

Independent Content Creators Online:

A Paradigm Shift in Film Aesthetic

and Production, the Case of Israel



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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant degree committee.

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Abstract

The emergence of Web 2.0¹, along with online video platforms, and the widespread of social networks, have enabled new forms of creation where content makers no longer need a reputation, funding, broadcasting apparatuses, marketing deals, or distribution systems to reach their audiences. The ability to dispense with mediators upends the traditional hierarchy and leads to what is often perceived as a pluralistic free market where artists connect directly with the viewers, whose approval/disapproval impacts straightforwardly their careers. The revolution does not have to do with mere logistics. The new abilities freed the creators from the need to conform to the norms in aspects such as storytelling, genre, humor, and aesthetics. The artistic output generated by these new technologies has revolutionized typical strategies in the substructure of the entertainment industry and imposed radical changes on the cultural and social superstructure. Today we may be witnessing no less than a fundamental paradigm shift in the notion of art itself.

In Israel, which stands at the center of this research, such names as Sugar Zaza, Bne-El, Nitza and Lechem, Dudu Faruk, Messiah, Arutz Hakibud, and Tutit have enjoyed a broad loyal fan base and garnered the enthusiastic attention of the traditional media. After they achieved their fame online, in the last few years, this first generation of online content creators has made a transition to prime-time television and cinema. Their careers have a strong inseparable connection to social networks, especially Facebook, which has been the most popular one in Israel². A few years before the age of social networks, there have already been a handful of successful artists who started their careers by creating on and for the internet. However, unlike them, the Facebook-launched creators form a consolidated group. They share distinct style, aesthetic,

¹ "Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform". Web 2.0 creates an enhanced interactive experience, where the users are not just passive readers. Some of the Web 2.0 key principles are the user as contributor; participation instead of publishing; rich user experience (Needleman 2007). Nowadays, there is a discourse around the next phase, Web 3.0, whose applications "run on blockchains, decentralized organizations of many shared hubs (servers), or a cross breed of the two that comprises a crypto-financial protocol" (Gupta and Singh n.d.). However, this definition is still less of a consensus than Web 2.0. It is also still more of a still unrealized potential than a common reality – "The future is all about Artificial Intelligence, and this is what web 3.0 focuses". At the time of the writing of this dissertation, Web 3.0 is less relevant for our case studies, an so I chose to leave it out of this discussion.

² (Ben Shushan 2022); (Israel Internet Association 2015).

humor, and artistic agenda. Therefore, their works can even be seen as a new digital wave. There is another significant difference - the earlier individuals who began their careers on the web were spotted by talent agents from traditional media that sponsored and assisted them to reach the mainstream. However, the independent creators from the social networks era became well known among the general public by themselves, through organic viral spread, before traditional platforms opened their gates to them. Now that their path to glory has reached an embrace by mainstream culture, the time is right to examine this phenomenon in depth.

In this dissertation, a thorough analysis of prominent works by various new media creators will expose significant changes in culture in general and Israeli culture specifically. It will shed light on a new generation whose groundbreaking works have not yet received scholarly attention, despite proving themselves as highly influential. It will present and explain how they are reforming and designing the aesthetics, business models, and typical themes of moving images. It will identify how they set an alternative to traditional media, but also where they fail to do so. This examination enables to deduce substantial socio-anthropological processes which Israel has been going through in the 21st century, and how they manifest in the arts. It might even allow to speculate more precisely about the consequences for the industry and the culture in general.

I claim that there is a strong connection between youth culture, specifically of the Millennials (Generation Y, who were born in the 1980s-1990s), and the unique characteristics of the first generation of independent online content creators in Israel. Through an in-depth analysis of several case studies, I will articulate the fresh concepts that make these examples stand out. I will highlight the brilliant innovations that led to their success, but I will also place warning signs around obstacles and mistakes that failed them. I will present and analyze the artistic developments in these creations. This pioneering research aspires to provide the next generation of content creators and scholars with valuable knowledge and set a framework for future researchers and practitioners.

Methodologies

This research is conducted within the disciplines of film studies, (new) media studies, and cultural studies. In the following chapters, I examine web videos, and perform a theoretical, ideological, and artistic analysis of them, while paying close attention to the aesthetic and the cinematic expressive means. Under the contemporary times of media convergence, in which the boundaries between different media are blurred, I take an interdisciplinary approach. My variety of sources includes research and theories about different aspects of the World Wide Web, from digital images to online culture, and these are supplemented by research and theories of film and television.

Each chapter focuses on a different case study that delves into a different angle of the phenomenon I examine. The first chapter uses theories of temporality, sociology, and humor. The second chapter deals with issues of ontology and uses theories of genre (specifically comedy and its sub-genres), amateur filmmaking, and independent filmmaking. The third chapter relates to star studies and examines issues of web-celebrities, public persona, and fame/notoriety. In addition, it deals with issues of race and ethnicity.

A sociological approach serves as a significant foundation throughout this dissertation. I claim that Generation Y's unique characteristics and innovative ideas are strongly expressed in their digital works, more than in any other media. Although many works of art are products of their times and can be grouped with other pieces from the same period under a generational perspective, the Millennial case seems to stand out. In Gen-Y's works the implementation of generational attributes is arguably less covert, and it is more symbiotic with contemporary artistic technologies than in other generations. The analysis will expose and sketch the attributes and the values of the Millennials, 'children of the digital age'. Even though social media has been prospering all over the world, the exceptional conditions of Israeli society and Hebrew culture make the local content creators unique, as will be shown. My fulcrum for this aspect of the analysis is Tamar Almog and Oz Almog's comprehensive research about Israeli Millennials³. I emphasize ideological readings of the digital content, and how it correlates with the dominant values in the Israeli-Zionist society.

³ (Almog and Almog 2019).

At the same time, the globality of the internet allows to draw universal conclusions about web creation that can be useful for other scholars in the field. Isabelle McNeill notes that digital texts enable to connect to the global space of the web and social media. According to her, "audiovisual culture circulates and traverses us all, as we navigate our lives' virtual and physical spaces". Hence, when digital texts appear within other media (or when they appear in our everyday lives) they destabilize local specificity and diegetic space. "In this way the film makes an intervention not only into a local and national imaginary but, at the same time, into a global, digital consumer culture"⁴.

Throughout the dissertation, I add a comparative angle, that looks into the influences and discrepancies between the Israeli case and digital content from other countries. This transnational discussion enables to address questions such as do Israeli web videos have more in common with traditional Israeli film and television or with contemporary foreign new media hits? Can the Millennial "digital natives" shed their national identity and form a web-indigenous community? This critical survey of reciprocal international relationships also poses challenges to common perceptions about the web's globalized unity.

I will not deny that there are limitations in this research, in that almost all the foreign examples that are used are from English-speaking countries, mostly the US. English-speaking media, and the Hollywood industry, are still the most dominant powers in the global cultural field. "The scale and scope of American cultural transmissions are so vast that the terms globalization and Americanization are often used interchangeably"⁵. The intention in choosing these foreign examples is to pick key texts that are widely known. Most foreign content that Israeli viewers are exposed to on TV (whether passively, or actively in Over-the-Top media services), and most films that are distributed in Israeli cinemas are in English. In addition, the foreign examples that were chosen had already been established by scholars as significant, valuable, and influential. I hope that scholars with expertise in other diverse cultures and languages will carry on and widen the comparative analysis, especially Israel's neighbors in the Middle East, and other parts of Asia.

⁴ (McNeill 2018, 327-328).

⁵ (Shifman, Levy and Thelwall 2014, 729).

It is important to mention that the research on Israeli digital media is still in a very early stage. Ever since the internet revolution, the place that the web occupies in the media and film world has been exponentially expanding, yet the writing on the subject in Hebrew is severely lacking. Many important aspects have yet to be investigated. Therefore, some of the goals of this dissertation are to create a solid infrastructure, to arouse discussion, and to offer directions for future research.

When focusing on the part of digital media that is closer to cinematic outputs, such as web series, the lacuna appears to be greater still. The research about Israeli creations so far tended to focus on niche groups. The most notable example, that has already been the subject of several papers by different scholars⁶, is the web videos produced by the gay party line *Arisa* (created by Omer Tobi and Yotam Pappo). The other few examples also appear to emphasize the sectorial identity of the content makers, like web series made by and for queers⁷, or religious women⁸. However, the kind of content that is at the center of this dissertation is mainstream. It appeals to the masses⁹ and has a high profile. The videos that are discussed here are online hits. They turned into viral phenomena and achieved impressively high viewing numbers. They were covered by leading national media (newspapers, TV news, TV magazines, radio, news websites, and portals). Some of them raised a lot more interest than an average Israeli feature film or TV series, despite having a significantly smaller budget and fewer resources.

Due to the lack of local scholarly works on the subject, in addition to the academic resources I also use journalistic resources throughout this research. This is also important since the traditional media took a big part in cultivating the buzz around these innovative pop culture artifacts and in exposing them to Israelis from all ages and sectors.

Another important secondary source in this case is the online discourse. Whether it is in the comment section pinned to a YouTube video, on the creators' social

⁶ (Hagin and Yosef 2021) ; (Levon and Gafter 2019); (Milani, et al. 2018); (Yosef 2022).

⁷ (Greenberg 2020).

⁸ (Aharoni 2022).

⁹ By "masses" I mean it is popular by the vast majority out of those who consume Hebrew popular culture. Some sectors in Israel, like orthodox Jews or Arabs, tend to stay out of the local cultural scene. Moreover, creative web content is much more popular by relatively young viewers, who tend to consume online entertainment more than their parents and grandparents.

media profiles, or in fans' group chats. The immediate feedback and constant dialogue with the viewers are important features of Web 2.0 and therefore should be taken into consideration.

Even though this dissertation belongs to the faculties of humanities and arts, the discussion will not overlook the fact that 'show business' is indeed business and part of a capitalist commercial system. Even independent content creators almost always operate within platforms that are controlled by conglomerates in an enormous global industry. I will also address some business and financial aspects of these new forms of content production, distribution, marketing, and consumption¹⁰.

The Corpus

Hundreds of hours are uploaded to YouTube every minute, a few dozen years' worth of video every day¹¹. YouTube is only one video platform out of many (other popular examples are Vimeo and Daily Motion). An immense number of content creators, from occasional amateurs to professional filmmakers, produce videos all over the world, in budgets that range from zero to millions of dollars. The internet, as the cliché says, is a wide and deep ocean of content. If the internet is an ocean, then even in the relatively small puddle of content made by and for Hebrew speakers, there is still plenty of innovative and intriguing content that is worthy of scholarly attention. Determining which videos and creators to foreground in this dissertation was not a simple task.

The broad and vague term online content can mean many things. I wish to define what kind of online content is relevant for this discussion. Narrowing it down to visual online content is still not enough, since this definition includes, for example, comics, caricatures, memes, and photoshopped images. A definition like moving images online also remains too broad, since it includes GIFs or images edited with Instagram's 'boomerang' effect. This research, as said, is conducted within the frame of film studies and new media studies. Therefore, my interest is in digital creations which are inspired by traditional filmmaking. Content that has cinematic, aesthetic, and artistic values¹².

¹⁰ See for example (Bennett and Strange 2015); (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013).

¹¹ (Ceci 2022); (Christian 2018, 55).

¹² I am aware of the vagueness, flexibility, and room for subjective interpretation in these definitions, and I will develop this point further in the second chapter.

Furthermore, since I focus on mainstream and popular creations, it also means that the kind of content that is relevant is closer to narrative pieces than abstract video installations. I choose to use the term "web videos" since it is prevailing in popular discourse, albeit I am aware that this definition can also mean a variety of things.

It can also be useful to use elimination to clarify what kind of web videos are not relevant in this case. This research is not interested in digital creations that have more to do with vlogging (video-blogging) than filmmaking. Although there are popular independent Israeli vloggers who gained recognition and crossed over to traditional media platforms, they do not fit this discussion. Even when such vloggers have produced sketches or candid camera pranks, their videos were made in 'first person', and lack a cinematic intent (at least in comparison to the works that will be discussed here). Content creators of this kind are, for example¹³, Kevin Rubin¹⁴ and Sahar Calizo¹⁵.

A subcategory of vlogs is dedicated to gaming. In this niche too, there are Israeli independent content creators who gained impressive viewing numbers¹⁶. Yet the sort of videos that they produce is less contributing to the purposes of this discussion. Furthermore, despite their popularity in their niche, the gamers' fan base consists almost entirely of children, and they remain unknown to most of the public, and away from the mainstream culture. Additional examples of niche vloggers of other kinds are Ilana

¹³ For additional examples of notable Israeli vloggers see (Rak, Kochavim Batzneret: Kochvei HaYouTube Hachi Gdolim Belsrael. Project Meihad (Stars in the Tube: Israel's Biggest YouTube Stars. A Special Project) 2016).

¹⁴ Rubin participated in the פסטיגל (a popular Israeli song and dance show for children that takes place annually during the Hanukkah festival vacation) from 2019 to 2021. Also, he acted in a supporting role in the children film *Full Gas* (Kobi Machat, 2019), and starred in the film's spin-off *Full Speed* (Kobi Machat, 2021).

¹⁵ At one point, Calizo moved with a group of friends to a villa, where they created content together on a daily basis. In 2018, the concept was adapted by him and his friends for television, in the docu-reality פרויקט קליזו (*Calizo Project*), that was broadcasted in the channel Hot Bidur, whose viewers are mostly children and teenagers.

¹⁶ For example, Idan Telem (AKA Inde Game) and Raen Hasbani (AKA PeDiXOL). Hasbani's case is intriguing, since he is an Arab-Christian. There are hardly any non-Jewish media stars in Israel, let alone in children's entertainment. According to Hasbani, when he began creating content, he did not aim to appeal to young viewers (Blum 2021).

Fridman (AKA Ilanosh)¹⁷, who fits the status of celebrity "influencer", and Ashley Waxman Bakshi¹⁸, whose content deals with beauty and lifestyle.

Although the independent content creators in the abovementioned cases are largely irrelevant to this discussion, they have also nourished the common discourse, mainly in popular media, about the alleged revolutionary potential of contemporary digital filmmaking technologies. These advanced technologies are often perceived as powerful tools that can democratize the culture, empower laymen, and cultivate grassroots phenomena. This dissertation critically examines to what extent this revolutionary potential is realized. How, and if, do they set an alternative to legacy media? Therefore, this dissertation focuses on user generated content (UGC), which is made by independent creators.

Cases in which established organizations were involved in the production, funding, or distribution of web videos are excluded from this discussion. This means, for example, web series by Kan, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, even though some of them gained popularity and critical esteem and are worthy of further research. Some of Kan's made-for-web contents have a strong affinity to the matters discussed here. Examples like the animated comedy *סוף הדרך* (*Dead End*) (Nir Berger, 2019), or Tamir Bar's comedic trap-musical *עלייתו ונפילתו של שם טוב האבי* (*The Rise and Fall of Shem Tov Heavy*) (2020), share the same themes and aesthetics that I recognize in Israeli Gen-Y web content. They could have been used to support my arguments. Also, it could be interesting to ponder how their non-independent production method differentiates them from the other examples. However, the need to limit the discussion to the scope of a Ph.D. dissertation does not allow enough room to cover them as well at this opportunity.

This research also excludes branded content, web videos that serve as covert or overt advertising, and videos initiated by companies for commercial and marketing purposes¹⁹. In Israel, non-independent web series of these kinds were often co-produced

¹⁷ Ilanosh's case is interesting since initially her followers were mostly children, and she used to tailor her content to young viewers and to cooperate with web stars who are associated with this niche. But then she moved on from YouTube and Instagram and reinvented herself as one of the prominent Israeli content creators in Onlyfans, a social media platform that is famously (or notoriously) used for sharing original erotic content. See (Hazan 2022).

¹⁸ See (Zaidman 2017).

¹⁹ It should be mentioned that some of the independent creators that are discussed here had made commercial cooperations in the production of some of their web videos, but that was after they had already achieved online fame by themselves.

or presented in cooperation with the biggest portals/news websites. For example, *גבי והעיר הגדולה* (*Gabi and the Big City*) (Hadar Levi, 2014), was sponsored by Mifal Hapais (the national lottery of Israel) and featured on the website Ynet; *סנאי סנאי* (*Squirrel Squirrel*) (Noam Vardi, 2012) was sponsored by Goldstar beer; *Fanny* (Ido Rosenblum, 2010-2011), was sponsored by the insurance company Migdal and featured on the website Mako²⁰. Another example is the animated comedy videos by the creative agency *Srutonim*.

Even after narrowing the scope, there are still a few notable independent creators who make digital content of the kind that is relevant, and yet their work is not analyzed here. This is because of the space limit, and since I wish to maintain a coherent flow. Many Web 2.0 platforms offer a chain of hyperlinks to related content, and it is easy to "fall down the rabbit hole" and wander off track. Therefore, unfortunately, I had to leave out the works of great content creators like Itay Zvolon, whose *יניר האקמ"ש* (*Yanir the Shift Manager*) from 2013 was defined by the website Walla as "the cultural phenomenon of the year"²¹, and whose *So-Low Haifa* (2018) inspired a surprising amount of tribute videos and turned into a hot meme. Zvolon also crossed over from the web to roles in cinema and TV²². More examples are director Vania Heymann, Rapper/Comedian Itay Lukach, and the comedian Gitit Fisher²³. All of them have zany humor and a filmmaking style that has a lot to do with the kind of content that is examined here. Unfortunately, I am not able to discuss everyone²⁴.

Nowadays, at the beginning of the third decade of this century, an even younger generation of content creators begins to claim their place in the spotlight. These Gen-Zs abandoned Facebook and YouTube in favor of TikTok. For example, comedian Talya Bartfeld, whose viral success already led her to roles on TV. However, this dissertation focuses on Generation Y.

²⁰ For additional examples see (Wiener, Sdarot Reshet Israeliot: Hameshuvakot (Israeli Web Series: The Marketed) 2011).

²¹ (Sharon 2013). The translation, as with all sources in Hebrew, is mine.

²² (Stern 2019).

²³ Unfortunately, there are fewer examples of female content creators who gained mainstream status, compared to males who did. The decision to leave the works of Fisher (and her frequent collaborator, Oshrit Sarusi) out of this dissertation was not easy. However, I find comfort in the fact that a chapter that is dedicated to them will soon appear in a new anthology that I co-edit along with my supervisor Yaron Peleg, and with Eran Kaplan.

²⁴ Other notable Israeli web comedians, whose style has less to do with this discussion, are Guy Hochman, Dibuv Matzhik (brothers Ben and Amir Hakim), the Be'ereh trio (Yossi Gavni, Giora Zinger, Omer Burshtein), and the group Underdos (Nadav Naveh, Matan Zur, Asher Ben Abu, Yair Jacobi), whose members belong to the national-religious sector.

The creators that are discussed here have different levels of experience and qualifications. I do not distinguish between complete amateurs who never held a camera before making their first web video to semi-professional film/acting school graduates²⁵. The guiding criteria for this discussion are that they were all producing content independently and by their own initiative, and that they were all anonymous before joining social media and gained their reputation thanks to their viral hits. Other considerations were popularity, mainstream status, extended coverage by traditional media²⁶, presence in the cultural discourse, and transmedia mobility.

