality, or truthfulness, of each image but the artistic charge conveys the tension between the historical weight and the contemporary reality in Israel.

Marek Hendrykowski's paper *Reality as a Feeling – a Feeling as Reality. On Joseph Cedar's film, "Footnote"* is devoted to the analysis and interpretation of one remarkable film about academic intrigues and family conflicts. *Footnote* is treated as an image of contemporary intelligentsia understood in two complementary ways of the sociological and cultural context of academic life. Addressing the needs, drives, imaginations and dreams of academic activities, the author of this paper claims that the restoration of the proper measure of the analyzed issues concerns the sphere of values. This restoration is essentially cathartic. It means a symbolic agreement and the consent of the author of the film and his viewer to the mutual conviction that, in addition to what is current, scholars erect lifelong buildings of monumental importance to the life of the community, of which they are a distinguished particle.

Yael Ben-Moshe and Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann's *Terror Films: The Socio-Cultural Reconstruction of Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema* examines images of trauma in contemporary Israeli cinema during and after the Second Intifada (2000–2005). The authors discuss several low-budget films that feature terrorist violence in diverse social contexts. Coping with trauma resulting from a terrorist attack remains, however, a subjective matter of a socially problematic, complex reality. It integrates parallel, often competing, multidirectional elements, which not only affect but also question the cultural repertoire of commemoration and representation from a subjective – fragile – point of view. Their paper also analyzes two notable Israeli war movies, *Beaufort* and *Waltz with Bashir*, in which war memories seem to indirectly reference and replace more recent but non-expressible experiences with suicide terrorism. The authors conclude: "As a subjective experience, the films express the post-traumatic suffering personified in mentally and emotionally isolated characters within a wounded collective environment and tradition that is powerless to help them. However, simultaneously, they seek for an experiential space beyond private mourning and the contested public sphere that acknowledges both the personal and the collective trauma of terrorism."

The last two papers of this part of the volume refer to the connections between art and national identity. Ruth Dorot analyses how the land of Israel is painted by diverse artists and how art becomes a medium of contemporary forms of being, a medium of identity and memory where imagination and sensual experience are mediated by colours and styles of painting. Sylwia Szykowna's *Art as a laboratory – Guy Ben-Ary's work* focuses on an international Israeli artist in the new field of Bio Art.

Based on the premises that art cannot exist without medium built inter alia on tissue engineering, electrophysiology, microscopy and other biological techniques, Szykowna analyzes the distinct contribution of Guy Ben-Ari to bio art. The medium in both articles connects two different perspectives – first, being an Israeli artist in the land of Israel, and second, being an Israeli artist outside the land of Israel.

Ruth Dorot's article entitled *Mosaic of Israel's Landscapes as an Expression of Geographical, Cultural, and Religious Diversity* features twelve landscape paintings created by Ludwig Blum, Michael Kovner, Baruch Nachshon, Reuven Rubin, Mordechai Ardon, Nachum Guttman, Oded Feingersh, Ron Gang, Larisa Bersky, Marcel Janco, Mordechai Levanon, and Pamela Sharni. The land of Israel in these paintings functions as a medium full of images and imaginations, which condense thinking about Israel in the context of geographical, historical and symbolic forms of being. Israel is shown in the paintings from the country's most southern point to the most northern one. The authors of the paintings represent diverse styles, although their vision of the land is rooted in the dichotomy between the ancient history of Israel and the contemporary state. The idea that the land functions as a medium is highly intriguing in the context of the meanings, symbols, and imaginings of national culture.

Sylwia Szykowna's article entitled *Art as a laboratory – Guy Ben-Ary's work* deals with *bio art* works of Israeli artists who provokes critical thinking about the place and role of humans in the contemporary world. The ontology of audio/visual medium changes with understanding the limits of reality. Guy Ben-Ary is an artist who looks for the best laboratory where he can study reality with no references to his Israeli identity, suggesting, in the words of the author, that "being Israeli is an open ontology" (Sylwia Szykowna).

We choose articles for this issue in which Israel was shown in dynamic ways and far from stereotypical (and instrumental) perspectives. This interdisciplinary volume reflects present changes in thinking about humanities in general. Till the second part of the 20th century, we used to think that being a humanist meant being a person whose knowledge was like a set of data closed and controlled by diverse discourses. One of the worst consequences of this attitude was the lack of transgressive power of knowledge. People who "had" knowledge could not be understood by all of these people who knew "less" than them. That is why stereotypes and ignorance functioned like vampires of rationality in daily life. Nowadays, the humanities are the forms of critical thinking and critical forms of intellectual conversion from ignorance into dialogue built on knowledge; before the paradigm shift in the humanities, we could observe mainly a monologue of knowledge (which is why knowledge was treated instrumentally, for example, in the totalitarian systems) imposed by some authority. New digital media and the changes in their ontologies of transmission knowledge (i.e.: social networks, diverse sources of information, proliferation of discourses)

among people imply one of the causes of the paradigm shift. Indeed the new vistas of academic studies have also generated numerous devious works that seek to delegitimize Israel with unabashed animosity against the Jewish state. In the present volume, the audio/visual texts in this context convey the complexities of modern communications, implying openness for new forms of thinking and talking, and being open for the factuality and meaning of Israel in diverse dimensions of our common existence.