I should address the elephant in the room and make an important reservation. The virality status, even when based on data of viewing numbers, likes, and subscribers, is not always trustworthy. These figures can be, and often are, manipulated. There are all sorts of techniques, in varying degrees of legitimacy and legality, to affect them. For example, hacking, buying views, operating bots, or hiring the services of "click farms". These practices have become so common, that even established artists need to accommodate this "arms race". Whenever they release a new piece online, they too must buy views, simply so that they would not be left behind, and embarrassingly far away from the new (fake) standard²⁷.

Having said that, high viewing numbers do not guarantee success or career sustainability. So even if certain independent content creators used shady methods to gain initial attention, they would not make it very far without regular viewers' approval, who actively contribute to their successes by sharing and discussing the works. High engagement makes the algorithm push the content forward. Usually, when the algorithm spreads the hot content, the traditional media pick up the fresh hit. So sometimes, it is possible to "fake it till you make it", but you must have a good product to begin with. In the cases that are discussed here, the years that passed since these content creators started their careers enable a perspective that affirms their significant cultural status. These are not "one-hit wonders", or viral gags that had a temporary

²⁵ A reporter on Ynet, for example, created a distinction between amateurs and semi-professionals whom she labelled "established". See her articles for additional examples of Israeli web series. (Wiener, Tofaah: Sdarot Reshet Israeliot (Phenomenon: Israeli Web Series) 2011); (Wiener, Sdarot Reshet Israeliot: Hamemusadoim (Israeli Web Series: The Established) 2011).

²⁶ Considering coverage by traditional media as a criterion for legitimacy and status might seem to be an outdated approach that undermines the independent content revolution. However, legacy media have an important role in mediating the online success to large sectors that are not less active online.

²⁷ (Dagan 2018); (Globberman 2018); (Hatan 2016); (Levi and Goichman 2020); (Shechnik, Taut Bamispar (Wrong Number) 2018).

moment of fame which evaporated once viewers scrolled on to the next item on their feed. These creators made important contributions that built, shaped, and defined Israeli digital culture.

The Digital Era and Media Convergence

The turn of the century introduced new processes that revolutionized many fields, including cinema, TV, and media studies. Groundbreaking innovations quickly turned into norms and changed traditional perceptions. For example, the spread of the World Wide Web into homes all around the globe, and the digitalization of industrial means and products. Such processes refuted old assumptions and created a need for new methods of thinking. As Thomas Elsaesser wrote in 2010: "... in the decade to come, film theory will reinvent itself, even if (or perhaps because) the cinema as we have known it for its first 100 years is no more"²⁸. Similar insights were noted by television scholars who described the "end of Television"²⁹, "Television after TV"³⁰, or suggested a new discourse of "Post-TV"³¹. Therefore, the theoretical framework in this research is mostly contemporary publications from the past two decades, with a focus on new media and digital cinema.

Barbara Klinger's attempt to answer the question of "what is cinema today" considers that films are relocating from public venues into the home sphere. She discusses the platform changes and claims that cinema had developed "a kind of schizophrenic identity ... it exists both as a theatrical medium projected on celluloid and as a nontheatrical medium presented... in a video format on television"³². According to her, home theater, DVD libraries, cable television, and web shorts are all practices that do not "simply constitute a parallel history that exists separately from its theatrical counterpart. The public and private incarnations of cinema are financially and experientially connected". She ascribes this connection mostly to revenue goals³³.

²⁸ (Elsaesser 2010, 187)

²⁹ (Katz 2009). See also the entire issue (625.1), titled "The End of Television? Its Impact on the World (So Far)". For a more recent critique of this discourse, see "Is the End of Television Coming to an End?", (Bourdon 2018).

³⁰ (Spigel and Olsson 2004).

³¹ (Lotz 2014); (Strangelove 2015).

³² (Klinger 2006, 2).

³³ (Klinger 2006, 3).

Ideas regarding cross-platform relocations, and the merging of spheres, contents, and aesthetics, have been greatly developed by Henry Jenkins. His research examines changes in platform, distribution, and reception. He uses the key term "convergence", which he defines as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want"³⁴. Jenkins seems to attribute much more weight to the role of the audience, or consumers. He stresses that the circulation of media content depends on a "participatory culture", in which the users actively break the separation between producers and consumers³⁵.

With the changes in reception, storytelling evolved as well. Kristen Daly recognizes "a new tendency in cinema, where the dominance of narrative... is waning in favor of a form of cinema where navigating, intertextual linking, and figuring out the rules of the game provide the primary pleasures"³⁶. Many other scholars share the observation about the increasing complexity of narratives. This process is attributed to advancements in technologies that affect the watching process and developments in the social aspect³⁷. "The fan mode of interactive and intertextual engagement with the text has become... a more prevalent viewing mode as it has become easier and almost unavoidable..."³⁸. This interactive engagement happens largely within the web, and commonly through social networks.

Modern spectators are more active than ever, and the gaps between them and the filmmakers are narrowing. They are endowed with the role of voluntary marketing agents that spread the word through organic promotion (instead of "word of mouth", the spreading can be easily done to a much larger extent by posts, likes, and shares). They interact with other fans, form communities, and sometimes correspond directly with the filmmakers/showrunners. They have available, cheap, and relatively easy to operate means of production and distribution, which they use to create original content. Several scholars felt that this new state requires updating the somewhat passive terms used to describe the recipients on the receiving end of one-way communication. As

³⁴ (Jenkins 2006, 2).

³⁵ (Jenkins 2006, 3).

³⁶ (Daly 2010, 83).

³⁷ See (Ben Shaul 2012); (Buckland 2009); (Cameron 2008).

³⁸ (Daly 2010, 85).

Alan Kirby puts it: "none of the traditional words describing the relations of individuals with texts is appropriate... The inherited terminology of textual creation and reception (author, reader, text, listener, viewer, etc.) is awkward here, inadequate, misleading in this newly restructured universe"³⁹. Kirby mentions that there have been what he sees as unsatisfying attempts to step into the breach. Daly mentions previous examples of suggested alternative terms, like "(v)user", "prosumer", "produser", and her pick - "viewer". This term suits an era she calls "Cinema 3.0", that "might be a cinema of the user, as the [Deleuzian] time-image gives way to the interactive-image"⁴⁰. It appears that no singular term had been consensually adopted. The term "viewer" appears in the works of other scholars as well, sometimes in a different context, and with slight variations in its definition⁴¹. However, it is a relatively common term, which is relevant to this discussion.

Lev Manovich also notes that "the overlap between producers and users becomes significantly larger". He discusses the shift from an industrial society to an information society, in which "both work and leisure involve the use of the same computer interfaces". Under these conditions, he explains, the overlap occurs. Yet Manovich is reserved and adds that "this does not mean that new media completely collapse the difference between producers and users". Although he points out that differences in functionality and pricing between professional and amateur software, film equipment, and skills have become smaller, he argues that "at the same time, new media does not change the nature of the professional-amateur relationship. The gap... will always exist, because it is systematically maintained by professional producers themselves in order to survive"⁴².

However, during the time that passed since Manovich published his seminal book, his argument concerning the alleged eternal gap between professionals and amateurs had become more and more questionable. Although media conglomerates and institutes of artistic establishment have not been eager to delegate power and authority, the decision is not always up to them. The technological and cultural developments forced to reconsider and rephrase the definitions of terms such as "professional" and

³⁹ (Kirby 2009, 58).

⁴⁰ (Daly 2010, 82).

⁴¹ (Harries 2015).

⁴² (Manovich 2001, 119-120).

"amateur", as will be discussed in the second chapter. Acclaimed web series from all over the world have been hailed for their achievements in terms of innovation, aesthetics, narrative, representation, pluralism, diversity, and social critique⁴³. In some cases, they were credited for transcending traditional media or fixing its blind spots. A new generation of filmmakers that have emerged from the web brought the standards of online content so close to those of traditional television until eventually they crossed over into older media. Their works have been called, among other names, "Open TV", "Indie TV", or "Web Television"⁴⁴. American television channels, for example, have been so eager to keep up with the exciting developments that they adopted web series and successfully adapted them into popular TV shows such as *Web Therapy* (2011-2015, Showtime), *Broad City* (2014-2019, Comedy Central) and *High Maintenance* (2016-2020, HBO). As will be elaborately presented, Israeli TV channels have been attempting to do the same.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that recent scholarship has undermined the positive image of "participatory culture" and exposed its limitations and shortcomings. Adam Fish described it as a "battlefield" in which socially liberal ideas of equality clash with neo-liberal ideals of competition. According to him, "...Earlier desires that internet video would constitute a socially liberal public sphere for participatory politics and amateur production have been replaced by a gold rush of acquisition, conglomeration, and monopolization"⁴⁵. Fish, whose book title even declared the "End of Participatory Culture", pointed out a shift from a participatory, lean-forward, user-generated internet to a lean-back, spectator, professional internet. He uses Tim Wu's concept of "the Cycle", a historical process of media industries that begin with amateurish creation and moments of openness and ends with closure, professionalization, and capitalization. If so, Gen-Y content creators had the luck of being there at the right time, when the cycle was just beginning.

Fish argues that along with democracy, the internet has also manifested other, possibly conflicting, values of Western liberalism, such as individualism and free market. These values undermined solidarity and accelerated processes of free labor,

⁴³ See (Alice 2016); (Marghitu 2019); (Mehta and Kaye 2019); (Monaghan 2017); (Ng 2020); (Prokhorov 2021); (Sobande, Fearfull and Brownlie 2020); (Yékú 2022).

⁴⁴ (Christian 2018).

⁴⁵ (Fish 2017, 16).

populism, and exploitation. Similarly, Karl Spracklen noted that "There is a dominantly dangerous amount of instrumentality associated with digital leisure". The Net, he says, has always served the purposes of the military-industrial complex and the government. Personal data is exploited by such institutions to routinely monitor and control citizens, or by businesses that convert it into monetized advertising. The association of Web 2.0 with utopian ethics and communicative ideals, claims Spracklen, is "hopelessly antiquated". In his pessimistic view, "The future version of the Net will inevitably be shaped by the instrumental power of corporations and nation states... corporations will get better at removing content which is unlicensed, small businesses will be consumed by transnational businesses, and nation states will become more effective at collecting and controlling information"⁴⁶.

Judith E. Rosenbaum's study of minority groups' usage of Twitter⁴⁷ also complicates optimistic perceptions of participatory culture. She noted that giving marginalized people a voice does not guarantee that people will listen and raised the question "...to what extent 'giving voice' translates into the constructive meaning making that the technooptimists argue is made possible by Twitter"⁴⁸. For example, the participants in her study spoke about their critical use of the second screen to express frustration about representations of minorities in popular movies and television shows. However, despite spreading their criticism, they described still seeing large numbers of people on Twitter and other social media buying into the stereotypes, accepting the representation as unproblematic⁴⁹. Her analysis shows that social media users mainly engage with those who agree with their opinions, creating an echo chamber. Nevertheless, she finds that "participatory cultures that reject, negotiate, and accept the mainstream culture, showing that Twitter may not be the fully countercultural space that some scholars had envisioned, but that it does allow for the creation of a diverse set of meanings"⁵⁰. This ambivalent impression is still much more optimistic than Spracklen's, who argues that "the Net supports and reproduces heteronormative, elitist, racist hierarchies of the real world"⁵¹.

⁴⁶ (Spracklen 2015).

⁴⁷ The popular social network was rebranded in July 2023, and the name Twitter was replaced by X.

⁴⁸ (Rosenbaum 2018, 254).

⁴⁹ Ibid, 256.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 293.

⁵¹ (Spracklen 2015).

It should also be noted that any discussion about participatory culture should take into account the terms on which participation is made possible in these online venues, and which kinds of participants are most likely to influence, shape, and stand out in it. Access to online spaces is still not fully equal, but rather subject to the same limitations and forms of prejudice as any other area of social life, often affected by factors such as class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, geography, education, socioeconomic background, and so on. Williams and Zenger, for example, mention that "cross-cultural contact in online spaces is not always a place of happy multicultural synthesis. Negotiations of differences of language and culture are often incomplete or frustrated"⁵².

Comedy and Web

Attempts to categorize online content might be tricky. Is it adequate to use the classic and common classification to genres, the same way that it is done in cinematic discourse and theory⁵³? When some scholars speak about "web genres", they mean an entirely different system. Santini, Mehler, and Sharoff, for example, claim that "modern genre research is no longer confined to philosophical, literary and linguistic studies, although it can receive enlightenment from these disciplines". They argue that in the digital era, "modern genre research transcends the manual and qualitative classification of texts on paper to become a meta-discipline that contributes to and delves into all the fields grounded in digital media, where quantitative studies of language, language technology, information and classification systems, as well as social sciences play an important role"⁵⁴. Therefore, when they discuss web genres, they do not refer to categories of stories and aesthetics, such as dramas, comedies, horror, melodramas, etc. Instead, they refer to home pages, blogs, personal profiles, live feeds, etc.⁵⁵.

Other scholars of the World Wide Web stick to the traditional genre classification system but attempt to develop and update it. For example, when Limor Shifman examined online humor (pre social networks boom), she identified six types of new Internet-based humor (interactive humor, funny photos, manipotos,

⁵² (Williams and Zenger 2012).

⁵³ (Schatz 1981).

⁵⁴ (Santini, Mehler and Sharoff 2010, 23).

⁵⁵ (Santini, Mehler and Sharoff 2010, 13)

phanimation, celebrity soundboards, and PowerPoint humor), and classified her samples accordingly⁵⁶. She explained that "the old and new types differ in their morphologies: Whereas the old types are based both on writing and visual images, none of the new types are based on written language"⁵⁷. An observation that might indicate the upcoming growth in online video content.

Nevertheless, many scholars, especially those who focus on web videos, continue the traditional cinematic discourse to classify and examine online content. They implement well-known systems and definitions in their research about newfangled online content, and sometimes the result is the evolvment of old ideas. The same approach is used in this dissertation.

Right from the beginning of the web, comedy has been one of the most dominant forms of online content. Some critics go as far as claiming that comedy has been the number one genre among web content. Data from the mid-00s revealed that humorous content is by far the most common type of content in pass-along/viral emails⁵⁸ and that over a third of internet surfers in the U.K. have been using the Internet to find jokes, cartoons, and other humorous materials⁵⁹. Aymar Jean Christian points out that in the early days of creative online content (from roughly 1999 to 2003) hundreds of web channels debuted, and all seemed to focus on comedy (although some also distributed dramatic shorts, docu-series, and other reality-based programming)⁶⁰. He mentions that most of these web channels did not survive long⁶¹. Some of the more memorable examples of American online comedy platforms include AtomFilms, Babelgum, Blip, Channel 101, College Humor, Funny or Die, JibJab, Omnivision Entertainment (formerly My Damn Channel), the Onion's Digital Studio, Super Deluxe.

Comedy gained its preferred status because of several complementing reasons. First, some critics and content creators claim that no other genre fits the short form better. According to David Gurney, "comedy is famously built on timing, with rapid verbal delivery, concise jokes and gags, and short sketches being some of its clearest

⁵⁶ (Shifman 2007, 196-199).

⁵⁷ (Shifman 2007, 199).

⁵⁸ (Phelps, et al. 2004).

⁵⁹ (Dutton, Di Gennaro and Millwood Hargrave 2005).

⁶⁰ (Christian 2018, 50). He mentions that "many of these networks, while nominally independent, were well financed by former Hollywood executives, film studios, and venture capital firms".

⁶¹ For additional examples of early web channels see (Hillner 1999).

hallmarks. This punchiness of comedy is part of what made it such a core element of early cinema"⁶². Like in early cinema, in the early web era, the short form was necessary for technological-functional reasons. The longer a digital video is, and the better quality the digital image is, the bigger the computer file that stores it. Big files were a very undesired disadvantage in the era before broadband, cloud storage, and streaming.

Moreover, the brief format of web videos matches earlier comedic performance traditions, like short-form improvisation, stand-up, sketch comedy, and therefore has attracted many comedians⁶³. In addition, the internet has afforded space to maintain more fluidity in their performances compared to other media⁶⁴. Wild satirists could find more creative freedom there than in established platforms. But this freedom was not only relevant to the content but also to the form. For example, the producers could create content as long as they think it should be, and not shoehorn it into pre-determined time slots⁶⁵.

Other than that, short sketches or gags are relatively cheap to produce. "Brevity in comedy is an asset— a joke merely requires a set-up and a punch line", and the possibility to work on low budgets (in comparison to other genres that require higher production values) fits the constraints of independent or amateur creators. Comedy provides "a cost-effective format for experimentation and immediacy"⁶⁶.

Yet, the web videos' short length is not only important because of its inherent thriftiness. As Brian Stelter notes, "when motion pictures were invented... most films were shorter than a minute, because of the limitations of technology. A little more than a hundred years later when Web videos were introduced, they were also cut short, but for social as well as technical reasons". He explains that "video creators, by and large, thought their audiences were impatient. A three-minute-long comedy skit? Shrink it to 90 seconds... the first commandment of online video: Keep it short"⁶⁷. Other sources

⁶² (Gurney 2011, 6).

⁶³ (Marx 2011, 17). The tight connection between the Israeli stand-up comedy scene and the local online content creators will be scrutinized in the next chapter.

⁶⁴ (Marx 2011, 19).

⁶⁵ (Stelter 2009).

⁶⁶ (Christian 2018, 48).

⁶⁷ (Stelter 2009).

evaluate the average length of early web videos as a bit longer, "most come in three-to-five minute jolts of animated comedy... ideal for people taking breaks at work"⁶⁸.

This conception is evident in an interview with comedian Yuval Segev, whose big break came from web videos he made for a popular Israeli website. In 2005 he explained in an interview: "On the internet [compared to older media]... the game is different and harder. You only have a few seconds to turn on the viewer. If you haven't turned them on, they will shut you down. You have one minute of life before the [viewer decides to move on]"⁶⁹.

The necessity to capture the attention of an easily distracted casual viewer is another reason for the creators' turn towards humor, claims Christian. They often use attention-grabbing provocations to intrigue viewers, and to stick out in the endless selection of content that is offered on the web at any given time. "Comedy in general and animation in particular allowed producers to push the boundaries of representation and storytelling further away from legacy television"⁷⁰.

This clarifies why the comedy genre remained a favorite even long after the technological constraints that limited creators to short form have been lifted. With time, as internet connections became increasingly faster, producers and advertisers discovered that viewers would willingly watch online videos for more than two minutes or so at a time. An article from 2009 observed that "the viral videos of YouTube 1.0 dog-on-skateboard and cat-on-keyboard are being supplemented by a new, more vibrant generation of online video. Production companies are now creating 10- and 20-minute shows for the Internet and writing story arcs for their characters essentially acting more like television producers, while operating far outside the boundaries of a network schedule"⁷¹.

Even as the internet moved into Web 2.0, comedy maintained its status as the most ideal genre for online content. It can be claimed that the new stage might even

⁶⁸ (Harmon 2000).

⁶⁹ (Hadar 2005).

⁷⁰ (Christian 2018, 48).

⁷¹ (Stelzer 2009).

have enhanced the genre's potential. Humorous texts encourage participation and sharing⁷², and these qualities became even more desirable in the interactive Web 2.0.

According to Eric Weitz, "for humor studies, the upgrade from [web] 1.0 to 2.0 represented a move from online activities largely restricted to joking *for* an audience to the capacity to joke *with* each other as participants in real time"⁷³. However, even before the age of social networks and the "comment"/ "share"/ "retweet" buttons, comedic content was widely circulated by pass-along emails. Humor websites encouraged visitors to distribute the content to their friends⁷⁴. Online advertisers perceived humor as "an integral, almost obligatory component" in internet-based commercials, expecting that it would simulate viewers to spread the ad, so they would reach more people⁷⁵. Comedy's communal qualities proved especially valuable with the rise of social networks, which quickly became major platforms for the display and promotion of video content. As Gurney puts it, "there's something about online comedy clips that is unmistakably 'viral' in nature"⁷⁶.

More specifically, Gurney highlights this viral nature as connected to "the pervasive phenomenon of recombination". Digital media objects, he argues, tend to be built of parts that, though perhaps intended to act in concert, can often be removed or changed without destroying the entire object. Comedy's recombinant nature makes it especially fit to the digital arena and contributes to its dominance among web genres. "As producers (and their parent companies) of original Web video have increasingly sought cross-platform mobility, comedy... has become their preferred genre", says Nick Marx. Following Jenkins, Marx sees comedy as a loosely linked succession of comic bits. These bits "can be assembled or disassembled according to their distribution outlet without losing their aesthetic appeal... it points to the need for producers and distributors alike to create comedy in purposefully multivalent ways rather than ones

⁷² (Shifman 2007); In Rosenbaum's study (2018) about Twitter users, she observes that "Anticipated entertainment was the main reason to join a conversation. Sharing or retweeting... was often motivated by how funny respondents thought the content of the hashtag was". (261) Also, while "Participants appeared to share thoughts, quotes, and beliefs important to them", it is pointed out that the defining feature was "cute and catchy", "indicating that the use of Twitter to uplift others is another way to create a positive brand of self. (255)

⁷³ (Weitz 2017, 505).

⁷⁴ (Shifman 2007, 188).

⁷⁵ (Shifman 2007, 196).

⁷⁶ (Gurney 2011, 3).

beholden to a single medium's aesthetic norms"⁷⁷. In an age of cultural convergence, transmedia qualities are a necessity. Furthermore, Gurney reminds that the ability to adapt is not only required in transitions between platforms but also within the web. "Take, for instance, a YouTube video page on which the HTML code need not fall apart if one JPEG or Flash video file doesn't load. The modular nature of such objects makes them easy to move around and reconfigure"⁷⁸. Therefore, "Given these fundamental parallels between the recombinant and social nature of comedy and the modularity and variability of new media platforms like video sharing Web sites, it becomes clearer why comedy plays such an integral remediative role in the field of viral video"⁷⁹.

Since web videos have been circulating beyond the internet, they have influenced the aesthetic and industrial traits of other platforms to which they crossed over. Marx points out that "hit television shows from many genres presently provide abundant ancillary content in the form of Webisodes, character blogs, and interactive games at their network Web sites". However, his dated observation as if "the flow of content in the opposite direction – from the Internet to the established 'old' media like television – has been decidedly less prominent"⁸⁰, is no longer relevant. Successful web comedy hubs have franchised themselves into TV shows that boast the online brand, such as *The College Humor Show* (MTV, 2009) and *Funny or Die Presents* (HBO, 2010-2011). This is in addition to plenty of web series that have been picked up by television networks, like those that were mentioned above.

The Internet revolution shook up many norms. The entertainment industry underwent massive transformations. When the boundaries between media turned fluid, comedy became more pertinent. Christian notes that "comedy is easily combined with other genres and can accommodate industrial self-reflexivity at critical moments in industrial change"⁸¹. Marx mentions that "comedic content has been discursively framed as distinct and disruptive, ushering in innovations at a time when existing media industry practices are undergoing change and instability".

⁷⁷ (Marx 2011, 16).

⁷⁸ (Gurney 2011, 8).

⁷⁹ (Gurney 2011, 9); For more on media remediation see (Bolter and Grusin 2000).

⁸⁰ (Marx 2011, 15).

⁸¹ (Christian 2018, 48).

Thus far this survey listed several reasons that make comedy eminently suitable for the web: The technological restrictions in the early days of slow internet connections; its suitability to short form; the connection with earlier comedic performance traditions; the cost-effective productions, ideal for independent creators; the creative freedom in content and form that allows to push the envelope further, the ability to provoke and gain attention; the light entertaining traits that hook the generally impatient and easily distracted casual viewers; Comedy's inherent virality, that encourages interactivity, sharing and participation; the genre is congruous with multimedia, recombination, and cross-platform distribution; and it fits times of technological, industrial, and theoretical changes.

But these are not the only reasons. One can think of additional advantages from more perspectives: for example, how the storytelling in comedy suits media that reach the viewers instead of viewers reaching the content. Many times, people encounter viral hits without planning to do so. They do not sit down to watch a series or a film, nor surf a dedicated website, and do not even click on a specific YouTube channel. The content just pops up in their feed. Comedy has traits that suit this kind of spontaneous content consumption. Compared to other genres, it is less leaning on narrative development. There is less need for exposition. Its nature is light, "undemanding", with less emotional involvement, and less need to keep up with the narrative or to follow each and every episode. The makers can be more flexible with the timing of the next webisode's release. All of these advantages, and probably even more, explain why comedy is considered to be the leading genre on the web. It is also the genre of all the prominent case studies from Israel that this dissertation examines.

Before Social Networks Changed Everything: Early Web Creation in Israel

The group of Israeli content creators that are at the center of this dissertation enjoyed unprecedented virality and media attention, mainly thanks to Facebook. Nevertheless, there have been previous local success stories and even figures who managed to cross over from online fame to the center of the mainstream cultural scene. Back in those days, before social networks became an almost inseparable part of the web experience, the discourse about "viral media" was not as prevailing⁸². The buzzword got its boost

⁸² (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 17).

with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and the social networks boom by the end of the same decade. By that time, broadband internet connection made storing and sharing content a lot simpler. Beforehand, creators usually published on their personal websites, or on dedicated websites that functioned as a community of amateur creators. People discussed and shared content with similar minded people through emails, links, and forums.

In current social networks (since the 2010s), most users have a genuine, personal profile. Previously, many users operated under fake identities, without pictures, and kept their real identities unknown. Anonymity is one of the main aspects of online socialization that has changed since then.

Early independent online creators seem to fit the somewhat outdated definition of "amateur", as defined by Stan Brakhage in the 20th century. He claimed that "the true amateur, even when in consort with other amateurs, is always working alone gauging his success according to his care for the work rather than according to the accomplishments or recognitions of others"⁸³. The social networks created a different attitude in which most content creators strive for recognition⁸⁴. Even if they do not plan to commit to a professional career, they still strive to gain as many likes and views as possible. This is connected to wider cultural changes, like the ideal of "becoming famous", or reality TV shows that turned average Joes, sometimes without any talent, into media heroes⁸⁵. Since domestic filmmaking devices narrowed the gap in production quality between amateurs and professionals, many aspiring artists are happy to take their chance, in the belief that the web will quickly carry them to fame and fortune.

In the early days, the creators' modest aspirations, along with the perks of anonymity, affected the kind of content that was made. Shifman noticed back then that sex was the most common topic in web comedy. According to her, "the anonymity and isolated reading process may encourage people who find it embarrassing to tell or hear sexual jokes in the 'offline world' to send or read them online"⁸⁶. By the same logic, it

⁸³ (Brakhage 2001).

⁸⁴ (Greenwood 2013).

⁸⁵ (Halpern 2007); (Pattinson 2008). Also, for more about the narcissism of active social networks users, see (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012); (Sheldon and Bryant 2016).

⁸⁶ (Shifman 2007, 201).

is no surprise that notable early examples of independent online content tend to be a lot cruder, extreme, and even bizarre. Such an example from the Israeli web has been the works of the underground comics artist Amir Dori (AKA doriman). In 2002, he founded the website *Orla (Foreskin)*, which published subversive works by him and fellow humorists. It should be noted that most of them were teenagers at the time. The typical style was outrageous, offensive, and in bad taste. The content was packed with scatological humor, pornography, and triggering themes such as terrorism and terminal illness. Not long after the site's initiation, some of the contributing illustrators began animating their toons, and the site featured cartoon videos.

Generally, at the turn of the century, the web experienced a "toon boom"⁸⁷. Most of the emerging web television channels focused on animation⁸⁸. According to Aymar Jean Christian, a lot of this is credited to the appearance of Macromedia's Flash. The popular software provided a convenient way to animate, and its compact outputs made it possible to overcome technological constraints⁸⁹. Unlike video, the relatively small files of Flash animation were ideal for distribution at times when broadband was still in its infancy. The files could be shrunk without sacrificing visual quality⁹⁰.

Yet, the "netcasters" of web television did not favor animation merely due to technological reasons. They enjoyed animating exaggerated fiction, "a more offbeat version of television that is often more profane and always less formulaic than its broadcast and cable counterparts"⁹¹. However, it should be noted that despite frequent declarations as if the animated web comedies were too controversial for legacy television, some of the established studios funded web content platforms, and some of the TV networks rushed to pick up viral hits. "Cartoons allowed producers to be edgy and still advertiser friendly, all of which helped attract the young male fans that advertisers and networks feared losing to the web"⁹². And so, the animated web series

⁸⁷ Around the same period, traditional media also experienced a "toon boom", and animated content for mature audiences was considered the hottest trend (Schneider, *TV Toppers Fret over Toon Boom* 2000).

⁸⁸ The "toon boom" can be seen as a sub-genre of comedy since many of these creations were humorous and favored gags over storytelling.

⁸⁹ "In the early 2000s, Flash was important enough to web programming that Macromedia created a network for showcasing its technology, Shockwave.com, and, before Shockwave merged with AtomFilms, enticed Hollywood heavyweights like Matt Stone and Trey Parker, David Lynch, Ben Stein, Stan Lee, Tim Burton, and Jim Belushi to create content" (Christian 2018, 50).

⁹⁰ (Christian 2018, 48-51); (Harmon 2000).

⁹¹ (Harmon 2000).

⁹² (Christian 2018, 50).

by John Ridley, *Undercover Brother*, which spoofed blaxploitation films, was made into a live-action film by the same name (Malcolm D. Lee, 2002), distributed by Universal. Another web series that parodied blaxploitation and racial stereotypes, *Lil' Pimp*, was also adapted into a feature film (Mark Brooks, 2005), originally planned as a theatrical release through Columbia Pictures, it was eventually released straight to DVD by Lions Gate Home Entertainment. A third example is *Queer Duck*, which began on the website Icebox.com and was picked up by the cable network Showtime (2000-2002). The TV show was followed by a straight-to-DVD film (Xeth Feinberg, 2006), distributed by Paramount Home Entertainment. Some claim that these cases undermine the common perception that the web allows creative freedom that cannot exist within the industry. At the same time, these cases remained outside of the mainstream's legitimacy and success. As Christian puts it, "it was Hollywood, but a marginally different kind of Hollywood"⁹³.

In Israel, the best representative of this phenomenon is the animated web series, *Ahmed and Salim*⁹⁴ (2009). Independently produced, using basic animation, it had an uninhibited humor, that often relied on ethnic stigmas. This web series was created and released by the end of the 00s, and hence it fits the earlier trends in independent content creation. *Ahmed and Salim* will be more thoroughly discussed later.

Another form of web videos that gained popularity in Israel during the early "toon boom" period was mock translations of foreign songs. This trend is worthy of wider discussion since it can be studied as an exceptional expression of transnational connections through the web and of cultural merges/appropriations. In this sub-genre, a creator picks a foreign song in an uncommon language and creates a video clip for it using Flash animation. Avoiding songs in English or Russian, for example, that are understood by many Israelis, they choose foreign languages (or sometimes, pure gibberish) that most Israelis do not fully grasp, and therefore the words can be easily distorted in mock translations. These pseudo-transcribes use phonetic and pronunciation similarities to create the impression that the songs are written and sung in Hebrew. What is considered to be the first local video in this style is Morr Meroz's mock translation of the song, *Enae Volare* by *Era*, which he turned into *דנה עוד ים עולה*

⁹³ (Christian 2018, 49).

⁹⁴ אהמד וסלים / *Ahmed and Salim* (2009 – 2011) was created by Or Paz and Tom Trager, AKA Sugar Zaza on their YouTube channel.

(*Here's Another Sea Rising*)⁹⁵ (2004). The concept was mimicked and duplicated by other users, in a meme-like fashion. The videos developed from only presenting (made up) lyrics to including illustrations and basic animations. Other memorable viral examples are Yoav Wazana's *מה קרה לדורי?* (*What Happened to Dori?*)⁹⁶ (2004), based on the song *Ameno*, also by Era; and Maor Linn's *שובצתי כרהיט* (*I Have Been Assigned as Furniture*) (2005), based on *Mundian To Bach Ke* by Panjabi MC⁹⁷. This early trend already marks some of the key elements in the later web creations that are the focus of this dissertation, even though there is a gap of around ten years between them. Similar to the mock-lyrics clips, they also heavily rely on the combination of music and comedy, use video clips' aesthetic and editing style, and in some cases also use animation.

The platform in which the mock-lyrics videos blossomed was *במה חדשה* /*Bama Hadasha* (*New Stage*)⁹⁸, a blogging platform for amateurish or beginning artists. It enabled users to manage personal pages in which they shared their original content. They would also interact with other users in the comments section and discuss each other's works. Most of the content on the site was textual, like poems and short stories, and not moving images.

The biggest talent whose discovery is credited to *Bama Hadasha* is musician Yoni Bloch. He became active on the platform in the late 1990s. It was there where he (virtually) encountered Barak Feldman, who became his frequent lyricist and collaborator. In 2002, Bloch received an email from a 13-year-old girl that was active on the website. The young fan wrote that she listens to his music all the time and that when her father heard one of his songs played in their home, he was hooked. Her father happened to be Zeev Schlick, the CEO of the leading music label NMC. The company decided to produce a pilot concert and marketed the live performance solely through *Bama Hadasha*. The sales were satisfactory, and Bloch was signed by the label. He soon turned into one of the biggest pop stars of the 00s⁹⁹. In a somewhat ironic twist, the singer who became an icon of Israeli new media chose to leave the music industry

⁹⁵ <http://stage.co.il/Stories/290169>

⁹⁶ <http://stage.co.il/Stories/318272>

⁹⁷ <http://stage.co.il/Stories/459880>

⁹⁸ <http://stage.co.il>

⁹⁹ (Goraly, Ani Makir Oto, Mehainternet: Shir Ehad Yim Yoni Bloch (I Know Him, form the Internet: One Song with Yoni Bloch) 2022).

in favor of high-tech entrepreneurship. In 2010 he relocated to the US, where he and Feldman founded *Interlude* (nowadays *Eko*¹⁰⁰), a media and technology company that produces and distributes interactive multimedia web videos¹⁰¹.

In 2005, web content was already something that the Israeli public was aware of, not only tech-savvy members of specific online communities like *Bama Hadasha*. A journalist described that "over the past few months the Israeli web is flooded with countless video content, some original and some taken from commercial television channels. Some are live broadcasts and others are offline. Some would have never found their place in [the most popular] Channel 2 and others would not fall short from it". The reporter expresses disappointment with the selection that TV has to offer and favors the online alternative – "every Israeli [web] surfer can program his own broadcasting schedule without depending on favors from the networks". He adds that the most significant development comes from the leading internet portals, which began broadcasting original productions. He mentions, for example, Tapuz's live broadcasts platform Blog TV, and Nana's original web series *רנו פסקל / Reno Pascal*¹⁰².

Reno Pascal is considered to be the earliest example of a successful crossover by a local video creator from the web to traditional media. Comedian Yuval Segev created and played the fictional character Reno Pascal, a nerdy and eccentric reporter with a heavy French accent, who pranked people in silly interviews. The obvious inspiration was Sacha Baron Cohen's trolling antics in *Da Ali G Show* (Channel 4, 2000; HBO, 2003-2004), where he portrayed iconic alter-egos such as Ali G and Borat (Baron Cohen's influential work will be mentioned again later). However, unlike Cohen, Segev did not fool, or intend to fool, his interviewees into believing that he is a real journalist. After six months of web creation for Nana, Segev was signed by the cable channel Bip. The niche channel was branded as "the laughter channel" and modeled after the American Comedy Central. It appealed to young viewers with wild comedic content. Segev's TV version, *עולמו של רנו פסקל (Reno Pascal's World)* (2005-2006) ran for three seasons. In the extended version made as TV episodes, Pascal's character was

¹⁰⁰ <https://company.eko.com>.

¹⁰¹ (Aharey Hamillionim BeNew York: Yoni Bloch Hozer Lechayei Halsraelim (After the Millions in New York: Yoni Bloch Returns to the Israeli Lives) 2021).

¹⁰² (Globerman 2005).

supplemented with several new bizarre characters, who conducted unorthodox interviews and sketches.

Bip channel later imported more "extreme" content from the web, such as *טופי והגורילה* (*Toffee and the Gorilla*) (Bip, 2008). The show was created by Shaul Betser and Erez Heiman (who also collaborated with Segev on the TV version of *Pascal*), after an initial online version in the Israeli video website *FLiX*¹⁰³. In an interview from that time, Betser explained: "To us, the internet seems like a natural habitat. TV is a world of prime time viewing and regulation... The internet is an ideal platform for experimentation and taking risks that commercial TV cannot afford". Betser claimed that web creation is the hottest global trend, and when the reporter asked if it is profitable, he replied: "certainly not. The problem is that everybody wants web video, but they are not willing to pay the price". He adds that the big portal's entrance to the market raised the prices a bit, "but still, TV pays three times more for documentary content and five times more for drama". He summarizes: "If internet could have been profitable, we would be exclusively there"¹⁰⁴. As will be further shown, even more than a decade later, this acute problem continues to plague independent content creators. It also pushes them toward the stable income that legacy media provide. But do they sell out? Or do they change the traditional industry from within? What happens to both sides when the two worlds collide? The answers lie in the following chapters of this dissertation, which analyze some of the most substantial case studies from the contemporary digital culture in Israel and which hopefully resonate beyond it.

¹⁰³ FLiX is also where the comedy duo *Nitza and Lechem* had their break. The two, Roy Kafri and Niv Majar, met when they worked at the website, and began creating together in 2007. Kafri is also responsible for another hit web series that was first broadcast on FLiX – *חתולונבלה* (*Gatonovela*, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ (Veltzer 2008).

Chapter :1 Don't Grow Up ,It's a Trap :Presentism ,Arrested Development ,and Juvenility in Generation-Y's Viral Comedy Hits

"We are surely not the first but without doubt the most self-conscious age to see ourselves as living before the future", wrote scholar and electronic literature pioneer Michael Joyce. "In our technologies, our cultures, our entertainments and, increasingly, the way we constitute our communities and families we live in an anticipatory state of constant nextness"¹⁰⁵.