The second part of the volume entitled *Author Gallery*, present images created by Adi Nes. His photographs address specific Israeli moments, situations, and characters in forms and details that combine national reflections and universal meanings, creating expressive works that have gained him international recognition as one of the most distinguished artist photographers of the 21st century.

Author Gallery

There are six articles in this part of the volume. Two of them are in English and four are in Polish. The flexibility of this part of the journal implies articles where the reader can find original and subtle intellectual "reports" from the research focused on film studies in general. This part of the volume does not refer to the main issue of the volume. All of these six texts present dynamic perspectives in thinking about cinema, in which the reader can find reflection built on different methodologies: cognitive science, the history of cinema, analysis and interpretation of films.

Varia

Hanna Przybysz wrote the article entitled *An artist treated as an unconscious neurobiologist in the context of cognitive film studies: Hugo Münsterberg and Lev Kuleshov (Artysta jako nieświadomy neurobiolog. Filmoznawczo-neurokognitywistyczna analiza myśli Hugo Münsterberga i Lwa Kuleszowa).* The author of this article – concerning Hugo Münsterberg's and Lev Kuleshov's creativity – shows that great artists are unconscious neurobiologists even when there was no knowledge about neurobiology, cognitive psychology and cognitive science. Hugo Münsterberg and Lev Kuleshov are treated by Hanna Przybysz as the two pioneers of pre-cognitive research and reflection in film studies. It is obvious that cinema is shaped by human perception and that human perception is stimulated by cinema, but the author of the article shows, via the present state of research in cognitive science, the pioneering visions and achievements of these two creators who nowadays are almost forgotten.

Nikica Gilić wrote the article entitled *Modernism and Auteurial Cinema in Croatia in the 1960s (Modernizm a film autorski lat sześćdziesiątych w Chorwacji)* about a peculiar moment in the history of Cinema in Croatia. The author considers the production modes of the era in Croatia and Yugoslavia, as well as some elements of the poetics of cinematic modernism. Nikica Gilić describes modernism and auteurial *cinema* through interpreting Branko Ivanda's feature debut *Gravity (Gravitacija).*

Tomasz Kłys' article *Fiancées and widows: women's encounters with death in the silent films of Fritz Lang* shows the interpretative potential of the psychoanalytic concepts of melancholy and the mourning "not-worked-out" by the persons who lost their loved ones. The author shows the will of crossing the limits of death by characters determined by their love. Tomasz Kłys shows the dichotomy between Eros and Thanatos, focusing on the interpretation of two films: *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921) and *The Nibelungs* (*Die Nibelungen*, 1924).

Artur Borowiecki's paper entitled *Neo series, premium series or post soap opera? In looking for characteristics of the new generation TV series* (*Neoserial, serial premium czy post soap opera? W poszukiwaniu wyznaczników dla seriali nowej generacji*) is a reconstruction of the poetics of new generation TV series in the context of the narrative complexity. The author of the article says that the modern television series are the products of quality television. To be able to explain the peculiarity of the poetics of this genre of series, Artur Borowiecki focused on the following example: the Polish crime TV series *Blinded By The Lights* (*Ślepnąc od świateł*, 2018).

Urszula Tes' paper entitled *Human on Fire as a Gesture of Self-offering in Polish Documentary Films* refers to the act of self-immolation as an example of the strongest act of personal protest during communist times. The author writes about two documentaries: Maciej Drygas' *Hear My Cry* presents the story of Ryszard Siwiec, who self-immolated in 1968, and Jarosław Mańka's and Maciej Grabys' *Holy Fire*, which presents the story of Walenty Badylak, who self-immolated in March of 1980. Urszula Tes' article is an analysis in which the author invokes historic and cultural contexts, conducting a multifaceted interpretation of self-immolation act and discussing the complex imagery included in these two documentaries.

Kamila Kulessa's article entitled *Disembodied body in Carlos Saura's 'Cría Cuervos' (Raise ravens)* (*Odcieleśnione ciało w filmie* Nakarmić kruki *Carlosa Saury)* is an analysis of Carlos Saura's *Cria Cuervos* (*Raise ravens*, 1976). The author focuses on the poetics of the film in the context of temporal and spatial structures. Kamila Kulessa explores the dimensions of bodily presence, mainly the representation of spectral body in cinematic image.

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