New media, as the name suggests, are expected to be innovative, cutting edge, and futuristic. If so, why are Israeli new media stars so obsessed with the past, and refuse to let it go?

In this chapter, I examine the works of some of the most popular Israeli web comedians who gained fame during the 2010s. All these highly successful examples seem to be caught in regression and infantilism. For instance, the musical comedy trio Arutz Hakibud is made up of a group of men in their late 20s (when the group was formed), who adopt the alter-egos of high school students. Actress Gaya Beer Gurevich was also in her mid-20s when she created the persona of *Bne-El*, a preteen aged roughly 13, around Bar Mitzvah age. The animated web series *משפחת שוויץ* (*The Shvets Family*) and *Ahmed and Salim* focus on father-son relationships, with much more emphasis on the sons¹⁰⁶. The comedy group כל מה שמצחיק בעולם ("Everything that is Funny in the World"), a conglomerate of stand-up comedians, actors, writers, and filmmakers in their 20s and 30s, has produced numerous web shorts that vary in style. However, two of their most watched hits are *מסיבת כבדים* (*Liver Party*, 2014), in which they play infant versions of themselves, and *המחברת הסגורה* (*The Closed Notebook*, 2014), which lampoons a high school student thesis film. Several members of this group later made the TV sketch show *טלוויזיה מהעתיד* (*Future TV*, 2017-2018, Reshet), in which they regularly featured a series of sketches called *חבל על הזמן* (*A Waste of Time*). These sketches are set in the 1990s and spoof Israeli TV dramas from that decade. Udi Kagan's famous alter-ego, *Messiah* (משיח), was first introduced to viewers in the eponymous

¹⁰⁵ (Joyce 1999, 399).

¹⁰⁶ *Ahmed and Salim* (אחמד וסלים) (2009 – 2011) was created by Or Paz and Tom Trager, AKA Sugar Zaza, on their YouTube channel. *The Shvets Family* (2018 – 2020) was created by Dean Naim and Assaf Navon, AKA Din UDvarim, on their YouTube channel.

web series (2013) that was later adapted as a mainstream TV series (2018, 2021, Cellcom TV, Keshet). The protagonist, Messiah, is a failed musician who seems to be stuck in the 1980s, who dresses in time-warped clothes and uses anachronistic slang.

This tendency on the part of comedians to go back in time can be attributed to several intersecting factors. The first is that the creators of these shows belong to Generation Y; in other words, the millennial culture, which according to sociological theories has several defining characteristics, including a reluctance to grow up and have a mature and independent lifestyle. This manifests in the juvenile content they produce and is amplified by attempts to appeal to younger viewers, who are often early adopters and trendsetters in cyberspace, and by the proverbial tendency of the film industry to cater to young audiences.¹⁰⁷ A closer look at the content itself reveals the ideological consequences of this juvenile approach. This chapter examines the values and world views of Israeli Gen-Y creators to better understand who and what they are.

Generation Y

The label “Generation Y” derives from its predecessor “Generation X”, a term that is widely used by scholars to describe people born between the mid-1960s and 1980¹⁰⁸. Gen-Xers are sometimes also referred to as the "MTV Generation" or "Slackers". Since the early 2000s, the next generation has been referred to as Generation Y, signaling continuity, but moving on to a new chapter.

Many writers have attempted to reinterpret Generation Y through a swath of different definitions. They have been called Millennials, the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, the Global Generation, the Non-Rebellious Generation, the Me Generation, the Lost Generation, Nexters, and others¹⁰⁹. These definitions vary not only by epithet but also by the period of time that determines generational belonging. However, the most common definition, and the one adopted here as well, refers to individuals born between 1980 and 1995. This is based on the work that will serve as the main point of reference for this chapter: a study conducted by Israeli sociologists Tamar Almog and Oz Almog. Their book, *Generation Y: Generation Snowflake?* (2019) is the most comprehensive study to date on the Y generation in Israel. Although Israeli millennials

¹⁰⁷ (Novak 1993, 87-88); (Talmon 2001, 143, 162).

¹⁰⁸ (Almog and Almog 2019, 7); (Hanson 2010); (Taub 2008). The term Generation X was popularized by Douglas Coupland's bestselling novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (Coupland 1991).

¹⁰⁹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 7); (Eisner 2005); (Seemiller and Grace 2016).

live in a globalized world and have many similarities with their counterparts in Western countries, Israeli society differs in several specific ways.

Every generation identifies itself by different groupings, so any analysis of a generation necessarily results in generalizations and somewhat forced comparisons. Nevertheless, Almog and Almog's study does not attempt to cover Israeli society as a whole but focuses on one sector the writers consider hegemonic. Their study "focuses on young, non-religious men and women from the Jewish sector", which are defined as "the largest, most influential sector"¹¹⁰. The study "does not include young people from the Arab, Druze, ultra-Orthodox or National-Religious sectors".

Almog and Almog's study is especially relevant for this chapter because all the content creators discussed here belong to the social group the study identifies. At the same time, the study is also problematic because of its hegemonic focus. While the literature on other countries takes pride in how Gen-Y web creations have enabled marginalized voices to overcome barriers¹¹¹, in Israel the situation is different. The Israeli Gen Y consists of old hegemonic Ashkenazim (Jews whose origins are in Europe) and secular-urban-educated Mizrahim (Jews with Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds)¹¹². For various reasons, the web has not become a vehicle for stars from sectors that are severely underrepresented in the traditional Israeli media such as Arabs, Jews of Ethiopian descent, Queers, or the handicapped. The new media stars who make a name for themselves are the ones who resemble traditional elite groups¹¹³.

Most of the comedy creators fit this mold in that they are native, secular, center/left-wing intellectuals from the Tel Aviv area and are far from embodying "the average Israeli". Most Israeli young people today identify as right wing and conservative. "Young adults from Gen Y reported significantly higher levels of religiosity compared to young adults from Gen X"¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁰ (Almog and Almog 2019, 7-8). The writers assume that most of Generation Y's characteristics can be found in other sectors as well, but to a lesser extent.

¹¹¹ (Christian 2018, 19-20); (Marghitu 2019); (Zboralska 2017, 44).

¹¹² Although the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi social divide appears to remain at the top of the Israeli agenda, generation Y actually experienced "the rise of a wide middle class comprised of both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews (narrowing ethnic gaps)" (Almog and Almog 2019, 7).

¹¹³ This problem is not restricted to Israel. Tofler et al. expressed similar concerns about the homogenic hegemonic identity of the creators behind Australian web series who garner attention and secure funding (Tofler, Batty and Taylor 2019, 80).

¹¹⁴ (Lavie, Kaplan and Tal 2021, 14). The literature points to a paradox. On one hand, rates of single parenthood, cohabitation, and divorce are on the rise, which seemingly implies egalitarian notions.

As children, they were promised that the decades-long conflict between Jews and Palestinians was about to reach its happy ending. They watched Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat sign the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn in 1993 and receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. This optimistic future soon collapsed in the face of the violent reality of Rabin's assassination and the intifadas. This bitter disappointment left many of them scarred and fostered more suspicious and pessimistic attitudes¹¹⁵. Gen-Y Israelis, who still live their adult lives in the shadow of the conflict, are less committed to the idea of the peace process. "Post-Oslo public opinion polls consistently show the vast majority of Jewish-Israelis prefer a 'wait-and-see' approach to renewed negotiations"¹¹⁶.

Web creators do not sympathize with other sectors, and sometimes manifest hostility towards them. This is particularly clear in the many web series whose platform enables them to be more edgy and offensive. For example, critics have targeted them for their hostile, if not borderline anti-Semitic portrayal of orthodox (Haredi) Jews¹¹⁷. Thus, if the most highly acclaimed web creators do not represent the ideology and characteristics of the Israeli majority, why have they become so popular? One possible explanation is that Israel is "a culture where there seems to be a split between liberal behavior and conservative perceptions"¹¹⁸.

At the same time, Almog and Almog's study has fueled debates and criticism. The most vehement objections have not come from specialists but from a journalist. Tzlil Avraham published her well-reasoned critique in a series of articles that appeared for several consecutive weeks in the weekend edition of Mako's website magazine¹¹⁹. Unlike Almog and Almog, Avraham belongs to Generation Y. Both sides of the debate appeared in the documentary series *Y Y Y* (2019, Kan). This is not the place to delve into the arguments. However, it is important to note that Almog and Almog are not part

On the other, the views of Israeli young people, both Palestinian or Jewish, male and female, have become more conservative.

¹¹⁵ See the special issue to mark 25 years since the Oslo Accords published by the *Palestine - Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* (Schenker 2018).

¹¹⁶ (Gutkowski 2020, 4).

¹¹⁷ For example: Sugar Zaza's web series *השטרײמלים* (*The Shtreimels*) (2011); Gaya Beer Gurevich's sketches with the character of מנדי הקטן (Little Mandy); several sketches by the group Everything that is Funny in the World, and later in their TV show *Future TV*. One of the group members, Niv Majar, caused public outrage over "an antisemitic joke". In a talk on a popular public radio station, Majar suggested "reducing the Orthodox population" (Ettinger 2014).

¹¹⁸ (Lavie, Kaplan and Tal 2021, 16).

¹¹⁹ (Avraham 2016).

of the generation they describe, and their point of view is, therefore, less empathetic. It tends to be too strict, like a sullen school principal, who constantly compares current students to the norms of 'the good old days', which perhaps seem brighter in nostalgic retrospect than they actually were.

Another debatable aspect of Almog and Almog's study is their portrayal of Israeli Millennials as almost apolitical. This seems questionable considering Generation Y (in Israel and abroad) was responsible for several major social uprisings. For example: the 2011 Tent Protest in Israel, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street¹²⁰. The usage of social media has been an inseparable part of these historical movements. Moreover, several scholars point out how the digital age specifically turned comedy into a powerful form of social commentary with the capability for public influence¹²¹. (Interestingly, Boukes et al. claim that online satire videos generate more interactive engagement than regular news, yet they are related to less controversy¹²²).

However, in the context of this discussion, indeed, online political activity, as vivid as it may be, does not overlap with the products of local web culture. Some of the most notable viral hits by Israeli web comedians remained detached from political and social protests, favoring surreal nonsense, thus strengthening the proposed image of Gen-Y's as self-centered and apathetic. For example, comedy web series such as *The Shvets Family* (created by Dean Naim and Assaf Navon, 2018 – 2020), or sketches by popular web comedians like Nitza and Lechem (Roy Kafri and Niv Majar, who worked as a duo from 2007 to 2015)¹²³. In other cases, even when the characters' identity is directly bound to the political discourse, the creators still do not express an overt stand. The issues on top of the public agenda remain in the background, as a given situation, and are not explored or subverted. For example, terrorism in *Ahmed and Salim* and the settlements in *Bne-El*. Although the issues may be exploited for gags, exaggerated, or ridiculed, the critique remains general. As if the viewpoint is external, sometimes

¹²⁰ (E. Y. Alimi); (Milkman); (Mulderig).

¹²¹ (Bore, Graefer and Kilby); (Chattoo and Feldman); (Hurley); (Mpfu).

¹²² (Boukes, Chu and Abdulqadir Noon).

¹²³ For example, the members of Artuz HaKibud were not afraid to express their agenda, even if it is currently not the most popular among public opinion in Israel. During the "Balfour Protest" against Prime Minister Netanyahu, the group encouraged their fans to join the demonstrations. They even arranged free shuttles from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, promising to entertain those who will come (Kav 77 LeBalfour); (Kav 77 LeBalfour (HaComeback)). Yet this political awareness did not find its expression in any of their clips nor lyrics from the same time.

almost neutral. Especially in comparison to popular satire in Israeli Theater, Television, and Cinema.

The musical producer Boi Ecchi (Elior Antwi), who collaborated with social media stars such as Dudu Faruk (Ori Comay) and Dor Muskal (of Arutz Hakibud trio), claimed in an interview that: "speaking about problems is not cool". He explained that the audience will be skeptical that stars really understand problems like poverty and inequality. Furthermore, listeners can simply Google any subject and find inputs from experts who are much smarter than any rapper. "It is a different generation", he concluded¹²⁴.

Another example is "Kol Ma SheMatzhik BaOlam" ("Everything that is Funny in the World"), a collective of comedians who created popular viral videos. Their online success led some of the gang's members to receive their own television sketch show, *Televisia MeHaAtid (Future TV, 2017-2018, Reshet)*. In a publicity interview around the release of the show, one of the creators, Niv Majar, explained why they avoid topical commentary: "The decision not to deal with politics and politicians, and sure not to make direct impressions of them, was an important part of the show's base. There are enough of these on TV already". Majar does not see their style as detached or politically irrelevant. He claimed: "The satire is here, and it is present in many of the show's bits, whether we meant it or not. Simply because we live here... The top value is that we are allowed to laugh about everything, and about nothing"¹²⁵.

That said, Almog and Almog's study is still highly useful, insightful, and thorough. It corroborates other findings in a range of countries on the attributes of the Y generation. Most importantly, their conclusions are highly relevant and are coherently manifested in works by notable web creators from this group, as discussed below.

Arrested Development, Regression, and Infantilism

Among the many epithets associated with Generation Y, one of the best examples is "snowflakes". According to Andrew Hunter Murray, the term first became popular around 2015 in the UK, and quickly spread throughout the media¹²⁶. Nevertheless,

¹²⁴ (Shalev).

¹²⁵ (Palty).

¹²⁶ (A. H. Murray 2018, 44).

different writers have slightly different interpretations of the term. Some claim it is "used in reference to individuals who deem themselves unique or special [snowflakes are unique in shape] and therefore deserving of recognition or special treatment"¹²⁷. Others emphasize its use as a derogatory term "to describe an overly sensitive person who thinks the world revolves around them"¹²⁸.

The millennials' thin skin is a result of another dominant component of their personality: their perceived immaturity¹²⁹. Throughout most of the 20th century, the period between adolescence and adulthood became considerably longer in the Western world¹³⁰. "The age of thirty, considered just half a century ago to be the midlife point, today marks the beginning of adulthood... the third decade of life, which was once dedicated to the process of settling down (marriage, having your first child and the beginning of a proper career), has been postponed"¹³¹. The vast majority of independent web creators discussed in this chapter began their careers when they were in their twenties. By this definition, they were practically adolescents. This affects the style, themes, and humor in their works. It also brings them closer to younger audiences, a point which will be discussed later.

The wish to extend the period in life in which one is free of commitments derives from fear and uncertainty¹³². The grown-up world intimidates the Millennials. "Whereas in previous generations becoming an adult was perceived as an achievement, i.e. something to aspire to, young people nowadays see it as a type of prison..."¹³³. The refusal to grow up is expressed in a wide variety of childish behaviors. Millennials find it hard to make decisions, take responsibility, or commit to stable relationships¹³⁴. They are inclined to extreme mood swings and anxiety, are unable to delay gratification, and live in the 'here and now' without making any plans for the future¹³⁵. Thus, the

¹²⁷ (Gallagher 2020).

¹²⁸ (Harrison 2020). See also (A. H. Murray 2018); (Redfern 2017).

¹²⁹ Some writers take issue with popular definitions. Murray, for example, argues that the "snowflake" traits are false and based on anecdotal examples which do not represent the whole. He presents statistics which indicate that Millennials are not more hostile to free speech than the general population (A. H. Murray 2018).

¹³⁰ (Benckendorff, Moscardo and Pendergast 2010); (Furstenberg, Kennedy, et al. 2003).

¹³¹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 22-23). See also (Seemiller and Grace 2016).

¹³² (Billari and Liefbroer 2010); (Furstenberg, On a New Schedule: Transitions to Adulthood and Family Change 2010).

¹³³ (Almog and Almog 2019, 22-23). See also (Hartmann and Swartz 2006).

¹³⁴ (Viswanathan and Jain 2013). However, some writers have made other observations. Hobart and Sendek claim that narcissistic Millennials think so highly of themselves that they do not hesitate to take responsibility, since they feel capable of doing anything they want (Hobart and Sendek 2014, 95).

¹³⁵ (Almog and Almog 2019, 25).

temporality so manifest in web hits resists the linear march of time into the future. Instead, it offers an alternative in the form of a continuous past.

About Time

François Hartog's book *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* discusses the evolving perception of time¹³⁶. He suggests three main phases of historicity. Initially, from antiquity until the late 18th century, the past was perceived as a valuable archive of experiences and insights that could be related to present-day thought and action. After the French Revolution, there was a shift to the modern regime of historicity. People ceased to expect that the future would repeat the past but hoped that it would contribute to change. This phase was characterized by its belief in the optimistic promise of a better future achieved through the progress of the nation. Hartog considers 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, to have been a turning point. These events, among others, created a crisis of temporality, which led to a transition to the contemporary regime of Presentism. At this point, he explains, the distance between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation has been stretched to breaking point, resulting in what seems to be a suspension of the production of historical time¹³⁷.

The specific crisis occurred in the late 1980s, the midpoint of Gen-Y's birth span. Gen-Ys in Israel grew up in a world that had a new temporal perception. Their shattered childhood hopes, such as the peace process, prompted a pessimism that resembled Hartog's claim that nowadays people no longer experience the future as a promise but rather as a threat. Heike Polster links the same attributes of the millennials to the current historicity regime, arguing that "the acceleration and resulting perceived shortage of time, widespread unemployment, ethnic nationalisms, and pessimism about the global future are all tied together as aspects of, and contributions to, 'presentism'"¹³⁸.

Although Hartog's definition of presentism does not fully overlap with all the attributes of Gen-Y in Israel, it is still very useful. Even though he refers mainly to the works of historians, and not to online content creators, the works of filmmakers and

¹³⁶ (Hartog 2015).

¹³⁷ For a broader discussion about presentism and the crisis of the modern time regime see also (Assmann 2020); (Gumbrecht 2014).

¹³⁸ (Polster 2016, 258-259).

artists have long proven their value as representatives of their era. In addition, Hartog himself seems to leave room for modifications, since he acknowledges that even though absolute time is similar for all cultures, the way in which societies and their members represent and experience time is culturally dependent. Representations of time are constructions meant to influence the present and at times control it.

The temporality in Israeli web videos appears at least superficially to have much more to do with the past than the present. However, Presentism, perhaps somewhat paradoxically¹³⁹, is characterized by an obsession with memory and heritage, both of which are notions that appear to point to the past. According to Hartog, “memory” is the presence of the past, whereas “heritage” involves a duty to preserve at least an imitation of the past in the present. In this era, “we seem to be caught on the treadmill of the present and ruminating upon a past which simply won’t go down”¹⁴⁰.

Hartog's theory, despite being largely acclaimed, has been criticized¹⁴¹. Some invert Hartog's diagnosis and argue that “it is not the present that colonizes the past and integrates it into its domain, but, on the contrary, the past that comes back in the present...”¹⁴². In an attempt to merge the two, Christophe Bouton claimed that “Hartog's conception of regimes of historicity sponsors a spectrum of interpretative possibilities for modernity, wherein several experiences of time can coexist... One would then have a multivalent concept of modernity which, so far from being limited to one dominant regime, would bring together a number of tendencies, several different experiences of time, each somewhat in conflict with the others”¹⁴³.

Temporality

The Zabari brothers (Avishay and Yoni) are well-known for their series of comic punk operas. Each episode (which can also be treated as a mini album) was released online as one long video clip that illustrates the whacky tales depicted in their songs. The third episode, *על תמאש ועל העוקץ* (*On Tamás and on the Sting*) (2018), describes an odyssey

¹³⁹ “full-blooded, consistent presentism would imply a depreciating, or at least a deliberate overlooking, of the past... which takes it that the past is ‘dead and gone’. Memory and heritage are on the contrary categories which refer positively to the past. Even if it is to select and to conserve the past in the present, these categories make the most of the dimension of the past, of its traces, as something precious that has to be preserved from forgetfulness and destruction” (Bouton 2019, 322).

¹⁴⁰ (Hartog 2015, 191).

¹⁴¹ See (Bouton 2019); (Polster 2016); Jeffrey Andrew Barash's points to Hartog's neglect of nostalgia (Barash 2016, 122-123).

¹⁴² (Bouton 2019, 328).

¹⁴³ (Bouton 2019, 329-330).

in which a group of friends goes on a quest to acquire a rare trading card of the Hungarian soccer player Tamás Sándor, who played on the Israeli team Beitar Jerusalem from 1998 to 2002. When the Zabari brothers were asked by a reporter what year the plot is set in, they expressed confusion and struggled to reply. "That's a really good question", said Avishay, "it is a combination of then and now, the early 2000s and 2018 together". Yoni added: "The Supergol [trading cards album] is the Supergol 2000 [edition], [but] the iPhone is [from] now. It's a mishmash". Avishay attempts to resolve the contradiction by suggesting "it's a parallel universe"¹⁴⁴. This parallel universe in which the past never ends and continues into the present is perhaps the imagined utopia of Generation Y. Such web videos exploit the unrealistic storytelling possibilities of absurd comedy to create a unique temporality that incorporates a timeline of the past progressive. It forms a parallel universe that enables people to keep on living, and even aging, without ever losing childhood.

When the reporter asked the Zabari brothers how old the main characters are, Avishay stuck to his vision of the impossible fantasy of simultaneity: "I think it is then and now together, 10-year-old behavior but they are actually older". Yoni suggested it is "somewhere between [the ages] 10 and 22... It is infantile, negotiating over a trading card, that is something kids do... but they sit at a bar drinking. You know what, I have no idea how old they are".

Like the Zabari brothers, the Arutz Hakibud (Rotem Kapelinsky, Dor Muskal, and Omer Ribak) group makes musical comedies. They also release a music video now and then to give their songs some sort of a narrative plot. They also preserve the continuity between their video clips which take place in the same ongoing diegesis and feature the comic tales of recurring characters, a group of teenage friends. Arutz Hakibud explained that this was a deliberate decision to "keep building the world around them"¹⁴⁵. This kind of storytelling is closer to cinematic/TV storytelling than to the kind of storytelling used in musical video clips. As one critic put it: "with all due respect to the songs, the clips are not an embellishment but an inseparable part of the experience. Arutz Hakibud is not really a band but a TV series in a short and musical web format..."¹⁴⁶. However, after the first two songs which celebrated high-schoolers

¹⁴⁴ (Samarias 2018).

¹⁴⁵ (Tofach 2017).

¹⁴⁶ (Rak, Arutz Hakibud Hem Hahulya Hahasera Bein Hipsterim LeStatic Ve Ben El (Arutz Hakibud are the missing link between hipsters and Static and Ben El) 2017).

way of life, and a third song which focused on a love story, the fourth song created a temporal dissonance. In קדאווה (*KaDaWa*, named after a violent game that is popular in school playgrounds), the three familiar protagonists describe a nostalgic visit to their hometown. As with the Zabari brothers, viewers were puzzled by the timeline, and could not determine the characters' ages. "How old are these people, damn it?", asked a frustrated critic, who pointed out inconsistencies and evidence of several conflicting timelines, "perhaps they are stuck in an eternal loop of youth..."? The confusion also fueled curiosity about the mysterious prologue and epilogue of the second clip, called ככה זה אצלנו (*That's The Way It Is with Us*) (2016). The opening and closing segments frame the events as visions in a child's imagination. This takes the regression even further since the expected genre of teen comedy is replaced by a story told from a child's point of view¹⁴⁷.

A different angle on this non-linear temporality can be found in the web series *Messiah*. Unlike the previous examples, in this case, the main characters are adults. However, the eponymous hero's persona is built around his anachronism. Messiah is a washed-up singer who currently runs a guest house. The comedy mainly derives from his refusal to acknowledge the present and admit that his heyday as a star ended long ago. He wears an old-fashioned suit, has a mullet hairstyle, uses dated slang, and still loves 1980s hits (not in the good retro-party sense, but in the cheesy and corny sense of singles that no one wants to hear). His sidekick, Ziv, is depicted as a child trapped in a grown-up body. Both are aging bachelors who have never settled down and are struggling to maintain decent careers; in other words, they failed to develop (what is commonly perceived as) a successful mature lifestyle. The biggest difference between *Messiah* and the previous examples, however, is its attitude toward the past. Even though past adventures were definitely a better period in the hero's life, his obsession with the past is exactly what makes him pitiful.

¹⁴⁷ After Arutz Hakibud achieved online fame, they moved from the web into cinemas. Their feature film, עולה לראש (*Over the Top*) (Daniel Adar, 2022), preserves the themes of regression, arrested development, and disrupted temporality. The group members, already in their 30s at the time of filming, portray their age-ambiguous alter egos. They are still studying in high school, despite being older than senior students, since they were labeled as "students for preservation" and avoided conscription. After a bad publicity incident threatens to ruin their career in show business, the friends are forced to enlist to the IDF. Thus, they are experiencing the most significant coming of age ritual in Israeli society in a later time in their life than it should have been experienced. The parodically-enhanced Gen-Y aesthetic is also preserved and raised by new characters who spoofs Gen-Zs.

Nostalgia has always been a dominant motif in Israeli culture. However, it took different forms in the past, but none like Gen-Y's version. In her study of nostalgia in Israeli cinema, Miri Talmon "adopts the approach that sees nostalgia as a private and social practice, used to coping in life transitions which threaten the identity's unity and continuity, and not as meaningless recycle of the culture's products"¹⁴⁸. This definition can explain why the youth film genre allows a nostalgic sensibility to be particularly dominant. It is because youth is a liminal period of transition. Since Millennials are especially preoccupied with this process¹⁴⁹, nostalgia can help ease their angst. Talmon, based on Fred Davis, argues that nostalgia "bursts into the communal life cycle in historic and social contexts which requires coping and adjustment. It arises in times of crisis, in which a threat on the continuity of the collective identity is formed"¹⁵⁰. The Israeli case may not only reflect a personal crisis of coming of age, but also the national crisis of a generation that grew up in a dramatic period of extreme national transitions, which shook its core beliefs and expectations from life. Like Almog and Almog note, Israelis from Generation Y "came of age during the days of commercial channels, the revolution of personal computers, the internet, and mobile phones, the development of feminist culture, civil rights, and individualism, the Iraq[i] missile attack [during the Gulf War], the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the economy of wealth and entrepreneurship, suicide bombings, and the war on terror, the leadership crisis, the leisure and entertainment revolution... the Second Lebanon War and operations to eradicate terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza"¹⁵¹.

This abundance of dramatic events can appear overwhelming. However, considering the usual amount of drama in the lives of Israelis, it is questionable whether Generation Y had to face more turmoil than other generations. For example, the generation who came of age during the 1970s faced its own chain of dramatic events including the traumatic Yom Kippur War, the political upheaval of 1977, and the peace agreement with Egypt. The founding generation of 1948 certainly experienced more since it emerged from the Holocaust to face regional war. In addition, the rapid series of shocking events is not unique to the geo-political situation in Israel, or even the

¹⁴⁸ (Talmon 2001, 4).

¹⁴⁹ (Johnson 2017).

¹⁵⁰ (Talmon 2001, 23). See also (Davis 1979).

¹⁵¹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 7).

Middle East. Seemiller and Grace, for example, provide a lengthy substantial record of traumatic historical events that overshadowed the upbringing of American Gen-Zs¹⁵².

This suggests that the main difference between Gen-Y and the generations that preceded them is not rooted in the number of events or their dramatic scale, but in the intense exposure to them through the media, and in this generation's relatively over-sensitive "snowflake-ness", which makes it harder for them to adjust and cope. One of the Israeli millennials' unique key coping mechanisms is this return to the past. "The collective nostalgia helped to preserve and restore, at least temporarily, the socio-historic sense of continuity. The nostalgic longing for the values of the past enables sort of a time out of adjustment and patience, which ease the trauma involved in constituting new values"¹⁵³. In Israeli cinema, according to Talmon, nostalgia usually goes hand in hand with youth and social groups.

Stand by Me: Nostalgia and the Gang

"The gang of kids, adolescents, pioneers, and warriors – is one of the main heroes in the Israeli cinema... The story of the gang is the story which the Israeli society continuously tells itself, fondly remembers in nostalgia, attacks parodically and even sarcastically, and has a hard time giving up on and beginning a new story"¹⁵⁴. Considering box office sales, the borrowing frequency in video libraries, and cultural cult status, Talmon argues that "the successful Israeli film is one which reflects a longing to male identity which is communal, solidary, and anti-establishment"¹⁵⁵.

On the one hand, coming of age films, especially teen comedies, might be associated with commercial cinema, or even lowbrow entertainment. Their raging-hormones humor often turns to vulgarity, which Talmon associates with "regression to infantile obsession with breasts and bodily waste"¹⁵⁶. On the other hand, Talmon notes that this genre provides valuable sociological and ideological insights. She portrays the changes in the typical gang throughout the 20th century. In the early days of the

¹⁵² "As these students entered kindergarten, they saw the newscasts of September 11, 2001. They witnessed the economy crash and saw the unemployment rate skyrocket... and have lived in a world at war for a majority of their lives... This highly technological era in which they were born has helped make them smart, efficient, and in tune with the world, both offline and online" (Seemiller and Grace 2016).

¹⁵³ (Talmon 2001, 23).

¹⁵⁴ (Ibid, 3).

¹⁵⁵ (Ibid, 161).

¹⁵⁶ (Ibid, 159).

country's establishment, the gang was masculine and gathered around a mission¹⁵⁷. During the 1960s a new model appeared alongside it, in which the mission plot and the purposeful journey are adapted in a parodic and subversive manner¹⁵⁸. From the late 1980s until the end of the 20th century, the gang became centered around Tel-Aviv as a trendy cultural center¹⁵⁹. There is a need for further research on the gang's development in film and television throughout this century. This is not the place to do so. However, it does not take more than a superficial glance to observe that the typical gang had wandered away from Tel Aviv. Another significant difference is that this generation's "snowflakeness" stands in contrast to what used to be one of the main features of the Israeli Sabra, "growing up and toughening up at an early age"¹⁶⁰, due to the special condition in the country.

Israeli millennials grew up watching international hit television shows centered around groups of young friends (although mostly in their twenties, older than the typical characters on the web), and local shows which followed the American formula. These shows created a role model that influenced them¹⁶¹. From the American *Seinfeld* (1989-1998, NBC) and *Friends* (1994-2004, NBC) to the local, פלורנטיין (*Florentine*) (1997-2001, Channel 2), פאזל (*Puzzle*) (1999-2000, Channel 2), מטוורדים (*Loaded*) (2007-2009, Channel 2), רמזור (*Traffic Light*) (2008-2014, Channel 2) and הזכרים של נאור (*Naor's Friends*) (2006-2017, Channel 10).

Millennials have taken the Israeli friendship ethos a step forward. According to Almog and Almog, "this generation's delayed adulthood adds a different angle to the camaraderie... In previous generations of those born in Israel, childhood friendships ended after the youth movement or the military service. Millennials continue to act like a group of (overgrown) children for much longer". Friends are one of the main foundations of Millennials' lives. For some, they are as valuable as family. For example, they will consult with them instead of their parents. Since "snowflakes" are undecisive and dependent, their gang has a crucial influence on their decisions in a variety of fields¹⁶². In addition, "Millennials were brought up in a sophisticated

¹⁵⁷ (Ibid, 42-43).

¹⁵⁸ (Ibid, 63).

¹⁵⁹ (Ibid, 72).

¹⁶⁰ (Ibid, 25).

¹⁶¹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 136).

¹⁶² (Almog and Almog 2019, 135). They note that this phenomenon is not unique to youngsters in Israel and is common among all millennials around the world.

industrial world where individual inventors are a thing of the past. This is no longer a world of outstanding visionaries, but rather of task forces that initiate and develop things together"¹⁶³.

The modern incarnation of the youth gang stands in the center of many of the prominent Israeli web hits, including, Arutz Hakibud's trio, the Tzabari brothers' tales of four friends, and the Everything that is Funny in the World ensemble, which collaboratively creates videos and stars in them; Messiah's guest house workers form an alternative family. Even the character of Bne-El, which was built on the premise of "[God] forsaken child", soon replaces his lonely monologues with dialogues between him and his loyal sidekick, Elyakim, or his sister. Moreover, the eleventh episode of *Bne-El, Lag Ba-Omer*, is all about gang wars.

The Zabari brothers pointed out the collective as the main theme in their works: "For us, it's about the gang, the togetherness... It allows you to take part in a private joke and to feel belong to a group, and it helps people relate to it"¹⁶⁴. And so, the web series provides a simulated social experience on two dimensions: A passive viewing of the diegetic gang, and an active belonging to a (virtual, at least initially) community of fans that is formed around the video. Sometimes, the fans also engage in dialogue with the creators of the diegesis¹⁶⁵. Almog and Almog claim that the most substantial need that social networks fill is the essential need to belong¹⁶⁶. The web videos supply the fans with an experience of belonging that suits the medium perfectly well.

The Israeli gang comedies can still be found in the older medium of cinema as well. Throughout the 2010s came out films such as *איביזה* (*Ibiza*) (Shay Kanot, 2015), *ארבע על ארבע* (*Four by Four*) (Shay Kanot, 2016), *מסע הטבעת* (*The Ring's Journey*) (Matti Harari and Arik Lubetzki, 2017) and *בזמק* (*Bazdmeg*) (Yossi Meiri and Ariel Weisbrod, 2019). Yet these films were created by slightly older filmmakers, who belong to the

¹⁶³ (Almog and Almog 2019, 136).

¹⁶⁴ (Samarias 2018). In the same interview, the Zabari brothers tried to distinguish their depiction of the "Ars" trope from other notable content creators and emphasized the importance of the collective: "Dudu Faruk is always alone, does not see anyone, he has the cash [instead of friends], we have the comradery". Faruk, as elaborated in the chapter dedicated to him, is an individual who does not fit the ethos of the youth gang. But it should be remembered that although he has been extremely popular among young listeners, he is officially aiming for mature audiences. In accordance, he expresses individualism in both his song lyrics and in his fictional videos.

¹⁶⁵ This form of an active viewing experience suits Daly's definition of "viewers". The viewers' role is not limited to watching, but it is an engagement that lasts, in different forms, after the clip ends and gives room (and even certain authority) for the audience's voices as well.

¹⁶⁶ (Almog and Almog 2019, 151).

traditional industry. The characters in these films are usually in their early twenties and not teens as in the web videos. The plots follow generic clichés of franchises like *מזיקין לימון* (*Lemon Popsicle*) (Boaz Davidson, 1978), *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999) and *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009), in which the coming-of-age processes are subjected to the generic conventions of sex romps and/or stoner comedies. Their humor is full of offensive stereotypes, which resemble the kind of humor that is attributed to Gen-X standup comedy, a style that Gen-Y comedians reject¹⁶⁷. Although contemporary Israeli gang films mostly did well at the box office, they did not enjoy the same buzz that the web videos generated. Hence their shelf lives are shorter. They are not repeatedly watched, they failed to gather a fan base or a cult following, or in other words, they did not manage to form a community around them. The cinematic viewing experience used to be seen as more collective than home viewing, since viewers would hear and sense the audience around them react to the film. But could it be that in the age of home viewing on the web, the cinematic experience, with an audience of strangers that go on their separate ways once the lights go up, can no longer offer the same sense of belonging¹⁶⁸?

Musical Hookahs: The Gen Y Aesthetic

Almog and Almog remarked that Millennials "love music clips and the visual aspect is very important to them. Quite a few songs became popular hits among millennials not because of their musical originality, but rather thanks to visual spectacle"¹⁶⁹. The dress code associated with the Gen-Y look was imported to Israel and spread among local teens through the musical pop scene. Web comedians were quick to adopt extreme versions of unusually flashy styles for purposes of parody (which sometimes morphed into popular music).

¹⁶⁷ (Anu Tzohkim Bazot: *Humor Dor Ha-Y (We are Hereby Laughing: Generation Y's Humor)* 2020); (Izikovitch 2015); (Rosen, Notnim Barosh (*Hits the Head*) 2013). See also the part about the alternative stand up scene in this dissertation.

¹⁶⁸ Cinema, however, has advantages which the web cannot offer. Adolescent films often portray transitional situations, inner processes, and identity formation. Many times, it is done using a narrative framework of a journey (Talmon 2001, 47). In short clips, whether music videos or skits, there is not much room to develop, examine and express inner processes. It might happen throughout a series of webisodes, but it is still hard to find a good local example for this. Nonetheless, considering the negative reviews which the recent gang films received - (Mochiach 2016); (Schnitzer 2019); (Tzalach, Haseret Hagarua Beyoter Shel Hashana Befaar Atzum Mehashear (*The Worst Film of the Year by Far*) 2015) - their potential ability to offer a deeper experience remains unfulfilled for the most part.

¹⁶⁹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 125).

During the 2010s, two dominant musical genres dominated the Israeli hit parade. One was Middle Eastern pop. The other was Reggaeton, a new import. At the same time, in the niche hip-hop scene, trap music, a newly imported genre became a sensation¹⁷⁰. Gen-Y comedians agree that "there is a lot of influence from trap [music] on this generation's humor", inherent in the style, the beat, and the culture¹⁷¹.

Arutz Hakibud's influences were described as "Eve and Lear [Middle Eastern pop musical duo]'s aesthetic, with names like Static and Ben El, Gal Malka's reggaeton vibe, and Eliad's silly rhymes". Eliad Nahum, a pop idol, was voted by the leading radio station Glgz as the "breakout of the year" in 2015 and won Glgz's "song of the year" in 2019. The other names on the list are considered grassroots phenomena whose fame is credited mostly to YouTube. Their songs are defined in the music industry jargon as "להיטי שטח" ("Field Hits"). This refers to songs that reach young listeners through the dancefloor in clubs, or on their phones, and not through radio stations and old media. More established radio stations sometimes pick up on these trends later on and adopt them, thus pushing the artists into mainstream success. The most notable example is the case of Static and Ben El (Liraz Russo and Ben El Tavori), who started independently, had breakthrough "field hits", and then won Glgz's "breakout of the year" and "people of the year" awards in 2016-2017, and quickly became the biggest stars in the country. However, success "in the field" still does not ensure mainstream embrace. For example, in the case of Eve and Lear (Tazhi and Eliran Bouzaglo), they failed to meet traditional quality standards and were rejected by the big radio stations. However, they remained celebrities among certain listeners (most of whom are still in high school).

Static and Ben El not only revolutionized Israeli sound (along with their musical producer Yarden "Jordi" Peleg) but also reinvented young people's look. Their extravagant fashion style attracted attention and aligned with contemporary trends from abroad. In an interview in 2018, three years after their breakthrough, Static claimed: "we began a wave, in all sorts of respects... [from] the outfits. Everyone is more daring

¹⁷⁰ The connection between popular music and teen films dates back decades. In the 20th century, it was mostly apparent in rock and roll, and later pop. See (Buckingham 2021); (Caine 2004); (Glynn 2020); (Horwitz 1990). Similarly, in Israeli cinema "the Western ethos of rebellion and youth protest intersects with the Sabra ethos, which is based on youth culture, anarchism, spontaneity, gall, and challenging the hierarchies. This is one reason for the warm reception of the subversive rock and roll culture in popular Israeli culture" (Talmon 2001, 70). Today, as the hit parades show, rock is dead. Instead, young Israelis have adopted pop, trap, rap and hip hop.

¹⁷¹ (Anu Tzohkim Bazot: Humor Dor Ha-Y (We are Hereby Laughing: Generation Y's Humor) 2020).

nowadays... [but] there was not anything like this when we started. I feel old saying that"¹⁷². Static's frequent changes of hair color, his flashy jewelry, tunics, and Ben El's cleavage earned them the title "Israel's most eccentric dressers"¹⁷³. Were they really so idiosyncratic? Their wardrobe fits perfectly with Almog and Almog's description of the generic Gen-Y: "...millennials love clothes and devote a lot of money and attention to them, their visual language is ... flashy, [with] excessive use of clashing colors and clothes that don't go with their figures"¹⁷⁴. Their observation that millennials typically dress "in combinations more appropriate for children"¹⁷⁵ also explains why members of Everything that is Funny in the World did not have a problem independently producing and starring in skits as younger versions of themselves. In *Liver Party*, in which they play elementary school children, they wear X-men, Mutant Teenage Ninja Turtles, Adventure Time, and Popeye T-shirts sold in adult clothing departments. Almog and Almog noted that it is not uncommon to see Millennials wear "shirts with Bambi and Sponge Bob on them" and that "accessories and ornaments that used to be intended for teenagers are now sold en masse to people in their 20s and 30s"¹⁷⁶.

Members of Arutz Hakibud were inspired by this style, but in their typically absurd and parodic sense of humor found a way to exaggerate and ridicule "Israel's most eccentric dressers". Their first music video, the breakthrough hit *עור ברזל* (*Goosebumps*) (2016), resembles Static and Gal Malka's video clip *בא לה לרקוד* (*She Feels Like Dancing*) (2015) in its music, location, and wardrobe. Their hairstyles are particularly goofy and take Static's iconic "crest" to the next level. The video starts with a non-musical prologue in which one of them, Asthma (a silly nickname that spoofs nicknames such as Static), is getting a haircut. The segment emphasizes the ritual of "shaping up", and at the same time presents it as a typical pastime of young people today. While Asthma is having his hair done, his two friends just "hang out" at the barbershop. The video begins with an establishing shot of the hair salon. While Asthma gives the barber instructions, his friends discuss a viral (presumably pornographic) video that they are watching on a smartphone. One of them, Lidoy, has a mohawk hairstyle, with a pattern of the Star of David buzzed on the left side of his head. The actor who plays him, Dor Muskal, said: "What is cool about these characters... is the

¹⁷² (Zaid 2018).

¹⁷³ (Style Icon 2017; Static and Ben El 2017).

¹⁷⁴ (Almog and Almog 2019, 29).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

entire look. We went and got haircuts that do not correspond to who we are or how old we are"¹⁷⁷.

The most iconic item in Gen Y videos representing the Israeli youthful way of life is the hookah, which is featured in clips and lyrics by Dudu Faruk, the Zabari brothers, and Arutz Hakibud. "Hookahs, which have become very popular with this generation... are consumed as early as junior high. This trend has become an integral part of social gatherings, school trips, parties, and other hangouts among young people"¹⁷⁸. Most youngsters are hookah "social smokers", and do not smoke alone. In the clips, the hookah signifies a collective youth experience, a symbol of the gang. Muskal explained that the characters' origins are partly inspired by "people we grew up with, our neighbors or friends' brothers and a lot from how we were as teenagers. We also smoked a hookah when we were in high school"¹⁷⁹.

There are several other iconic objects associated with collective youth experiences. One of them is an electric vehicle. In their discussion of modern rites of passage, Almog and Almog claim that "the reduced age limit for getting a license for a car and motorcycle... next to the appearance of interim motorized options such as electric bicycles and scooters, mopeds and all-terrain vehicles, have in recent years blurred out historic rites of passage that separated the adults from the young"¹⁸⁰. *On Tamás and on the Sting* includes scenes of wild rides down the streets and across the dunes, along with lyrics such as "like a knight on an electric horse". In their clip *Goosebumps* the characters drive an ATV, in a nod to Static and Gal Malka's *She Feels Like Dancing*, which opens with a shot of an ATV driving on the beach. *Goosebumps* emphasizes the ATV's "swag appeal" in an exaggerated way which ridicules it. The vehicle is shown when Dolev Shifris is first introduced. Shifris, who serves as the group's antagonist in some of the clips, makes an impressive entrance into the diegesis. He first appears right after a break in the song in which the music is temporarily suspended. Just as the beat resumes, there is a shot in slow motion of an ATV driving through a puddle, literally making a splash. Then comes a reaction shot in which the protagonists are looking at him. The next shot presents Shifris and friends riding in the ATV, with a deliberately underwhelming animated title that pops onto the screen,

¹⁷⁷ (Tofach 2017).

¹⁷⁸ (Almog and Almog 2019, 20).

¹⁷⁹ (Tofach 2017).

¹⁸⁰ (Almog and Almog 2019, 20).

announcing his name and the class at school he is in. Shifris' electric status symbol attracts the same girl that one of the protagonists, Shaked, is wooing. Shaked stares jealously as she flirts with the boys in the ATV. Eventually, Shaked manages to win her heart as he returns to the scene riding a horse. Even if this is read as a superficial message about favoring a live animal over a machine, it still does not defuse the fetishizing gaze at electric vehicles¹⁸¹.

A different aspect of the Gen-Y aesthetic is connected to their being digital natives. Arutz HaKibud's lyrics combine buzzwords and trendy new media terms. This lingo has been an inseparable part of teens' everyday lives but was rarely used in lyrics beforehand. Lines like "Thursday arrived and the Whatsapp is boiling" or "You told me honey sorry / dumped me via a[n Instagram] story/ my friends found out before me / and it broke me/ you humiliated me online".

A more critical view of digital technology can be found in Nir Berger and Yogev Yefet's comic web series *שיחות יוצאות* (*Contacts*) (2014). Each episode is devoted to a different social network – Whatsapp, Tinder, and Instagram. However, the series' aesthetic has nothing to do with the advanced visuals of the digital world. The humor in the first two episodes stems from taking the social dynamics within the apps and applying them to everyday interactions in the real world. Situations like friends' conversations in the living room or grocery shopping become absurd. It is interesting to compare *Sihot Yotzot's* episode about Whatsapp to a sketch from *Future TV* called *מסיבת רווקות לימיתוש* (*Yamitush's bachelorette party*). Both have the same idea, but in the latter example there is a different visualization, which sticks to the familiar interface of the app.

One reason for some of the content creators' decision not to match the cinematic expressive means to the digital visualization, is the difficulty to convert the virtual sphere to reality. Especially in independent productions, which have more limited resources. This point strengthens an observation that animated web projects seem to better adopt and apply innovative web aesthetics.

¹⁸¹ In the context of the fetishizing gaze over electric vehicles, note that two members of Arutz Hakibud's trio, Kapelinsky and Muskal, created the made-for-TV film called *גרוטרלי: שובם של 'ילד אוכל מפח'* (*Grutarally: The Return of 'Kid's Eating Trash'*) (Rotem Kapelinsky, 2018). This experimental-mocumentary-musical-comedy is set in a real annual junk car rally, in which vehicle owners go out on a driving trek into the wild. In addition, electric scooters also appear in Arutz Hakibud's feature film *Over the Top*, and on the cover photo of the movie's theme song.

The Shvetz Family (2018)'s animation enables it to celebrate scatological and bodily humor, accompanied by appropriately gruesome images. Sometimes the disgusting images are deliberately shot in enhancing close ups. This style, albeit disturbing, has been seen on traditional television before, in subversive cartoons such as *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1995, Nickelodeon; 1996, MTV), or *South Park* (1997-, Comedy Central). However, such aesthetics was missing from Israeli comedy. The Israeli TV has thinner margins. Provocative shows for niche audiences struggle to find a place. If they require a big production budget, as animated productions often do, their chances of being produced are even lower. There has not been an Israeli equivalent to *South Park* or *Family Guy* (1999-, Fox). The closest attempt was *22 .p.z (M.K. 22)* (2004, Bip), created for a cable comedy channel. Although it is remembered fondly by fans and critics, this short-lived series lasted for only 10 episodes. The niche has not been filled in Israeli television ever since.

The Shvetz Family's revolting aesthetic is more contemporary compared to the above-mentioned TV shows. It is closer to Gen-Y's favorite *Rick and Morty* (2013-, Adult Swim)¹⁸². Both animated shows do not shy away from shocking images and bad taste. In both shows an eccentric patriarch drags his neurotic offspring to wild adventures. Neither animated show shies away from shocking images nor bad taste. In both shows the character dynamic is similar, with an eccentric patriarch who drags his neurotic offspring to experience wild adventures. Nevertheless, *The Shvetz Family* is influenced by the web as much, if not more so, than by TV. Throughout the series, the father, Haim, is shown in exceedingly unflattering close ups. His normal facial features are distorted to meme-like caricatures. His veiny eyes and tormented expressions look like the "Rage Comics" iconic characters from viral memes such as "Y U NO Guy", "NO. Rage Face" and "Forever Alone"¹⁸³. Haim's "reaction shots" are a parody of the concept of a reaction shot gone wrong. His feelings are greatly overstated.

Interestingly, the other main character, Haim's son Dror, is not featured similarly. His facial features can even be described as "cute". This may be because he is the one that the youth-adoring-infantile series favorites. Another example of the series' ageist agenda is evident in the portrayal of the elderly based on gross-out aesthetics and dark humor. In the third episode, there is a recurring joke where elderly

¹⁸² (Bruenig 2017); (Koltun 2018).

¹⁸³ (Milner, *Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes* 2013); (Rage Comics 2011).

people are thrown into a blender, chopped to death, and sold as juice. The cruel gag is reminiscent of both content and style of viral hits from the early days of the web. Joseph C. Shields's series of Flash animations, known as *Joe Cartoon*, was circulated by email users in the late 1990s, long before the social networks boom. His interactive cartoons included memorable sadistic jests such as *Frog in a Blender* and *Gerbil in a Microwave*.

Another animated Israeli web series, *Ahmed and Salim*, was modeled after the outrageous *South Park* and uses the same pseudo cut-out animation. It has a similar character design (for example, Salim has Cartmen's round shape and Kenny's covered mouth). It also has the same blunt humor, that is offensive and politically incorrect. Nevertheless, *Ahmed and Salim* goes beyond *South Park* and like in *The Shvets Family*, it does not only draw from TV but also features the Meme aesthetic¹⁸⁴. Notable examples are when the web series directly parodies viral phenomena such as *Nyan Cat* (2011) and *Charlie Bit My Finger* (Howard Davies-Carr, 2007). An entire episode (#13) recreates the world of the popular freeware computer game *Icy Tower*.

In addition to its adoption of the internet's universal pictographic language¹⁸⁵, *Ahmed and Salim* has been internationally appealing because it avoids the language barrier. The episodes are dubbed in comic gibberish and subtitled in both Hebrew and English. Although the content is arguably more understandable to those who are informed about the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has been viewed by diverse foreign audiences and received mostly positive feedback.

A different kind of animation was produced by the Zabari brothers. They create animated montages in a visual style that was described as "the atmosphere of a school's computer room in 2002, animations and poor Photoshop prints ... [mixing] bizarre clips... that people posted on YouTube"¹⁸⁶. Their works can be seen as the internet version of readymade art. Their raw materials were either shared by users or taken from them without much concern about copyrights, in the spirit of online piracy. For example, the actors who appear as the main characters were "cast", without their

¹⁸⁴ Another project by *Ahmed and Salim*'s creators is *The GAG Quartet- Le Internet Medle* (2011), a music clip that mixes sounds and images from around 40(!) iconic memes and viral phenomena. This video is the most frequently watched content in their YouTube channel, with over 42 million views (at the time of writing).

¹⁸⁵ "Internet memes constitute a formal 'media lingua franca', bearing multiplicities of content to dispersed collectives" (Milner, *Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity, Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz* 2013, 64); (Milner, *Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes* 2013).

¹⁸⁶ (Samarias 2018).

knowledge or consent, while the filmmakers were scrolling through Google Images. "Shimi is a football player in the national Moroccan team and Lagziel is a Lacoste model. We took him 'as is', with the [Lacoste] shirt included... for Farjun we searched 'Hafla' [Arabic slang for celebration] on YouTube, and found this wedding singer from Kfar Saba, but we changed his eyes..."¹⁸⁷.

The images were then used in a process that resembles the making of memes. Milner defined memes as "discursive artifacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way"¹⁸⁸. Similarly, the images in the video were duplicated and placed in a new context. They are meant to tell a story, but the main goal is simply to amuse¹⁸⁹. This creative method risks becoming problematic and limiting, since some platforms, mostly the traditional mainstream ones, will not air non-copyrighted materials.

Out with the Old

Almog and Almog suggest that the millennials' lesser resilience in comparison to previous generations derives from their upbringing in Yuppie families who adopted a paedocentric educational approach. They classify the millennials under what they define as "the nerd model". The nerd's protective upbringing included unlimited tolerance for anxieties and weakness, without demonstrating authority or imposing punishment. As a result, the kids were less trained to deal with the world's difficulties. "The nerd, therefore, is one of the outcomes of the collapse of authoritative culture and the fading dichotomy between the grownup world and the world of children. This collapse, next to the development of computer culture, is probably what boosted the nerd not only to the center of the symbolic stage, but also to the cultural and demographic stages"¹⁹⁰.

One might presume that the modern parents' friendly approach would create a closer and warmer bond with their kids, yet this is not necessarily the case, as

¹⁸⁷ (Samarias 2018).

¹⁸⁸ (Milner, *Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes* 2013). See also (Milner, *Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity, Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz* 2013, 65).

¹⁸⁹ (Milner, *Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity, Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz* 2013); (Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* 2014).

¹⁹⁰ (Almog and Almog 2019, 17-18).

demonstrated in a group of web videos that rebels against parental authority. This rebellion can be seen as part of the infantile position which rejects the mature world.

Arutz Hakibud's video *That's The Way it is with Us* replicates the generic patterns of teen comedies, including the cliché of an angry patriarch who bursts into a house party, angrily shuts it down and spoils the fun. This trope was previously seen, for example, in the classic video clip for the Israeli musician Danny Sanderson's song *אצל הַדַּד וְהַדַּדָּה* (*At the Aunt and Uncle's Place*) (Moti Kirschenbaum, 1987). It was also seen in American movies such as *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin, 1990) and *Sisters* (Jason Moore, 2015). Arutz Hakibud's video depicts the organization and execution of a wild house party. Towards the end of the song, an unwelcome intruder shows up. In a similar trick to the one that was used to introduce the antagonist in *Goosebumps*, this intruder also enters the diegesis with a bang. First, there is a shot of a van entering the parking lot. Parallel editing cuts to shots of the unsuspecting youngsters as they are happily partying. Then, there is a shot in which the van's door opens, and out comes an angry looking middle-aged man. The frame freezes, filtered in dramatic colors, and a title announces the character's name – "Ziko Ferrera". Viewers infer that he is the father of one of the boys in the trio, Shaked Ferrera. The cross cutting continues as Ziko aggressively makes his way into the party. When he finally finds his son and the two are presented within the same shot, Ziko's shout "Shaked!" abruptly cuts the song that has been played in the soundtrack. Shaked does not hear his call. The next shot shows Ziko calling him again. Then, there is a surprising reverse shot – it does not show Shaked at the party. Instead, it shows the kid from the prologue lifting his head, as if he is waking up from a daydream. Turns out that Ziko entered the kid's room and ordered him to stop playing with his action figures and go to sleep. The conflict with the repressing father is what connects both levels of the story.

Ahmed and Salim also presents a clash between a father's old fashioned values and his sons' modern lifestyle. In a deliberately very offensive characterization, the father Yasser expects his sons Ahmed and Salim to become great terrorists and perform violent attacks, even at the cost of their lives. But the two boys prefer to spend their days playing *Guitar Hero* and watching silly viral videos. They often play pranks on their father and disrespect him. Many episodes end in a similar shot – the alleged camera spins from a bird's eye view above the angry father as he turns his head to the sky and shouts in rage "Ahmed and Salimmmmm!" after they have once again caused him embarrassment and disappointment.

Bne-El (בנה־אל), the "forsaken kid", is neglected and deserted. His parents are never presented or heard in the series. The boy is always seen outside of his house, wanders on his own, and it appears like his parents do not know and do not care where he is and what he is up to. Is it an expression of the extreme freedom that contemporary non-authoritarian parents allow their children? Probably not, since in the few times when his mother is mentioned, it is usually after they dispute. Bne-El's forsakenness, I suggest, has more to do with his identity as a national-religious settler. This case of political commentary and satire is worthy of a wider discussion, which I plan to conduct elsewhere.

Other examples take the generational conflict to a darker extreme. In *Liver Party*, the members of Everything that is Funny in the World play younger versions of themselves. They recreate a typical afternoon of schoolboys socializing in a friend's house. This video also includes the cliché of the father who returns home and spoils the fun. The disturbing comedy hints that the father (portrayed by *Messiah*'s Udi Kagan, in a guest appearance) is abusive toward his child. He is rude, revolting, hostile toward the boys, and inappropriately eager to get closer to the only girl in the group¹⁹¹.

There are, however, counter examples. A more sympathetic approach towards parents can be found in a series of skits that were presented in the TV show, *Future TV* (that was created by web comedians). The skits take place in a parenting school, which alludes to the generation gap. Although the writers were around the age of thirty, the perspective is closer to the children's views, seeing the parents as tedious out-of-touch geezers. Despite predictable jokes at the parents' expense, the skits are generally quite compassionate, crediting the parents for being willing to learn how to get closer to their Millennial kids.

The example that perhaps best fits Almog and Almog's nerd model is *The Shvetz Family*. In the first episode, the exceedingly-devoted father illustrates "helicopter parenting" (a term used to describe parents, especially of millennials, who pay extremely close attention to their children's experiences¹⁹²), and quite literally hovers over his son. The second episode demonstrates Almog and Almog's definition of the blurred lines between adults and children. The infantile father, "a boy stuck in a man's

¹⁹¹ Some web comedies allowed themselves to push the envelope and poke subjects which some consider inappropriate in a humorous context. Sugar Zaza's notorious web series *Mindy and the Magician* (2010) also joked about pedophilia, in a much more explicit and controversial way, as will be discussed later.

¹⁹² (LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011).

body"¹⁹³, builds a pillow fort in the living room. He and his young son are equally enthusiastic about this juvenile activity. They drift into an imagined adventure in a dream world that only the two of them can see. The father shares the childish imagined (or irrational) point of view with his boy¹⁹⁴.

In contrast to the generational bridge which is expressed through the warm father-son bond, *The Shvets Family* also presents extreme hostility towards the elderly. In the third episode there are many elderly characters, each and every one of them presented in a demeaning manner. These old characters are also used for the degradation of the early Zionist ethos of the pioneer gang and the military gang¹⁹⁵. This contrast might seem inconsistent with previous episodes. However, in *The Shvets Family*, the father is likeable exactly because he does not fulfill his role and does not act as expected from a person in his age. When old people behave according to their age, and succumb to adulthood, they are excluded and punished.

Arrested Development – Blessing or a Curse? Gen-X vs Gen-Y

Regression is a key feature of the Y generation. It is also expressed in their sense of humor and in their web videos. But is it truly unique? "The 'overgrown children' or 'childish adults' phenomenon did not start with millennials, but rather with previous generations, particularly the Yuppie culture of Generation X"¹⁹⁶. Thus, infantilism has been a core attribute of the most successful popular comedies since the late 1990s and dominated the genre in the early 21st century. These comedies were created by and starring a gang of Gen-X comedians from Hollywood. The best-known names are Adam Sandler (born 1966), Will Ferrell (born 1967), Judd Apatow (born 1967), and Seth Rogan (born 1982).

Sandler's films include *Billy Madison* (Tamra Davis, 1995); *Happy Gilmore* (Dennis Dugan, 1996); *The Waterboy* (Frank Coraci, 1998); *The Wedding Singer* (Frank Coraci, 1998); *Big Daddy* (Dennis Dugan, 1999); *Little Nicky* (Steven Brill, 2000); *Mr. Deeds* (Steven Brill, 2002). Ferrell starred in movies such as *Elf* (Jon Favreau, 2003); *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003); *Blades of Glory* (Josh Gordon, Will

¹⁹³ (Almog and Almog 2019, 22).

¹⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier regarding its animation style, *The Shvets Family* seems to be deeply inspired by the American *Rick and Morty*. In a somewhat similar dynamic, the wild grandfather Rick drags his young Grandson Morty into joint adventures.

¹⁹⁵ (Talmon 2001).

¹⁹⁶ (Almog and Almog 2019, 27).

Speck, 2007); *The Other Guys* (Adam McKay, 2010). Comedies created/produced by Judd Apatow, starring Seth Rogan, include *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005); *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007); *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007); *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon Green, 2008); *This Is the End* (Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, 2013); *The Night Before* (Jonathan Levine, 2015)¹⁹⁷.

As David Greven notes, these comedies "are often read as indicative of a new crisis in American masculinity—men who refuse to grow up, get jobs, get out of their parents' house, get wives, get lives"¹⁹⁸. These "comedian's comedy" hits were created in the image of their stars, like Sandler and Ferrell, whose childish personas set the tone for early 21st century mainstream humor. The millennials grew up in a world in which these were the dominant comic styles. It influenced their impression of what comedy should be like. Hence these films defined their online successors, even in other countries. Almog and Almog mention that the Israeli "millennials' childish behavior is tied to the increasing influence of American culture on youths around the world (mostly via television and the internet), since childishness is embedded in this culture"¹⁹⁹.

However, there is a major difference between the generations. Gen-X's feature films "...may indeed be about man-children and their arrested development, but their narratives present the protagonists' ultimate need to grow up and embrace responsibility in the end"²⁰⁰. Taylor points out that most of these allegedly wild anarchistic tales are in fact "...ideologically conservative in form, featuring a social misfit who gradually comes to recognize the necessity of adopting the hegemonic cultural norms that he initially spurned"²⁰¹. Greven, for example, mentions that "even prolonged states of bachelorhood and brotherhood... almost always lead to marriage"²⁰². Taylor classifies

¹⁹⁷ There is some overlap between the groups. For example, Apatow co-wrote and co-produced Sandler's *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (Dennis Dugan, 2008); Sandler starred in Apatow's *Funny People* (2009); Apatow produced Ferrell's films *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004), *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (Adam McKay, 2006) and *Step Brothers* (Adam McKay, 2008).

Other notable comedy films from that era, made by others, that share similar themes and style are *The Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005); *Role Models* (David Wain, 2008); *I Love You Man* (John Hamburg, 2009); *The Hangover* (Todd Philips, 2009).

¹⁹⁸ (Greven 2013, 405).

¹⁹⁹ (Almog and Almog 2019, 27). They mention *Seinfeld* as an example of a popular TV show which influenced the generation who watched it (28). An anecdote that demonstrates this is that after gen-Y comedian Niv Majar gained fame, and was asked to make TV commercials for big brands that could offer big budgets, Majar chose to "make a childhood dream come true" and cast American actors who played memorable supporting roles in the hit sitcom from the 1990s (Palty 2017).

²⁰⁰ (Tait, *Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrell's Time-Bending Comic Persona* 2014, 176).

²⁰¹ (Taylor 2013, 21).

²⁰² (Greven 2013, 406).

these funny films as "anxious dramas of enculturation", which have an ambivalent, if not negative, approach towards the infantilism which they appear to celebrate. For these man-boys, says Taylor, "childhood is more prison than regenerating NeverNever Land"²⁰³.

If so, Gen-X comedies, which were produced as feature films, treat the refusal to grow up as an obstacle that must be dealt with, and coming of age as the happy resolution of the plot. By contrast, Gen-Y web creators do not see a problem at all. They joyfully wallow in regression and reject any justification to grow up.

This may be because the different approaches stem from different sets of values in each generation. Almog and Almog described the millennials' "legitimization of childlike behaviour" in a generation that is no longer "ashamed or embarrassed to stay forever children". They explain that "whereas in previous generations becoming an adult was perceived as an achievement, i.e. something to aspire to, young people nowadays see it as a type of prison..."²⁰⁴.

Alternatively, it is because Israeli Millennials' preoccupation with issues of masculinity takes a different form compared to Hollywood's Gen-X. American comedy films are often read by scholars as focused on themes of masculinity and gender identity²⁰⁵. Some labeled this group of films "Beta Male comedies". Tait suggested that this is not completely new, but rather a new stage in a long tradition of what Kaja Silverman dubbed "male hysteria". Since the films evoke "a fluid gender dynamic that includes feminine traits", the homosocial group dynamics between the main characters amount to a form of non-heteronormative relationship²⁰⁶. Therefore, some critics and scholars label the subgenre as "Bromances" or "Bromcoms" (a portmanteau term combining "Bro", short for "brother", a slang term to describe close familiarity among male friends, and "romance"/"romantic comedy"). "...all movies of this new genre—presenting a love story between two male protagonists—as well as highlighting the contradictions within contemporary masculinity by showing two grown men acting out a pre-Oedipal, pre-adolescent and polymorphous bisexuality"²⁰⁷.

²⁰³ (Taylor 2013, 25).

²⁰⁴ (Almog and Almog 2019, 17,23,87).

²⁰⁵ (Pace 2015); (Hartwell 2013); (Reinwald 2014).

²⁰⁶ (Tait, *Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrell's Time-Bending Comic Persona* 2014, 168). See also (Greven 2013, 405).

²⁰⁷ (Tait 2016, 61).

This masculinity crisis is part of American culture but exists in other countries as well. It can be considered a global phenomenon that stems from the modern Western way of life²⁰⁸. In Israeli web comedy, however, the approach is somewhat different²⁰⁹. While the Americans present their heroes as Beta males, the Israeli comedians express overly dominant and self-assured manhood²¹⁰. Dudu Faruk is hyperbolically machoistic and chauvinistic. Bne-El, (subversively played by a female), behaves in a very manly way that does not correspond to his young age. Ahmed and Salim are passive and lazy. They are devoted gamers and associated with geek culture. But they are still very aggressive and violent.

The third explanation has to do with the form and the platform. In terms of storytelling, the short form often does not enable, or require, the same level of narrative development. Scripts for feature films aspire to design well-rounded characters. The characters' evolution as the plot unfolds involves internal processes that eventually lead to a change in their personalities and psychology²¹¹. TV series can build a rich and detailed diegetic world, whether it is by the interwoven stories of dozens of citizens in one city (for example, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008)) or a whole new alternative reality, with its own rules, that the viewers gradually discover (for example, *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019)). Creators of short music videos, sketches, vlogs, and other common online genres do not bother with this kind of writing. In the humorous shorts, the diegesis' internal logic can divert from realism and allow itself to become a caricature.

The web videos' less realistic style is connected to another aspect of the online platform. Often the leading characters in Israeli web videos are younger than the men-children protagonists of Hollywood cinema. The American stars play characters who are closer to their real age, while the Israelis adopt younger personas. This might also have to do with the web's ability to blur the comedians' real persona. Web creators emerge from anonymity. In the cinema, on the other hand, especially in "comedian's comedies", the film relies on the distinct persona of its star as emphasized by publicity for the film. This may be more limiting than the web where, at least initially, the

²⁰⁸ (DeAngelis 2014); (Donnar 2015).

²⁰⁹ Different forms of a masculinity crisis can be found in other local genres. A prominent example is in the analysis of manhood in Israeli horror movies (and horror-comedies), see (Rosen 2020).

²¹⁰ Interestingly, Greven connects beta-male comedies, especially those with Jewish Seth Rogan, to the antisemitic trope of the neurotic, passive, and unmanly Jew. He claims that these films are "a striking rebuttal of Jewish stereotypes... freed from the emotional burdens and the 'kvetching' that marked previous generations of Jewish stars" (414).

²¹¹ (Bordwell 2006).

comedians are freed from audience expectations, and from meta-connections to their previous appearances. They are a blank slate. This is true for the analyses of Dudu Faruk's persona, as presented by me in another chapter of this dissertation. Members of Arutz Hakibud also stated that fans believe that their mock online personas are their real-life identities²¹². Another example is the description by actress Gaya Beer Gurevich, who plays Bne-El, of a typical reaction from fans:

"A group... suddenly recognized Yogev [The web series co-creator, who also plays the character of Elyakim]... They could not wrap their heads around what I was saying. They were convinced that Bne-El is truly a boy... They had three consecutive shocks: first, they were shocked that it is fiction. Second, that the character is portrayed by an actress and not an actor. Third, that Yogev and I are married..."²¹³.

Importantly, the Gen-Y and Gen-X approaches to childhood and regression are rooted in their national history and context. The Israeli millennials have their own local reasons for their refusal to let go of the past. For this generation of Israelis, growing up was constantly overshadowed by a never-ending series of catastrophic events including the Gulf War, the terror attacks in the cities, including traumatic images of exploding buses, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by a Jewish extremist, the 9/11 terror attack, the second Intifada, military operations, and regional wars²¹⁴. These dramatic events, among others, led to deep changes in the nature of the country. Since the key web creators belong to the same secular, educated, liberal, and left-wing sector, they were born into a group that at the time constituted the classic Israeli hegemony. As they grew up, however, the Israeli left-wing has declined sharply, adopted more conservative values, and deserted the denial of non-Western identity. These youngsters grew up in the 1990s when there was still an optimistic vision that promised "a new Middle East". Their dreams were shattered as they watched the leadership taken from Rabin by a deadly anti-democratic act. They witnessed the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and Prime Minister Ehud Barak's disillusioned conclusion that "there is no partner". Their values and world views shifted from a dominant national ideology to a minority opinion. Nevertheless, they kept on living in a terrible, violent, sometimes chaotic reality, which with time seems more and more like a dead end. In these conditions, no wonder they want to return to better times when Israelis still had hope.

²¹² (Giladi 2022).

²¹³ (Yaakov 2018).

²¹⁴ (Almog and Almog 2019, 7).

It's a Young Man's Game

Youth is an object of nostalgic longing that is often expressed in the arts of many cultures and nations, as can be attested by romantic literature, sentimental poetry, nostalgic movies, and coming of age films. Hollywood cinema, more specifically, paid special attention to adolescents as a desired target audience since the 1950s. Plots were designed in the interest of being more appealing and relatable to their world, and the age of the stars became younger, closer to the teens who idolize them. In Israel, the local cinema began to pursue younger audiences in the late 1970s, in a wave of puberty films. The main reasons for this were commercial considerations and the filmmakers' adjustment to changes in the characteristics of typical cinema viewers²¹⁵.

Cinema's obsession with youth has been prevailing ever since. According to a report by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, in popular films from 2015 - 2016 only 10.7% of the characters were 60 years of age or older. This is 9.2% below U.S. census (19.9%). As if to add insult to injury, even when the films included senior characters, they were oftentimes portrayed in an ageist manner. 44% of the films that featured leading or supporting senior characters contained ageist comments. 56% of these films included comments about health, including mental well-being, memory, and hearing. 24% of movies with ageist comments featured statements about appearance and smell. 24% of movies with ageist comments included derogatory references to death²¹⁶.

Hollywood ageism is significantly harsher towards women. According to another report by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which examined inequality in 1,300 popular films from 2007 to 2019, women filled only 38.8% of speaking roles among 21–39 years old. The findings were even more dire for women above 40 years of age, as they only held a quarter of the speaking roles within this age range —the lowest of all age groups. Only 3% of leading/co-leading roles went to women who were 45 years of age or older²¹⁷. Although in 2019 the percentage of females as leads and co-leads in films was at an all-time high (43%), the report proves that "no matter how much research, public outcry, press attention, or implicit bias training, Hollywood films fail girls/women year after year in popular movies"²¹⁸. Despite some notable changes

²¹⁵ (Talmon 2001, 143, 162) following (Gertz 1993).

²¹⁶ (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2018).

²¹⁷ (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2020).

²¹⁸ (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2020).

in the industry norms, from the MeToo revolution to niche tailor-made content produced by streaming services, there is still severe discrimination. While in 2019 the percentage of female characters was the highest in 13 years, it nevertheless reached only 34%. Parallel research regarding representation in popular American television comes up with quite similar conclusions²¹⁹.

The film industry's ageism both reflects and designs social norms that worship youth. Aside from the statistics and data, sometimes it is enough to look at the faces of leading actresses who underwent cosmetic procedures to preserve and reconstruct youth²²⁰. In an article titled "what every actress knows", Deborah Novak examines SAG reports from the late 1980s and early 1990s. She finds that "once an actress turns 40, her chances for a part in a feature film diminish significantly", with less than 10% of all roles available to her²²¹. In 2015, *Inside Amy Schumer* (Comedy Central, 2013-2016) presented a sketch called *Last Fuckable Day*²²². It became a viral sensation, with millions of views on YouTube, and was hailed as "one of the greatest sketches in television history"²²³. It features Schumer joining a group of successful female stars to toast Julia Louis-Dreyfus' "last fuckable day". "In every actress' life, the media decides when you finally reach the point when you're not believably fuckable anymore", they explain and add a convincing example: "You know how Sally Field was Tom Hanks' love interest in *Punchline*, and then, like, 20 minutes later she was his mom in *Forrest Gump*"?

Novak explains that "when Hollywood executives are asked why this discriminatory situation is allowed to persist, the traditional answer is that the worldwide target audience is 16 to 25 year old males"²²⁴. The film industry must compete for their attention. Nowadays, youngsters spend most of their viewing time in front of smaller screens, or within cyberspaces. "It is known that every new technological medium penetrates the younger populace first. Older people tend to be suspicious and hesitant and lag behind", says Almog and Almong, who point out social networks, specifically Facebook, as symbols of an "outstanding generational gap – so much so that it has turned its use into one of the main characteristics and cultural brands

²¹⁹ (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2017).

²²⁰ (M. Smith 2016).

²²¹ (Novak 1993, 87-88).

²²² The sketch appeared in the first episode of the third season.

²²³ (Handy 2016).

²²⁴ (Novak 1993, 87-88).

of Generation Y". Older people were still more hesitant to take part in web culture. They sometimes see it as a superficial activity. They prefer to maintain separation among their social circles. Also, they worry about public exposure, picking up arguments, or appearing technologically inept²²⁵.

In the cinema industry, young consumers have limited buying power, since they are often not financially independent. Online, however, content is usually free. In streaming platforms, the currency is the viewers' attention. Hence more free time equals more "specie" to spend. Since kids and teenagers usually have more time for leisure activities, it makes them very desired audiences. Their extensive free time also allows them to create more independent content and actively participate.

As in the film and TV industries, the web's age bias is also tangled with a gender bias. Young males are more tech savvy²²⁶. Therefore, they are more likely to consume and share content on social networks, they have more influence, and mass content would be shaped by their tastes.

Some may claim that it is too cynical to blame online content creators for trying to flatter youngsters. These independent filmmakers did not necessarily create their infantile content as part of a pre-planned business strategy. Considering the typical attributions of Millennials, it can certainly simply be their personal taste. Moreover, their creative process is much more spontaneous. Some of the most famous online personas, such as Beer Gurevich's Bne-El and Sugar Zaza's Efes (עפס), were created on the spot by improvisation, according to statements by their creators²²⁷. But even so, the norms that are deeply rooted in the entertainment world explain why their improvised materials have been so well received and managed to attain prominence within the sea of online content.

Keeping it Clean

The millennials' common characterizations - indulging leisure culture, weak parental authority, and the selfishness that prefers personal pleasure over compliance to social norms, all encouraged a "wilder" lifestyle. In their teenage years Millennials were

²²⁵ (Almog and Almog 2019, 151). See also (Rasi 2022).

²²⁶ (Dobson and Willinsky 2009, 295-296).

²²⁷ (Tzalach, Efes? Hu Yishte Zhuhit Lifney Sheyaase Hisun Ki Hu Idiot (Efes? He Would Drink Glass Before He Would Get Vaccinated Because He is an Idiot) 2021); (Yaakov 2018).

casually consuming age restricted substances, further blurring the boundaries between adult and childish behavior.

Alcohol consumption among Gen-Y is unlike previous generations in several aspects: first, they were exposed to an abundance of hard liquor since childhood. Second, they started consuming alcohol during puberty, mostly while partying at dance clubs. Whereas in the past, young people in Israel only started to consume alcohol after their army service (as grownups over 21 years of age), Millennials have been doing it since middle school, despite the law prohibiting the sale of alcohol to teens. Third, they consume more alcohol more frequently. Fourth, gender gaps regarding drinking greatly diminished in this generation²²⁸. In Arutz Hakibud's *That's The Way It Is with Us*, the depiction of a typical teenage party includes the lyrics: "In our party...everyone has a drink in their hand... we will not leave before the bar is empty". Another example is Dudu Faruk's song *Arak*, which is named after the distilled alcoholic drink and praises it.

One more popular age-inappropriate activity is smoking. "With the rise of 24/7 convenience stores, and despite the minimum age for cigarettes sales, cigarettes have become more available to millennial youths than any previous generation". As previously mentioned, when discussing the Millennial web video aesthetic, smoking is a recurring motif, sort of an icon for teenage fun (although many times the directors seem to prefer hookahs over cigarettes). For Gaya Beer Gurevich, Bne-El's smoking habits are not a gag but an authentic reflection of her personal experiences when she was at the same very early age. "When I was in seventh-eighth grade... I would hang around smoking cigarettes, I did not care about anything other than being with friends... we would smoke hookahs and drink Beer... Bne-El smokes because I used to smoke back then"²²⁹. Therefore, it is not correct to read these activities in the videos as the typical teenage rebellion, where youngsters aspire to prove their independence and adopt an adult lifestyle. For Gen-Y creators, booze and smoking activities are associated with childhood experiences, not with adulthood. For previous generations, the sight of a kid smoking a cigarette might be enough of a dissonance to serve as a gag. But for Gen-Y, Bne-El has to eat his cigarettes to create defamiliarization.

²²⁸ (Almog and Almog 2019, 114, 20).

²²⁹ (Yaakov 2018).

If there are still viewers who consider Bne-El's smoking shocking, they could perhaps find comfort in that he only smokes tobacco. Gen-Y teenagers practice more extensive drug use than previous generations. They also begin using drugs at earlier ages, at parties, or on backpack trips. The early 2010s seem to have brought change to the status quo about drugs. It stems from a number of reasons: Millennials were raised on the importance of personal liberties. They consider entertainment to be a supreme purpose. They were exposed to a relatively positive public discourse about drugs. They have easy access to narcotics, partly thanks to technology²³⁰ (for example, the Telegram app). Yet unlike alcohol and tobacco, drugs are illegal in Israel and still do not have the same level of legitimization. Therefore, they are hardly evident in these web videos²³¹. Arutz Hakibud, for example, reject their association with "stoner humor". In an interview about their feature film *Dor Muskal* claimed: "I love stoner humor, and I am somewhat of a stoner myself, but this is not stoner humor. There are not any drugs or stoned people in it. This film is on the verge of abstainer"²³².

Hence Generation Y might be quite insubordinate in their teenage years, but they are hardly "rebels without a cause", and not living by the motto "sex, drugs & Rock 'n' roll". In their web creations, they have replaced Rock 'n' roll with trap, drugs with tobacco (or vapes), and largely given up on promiscuousness. Many scholars find that Gen-Y teens are less sexually active²³³. Arutz Hakibud's trio of partying teens seems refined and well-mannered in comparison to the raunchy horny trio from the boomers' generation who lead the *Lemon Popsicle* franchise, with their vulgar humor, toxic masculinity, and soft-core sex scenes.

Uzi Weil and Etgar Keret are two of the most prominent Generation X writers in Israel. In addition to writing prose, the two were also members of the writing staff for the canonic TV sketch show *החמישייה הקאמרית* (*The Chamber Quintet*) (Channel 2, Channel 1, 1993-1997), which defined (some of) the Israeli humor of the 1990s. Yaron Peleg claims that the young Gen-X writers, like Weil and Keret, offered new paradigms among which love is central. They were mainly worried about finding the other half and forming a family²³⁴. He adds that "there is nothing new or special about the fact

²³⁰ (Almog and Almog 2019, 119).

²³¹ The notable exception is Dudu Faruk, whose alleged drug sympathy serves his gangster-rapper persona and his shock humor.

²³² (Giladi 2022).

²³³ (Golan, Wagner and Lifshitz Klieger 2016); (Slapper 2014); (Ueda, et al. 2020).

²³⁴ (Peleg, *Popular Media in a Post-National Age* 2008, 111).

that Gadi Taub, Uzi Weil, and Gafi Amir base their works on their own lives... Dating, sex, love, and romance figure prominently in their works because most of these were written and published when they were in their twenties and naturally reflect what was uppermost in their minds at that time"²³⁵. This may not have been special then, but it is now. While it is certainly still common in cinematic and TV works about the lives of people in their twenties, it is much less frequent on the web. The 20-something years old web creators prefer to focus on other themes.

The Israeli Gen-X writers were also considered infantile around the time they began their careers. Even though the writers of the 1990s dealt with the early stages of establishing an independent grown-up lifestyle, Peleg notes that "their focus on romantic love may sometimes seem adolescent and immature". It was Gen-X's way of shaping a "mode of rebellion, escape, and fulfillment in an increasingly alienating world"²³⁶. Gen-Y, as said, are also self-centered and detached, yet they choose a different approach and intensify it.

This argument is strengthened by a comparison between the Israeli web content creators and notable American comedian-musicians who gained fame online around the same time. The first example is Bo Burnham. He was only 16 years old when his funny songs first became a viral sensation in 2006. Burnham's early videos were self-produced in his family's home in Hamilton, Massachusetts. He recorded himself performing, playing a guitar or digital piano in front of a camera that stands still, in one static shot²³⁷. Burnham distributed his videos through streaming platforms such as Break.com and YouTube, where he is considered to be a pioneering user, especially in the comedy category²³⁸. In an interview from 2008, teen Burnham defended his taste for R-rated material claiming "[My songs are] about stuff kids my age normally wouldn't laugh at,

²³⁵ (Peleg, *Popular Media in a Post-National Age* 2008, 120).

²³⁶ (Peleg, *Popular Media in a Post-National Age* 2008, 120).

²³⁷ Burnham's one-man-show approach, and his experience in independent content creation, came handy in the production of one of the most acclaimed creations of the Covid-19 lockdown era. His comedy special *Inside* (Netflix, 2021) was produced, written, composed, directed, shot, edited and preformed as a solo act, while Burnham has been in isolation in his house. The impressive result earned him three Primetime Emmy Awards and several other prizes. Interestingly, some of the highlight segments in *Inside* harshly satirizes the World Wide Web (*Welcome to the Internet*) and social media (*White Woman's Instagram*). This is even more ironic considering that the special was produced for a major streaming service.

²³⁸ (J. P. Kahn 2008).

except they do". The interviewer adds that "what he sings about is so politically incorrect that it is not funny. Except it is"²³⁹.

Here are, for example, lyrics from his song *Bo Fo Sho*:

"I do drugs in the bedroom, lie on your back
 'Cause I got the pipe and you got the crack
 And though I'm sexually straight, you're bound to find
 I'm mentally gay, 'cause I'll blow your mind
 The parents be snickering, 'He shouldn't have written it',
 But I'm constipated--couldn't give a shit"

Another notable independent creator who became an international star is Dave Burd, better known by his stage name, Lil' Dicky. As his nickname suggests, his content also tends to be coarse. In 2013, at the age of 25, he recorded songs using his personal MacBook Pro and a \$400 microphone²⁴⁰, and released them online on a weekly basis. The songs quickly became viral hits. His music video *Ex-Boyfriend* was especially popular and gained over a million views in just 24 hours. After cultivating a broad fanbase, Burd launched a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter. His followers were keen to finance his next creative endeavor, and the independent creator raised more money than he hoped and asked for.

"Let me hear you shout
 If you grew up in the '90s
 Then you know what I'm about
 Don't you wish we could rewind it?"

One of Lil Dicky's songs is called "The 90s". It offers excessive namedropping of iconic pop culture items from that decade (Michael Jordan jersey, Tamagotchi, Goosebumps book series, Pogs, Koosh balls, etc.). As mentioned, Israeli web creators also aspire to return to this idolized decade. Comedian and podcaster Dor Kahn said, "in almost every episode my guest references the 1990s... Well, you know, it is our childhood"²⁴¹. The

²³⁹ (J. P. Kahn 2008).

²⁴⁰ (Betker 2016).

²⁴¹ (D. Kahn 2021).

decade has been nostalgically fetishized in Dor Muskal's hit comedic Facebook group "סטטוסים משנות התשעים" ("[Facebook] Statuses from the 1990s")²⁴², and in *Future TV*'s series of sketches *A Waste of Time*. While the Israelis look fondly on these memories and use them to create an experience of regression into simpler and better times, Burd's nostalgic piece takes a different approach. The comic effect stems from the dissonance between the innocent childhood experiences and the vulgar gangsta-rapper clichés: "Nerf guns loaded and we shootin' at y'all motherfuckers", "Pegging stupid bitches in that motherfucking ball pit", "And we was spinning that bottle, de-prude hoers".

Like many of the web creators who reached celebrity status and mainstream success, Burd made a transition into television²⁴³. In *Dave* (FXX, 2020 -), Burd stars as himself in a plot that is loosely based on his real life. The episode *Talent Shows* (season 1, episode 6) includes flashbacks to his adolescent memories from summer camp. Throughout the episode, Dave is longing for these times, until he experiences a psychological breakthrough and understands that his nostalgic memories are a false, distorted, perception of an unpleasant, even traumatic, past. The disillusioned Burd recovers from his addiction to the past. This is another big and significant difference between him and his Israeli colleagues.

A third example is *The Lonely Island* (Akiva Schaffer, Andy Samberg, and Jorma Taccone). Three American childhood friends that at the turn of the century produced funny videos using borrowed video gear and edited them on a single PowerMac. They released their materials online, under Creative Commons licenses. They used several distribution platforms, including a personal website, and early streaming services such as iFilm and Heavy.com. Fans helped spread their materials in peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, sometimes mixing their variations²⁴⁴. It did not take long before the trio reached the attention of industry professionals²⁴⁵. Around 2005 they became household names²⁴⁶, however, it was only after they had already secured jobs

²⁴² (Zand 2011).

²⁴³ Burd honestly admitted that: "I started [rapping] to be a comedian, so [the web videos are] me showing off that filmmaking/acting part of me, which was the original goal. More so than the audio file" (Betker 2016).

²⁴⁴ These active fans are another example of "viewers" (Daly). They voluntarily carried out the task of distribution, and sometimes also took the role of editors to present their own versions of the piece, and even to impose new style or meaning on it. They do not just view, they participate.

²⁴⁵ (Jardin 2005).

²⁴⁶ "I remember with 'Lazy Sunday', it was the first time you could forward a link using YouTube," says Samberg. "We'd heard a lot of people had seen it, but when we tracked it on our YouTube channel, it

as staff members in the mythological TV show *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975 -). They formed a digital content department that is credited for re-inventing and freshening up the veteran show. The Israeli musical-comic trio Arutz Hakibud somewhat resembles The Lonely Island trio and their viral *SNL Digital Shorts* (2005-2018) videos. At one point they even created content and managed the social networks for ארץ נהדרת (*A Wonderful Country*) (Channel 2/ Keshet, 2003-), the Israeli equivalent of *Saturday Night Live*. But in this case too, the Israelis choose to keep their materials family-friendly, while the Americans rap about sexual encounters and perversions (typical titles of their hits include *I Just Had Sex*, *Jizz in My Pants*, *Dick in a Box*, *Motherlover*, *3-Way*).

Are the Israelis exceptionally prudish? Or are they keeping it clean as part of a strategy to take over the most desired young audiences? There are enough counter examples to indicate that the case is more nuanced than this. It is impossible to claim that there is no filthy or inappropriate Israeli web content. For example, the case study of the controversial Dudu Faruk, that is thoroughly presented in another chapter in this dissertation. Boi Ecchi (Elior Antwi), a notable rapper and musical producer who collaborated with Faruk, was asked about the success of the crude comedian/rapper among young viewers. He claimed that it is unintentional and unpredictable: "We did not imagine anything like this... in our generation, artists release songs independently... There are no distribution companies, no commercial campaigns. [The songs reach the listeners] Straight through Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, maybe an Instagram story... But we did not push it to kids, just like we did not push it to anyone... we had no control over it... it spreads on its own"²⁴⁷. Nevertheless, it is not accurate to present Gen-Y works as if they take place in a free market without any regulations. Generally, if the content is too unsettling, any encounter with the mainstream will result in a backlash. Instead of pushing the mainstream's limits, or creating some bidirectional effect, there is a rejection of the unorthodox materials. One of the most notable examples of this is described in the chapter about Faruk, whose provocations led to an abrupt end of his stardom.

Other web creators who tried to exploit the web's relative freedom to produce extreme content which were unfit for traditional media, also failed. In 2010, Sugar Zaza

was mind-blowing. We were like, 'Wait, our video's the No.1 watched thing, in, like, Israel and Sweden and places we've never even been?' It was the coolest feeling" (McGurk 2012).

²⁴⁷ (Shalev 2022).

created an animated web series called *מינדי והקוסם* (*Mindy and the Magician*), that cynically depicted "humorous" encounters between a little girl and an old pedophile who sexually and violently abuses her. The media attacked the web series, and parents' organizations filed a police report, demanding that the creators be prosecuted²⁴⁸. As a result, the web series was taken offline (although pirated copies are still available online), and its creators denounced it.

In the US, claim Max Romanowski and Zachary Sheldon, Television comedy has been changed by YouTube and Internet culture. Content became more shocking and absurd²⁴⁹. Does the same apply to Israeli television? The commercial TV channel Reshet 13 made a bold experiment when it gathered some of the most prominent Gen-Y web creators and handed them the opportunity to come up with a sketch show, *Future TV*. The show indeed tried to be more daring in some of its sketches (compared to what is ordinarily presented in Israeli TV, all the more so in Israeli commercial TV). It included provocative characters such as "Rubi the Pedophile", and an animated singing "Bible Book from the Holocaust". However, the creators could not recreate the same appeal when they performed before the public. The TV show failed and was removed from the screen even before all the already-filmed episodes of its second season made it to air.

In the words of John Patrick in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, "Pornography is a matter of geography". Were the Israeli web creators out of line? If you ask Boi Eccia, "[these] are not the worst things that kids are exposed to... 11 years old kids watch porn and play very violent video games... As a kid... I played GTA, listened to very rough hip hop, watched porn online, and I think I turned out to be a sensitive, gentle person, who is not violent in any way... we are less sexist than the general culture... [than the real-life actions of older and famous] singers and parliament members"²⁵⁰. This perception might also explain why many Israeli content creators do not want to, or cannot, disturb their young viewers.

In cases where the creators are anonymous, do not have professional aspirations, and create the content on a random casual basis, it seems that they are more willing to be edgy and that the online community members are more willing to accept it. See, for

²⁴⁸ (Be'eri 2010); (Zeva'ah Bareshet: Sirton Al Padophil Metzuyar BeYoutube (Atrocity on the Web: A Video about a Cartoon Pedophile on YouTube) 2010).

²⁴⁹ (Romanowski and Sheldon 2020).

²⁵⁰ (Shalev 2022).

example, the extraordinary popularity that the "Hitler Rants" Meme-web-videos have among Israelis²⁵¹. However, when the creators are branded and have a semi-professional approach, they tend to stay out of trouble. Sugar Zaza, for example, began with provocative offensive humor. However, after several years in which they have established a high profile, cultivated a devoted fan base, and even had a foothold in cable television, they still have not managed to properly monetize their online success or to reach the career status of their colleagues in traditional media. They hired a business manager, and he demanded that they be more family friendly. By the end of the decade, their style changed drastically and moved away from the obscenities of *Mindy and the Magician* and *The Shtraimels* towards the mainstream. Nowadays, when Sugar Zaza holds occasional fan gatherings, the audience is almost entirely children or adolescents.

A similar transition was made by the rapper Static, who had a key part in the shaping of Gen-Y culture in Israel (and was a main source of inspiration for Arutz Hakibud). Static's early attempts at the local rap scene imitated American rap clichés, with a chauvinistic approach and profanities. His early hit (and first collaboration with Ben El), *Dubi Gal*, is much cruder than the rest of the due's bangers. Once mainstream radio noticed static, he decided to play the game according to their rules²⁵². This decision quickly turned him into one of the most successful artists in the country.

There are several indicators to support the claim that Gen-Y web creators deliberately design their content in order to appeal to kids. Their careers certainly benefit from this approach. At the same time, infantile humor and childish worldview do not necessarily require too much planning or effort on their behalf. It does not necessarily come at the expense of their artistic integrity. They are juvenile by nature.

When Stand-Up Stood Up

Comedy has been a prominent element in Millennials' lives. Not only for those with professional aspirations in the field but for all Gen-Ys. Stand-up comedy arrived in Israel during the 1980s and gradually replaced the old-school style of the "entertainers" (not "stand-up artists" or "comedians") that Baby Boomers and Gen-X grew up with. In the late 1980s, Israeli television changed significantly. After about two decades of

²⁵¹ (Kotler-Fux 2018); (Steir-Livny 2016).

²⁵² (Vachtel, MiBarbie Vead Dubi Gal: Ben El Tavori VeStatic Baderech Lapisga 2016).

only one public channel, viewers could enjoy a commercial channel, Channel 2, that had a less didactic and more entertaining orientation. At the same time, cable companies began to operate, and those who subscribed to them enjoyed a variety of channels and content. So, Gen-Y consumed much more television than their predecessors. A basic cable membership enabled to consume long hours of sitcoms on a daily basis, mostly on Channel 3, Star World, and the timeslot 6+ on Channel 6. Channel 6 was "the kids' channel" and therefore many young viewers would tune in to it as their default choice. After sunset, the content for kids ended, and the 6+ timeslot began, offering a bulk of sitcoms. Even though many of these sitcoms were certainly not suitable for young viewers, such as *Three's Company* (ABC, 1977-1984) and *Married... with Children* (FOX, 1987-1997), many Israeli children watched Channel 6 in the evenings regularly. The abundance of television comedy developed and shaped Gen-Y's sense of humor. They listened to long hours of witty sitcom dialogues which strive for a punchline once every three sentences, picked up the style, and acquired many comedy techniques. In the Mid-90s plenty of Israeli households logged into the internet, which offered, among other things, unlimited comedy sources. During the past decade, streaming services took over the television industry, and many of these services offer, produce, and promote stand-up specials for international audiences.

For Generation Y, more than ever before, standup comedians have become dominant cultural heroes and served as role models. According to Almog and Almog, the Millennials imitate the comedians' personas - witty, nonchalant, or simply "cool"²⁵³. Although Almog and Almog's observations refer to interpersonal communication, the same can be applied to Millennials' web presence. Whether it is in their personal profiles on social networks, YouTube channels, blogs, or if they hide behind fictitious avatars. They cultivate (fully or as part of their) online personas according to the "comedians' personas", and post carefully crafted one-liners, sarcastic comments, Memes, and zingers.

The comedy boom resonates with other cultural trends that defined generations. In Israel in the 1990s, local newspapers, especially in Tel Aviv, enjoyed a glorious aura. They were considered the freshest, hippest, most innovative thing around. They did not only cover the trends of the contemporary generation (at the time it was Gen-X) but

²⁵³ (Almog and Almog 2019, 139).

also set them²⁵⁴. Young people with journalistic or artistic (or celebrityhood) ambitions were not only avid yet passive readers but also contributed content to the local papers. For example, notable Gen-X filmmakers such as Ari Folman, Nadav Lapid, Hagai Levi, Irit Linur, and Gal Uchovsky worked in local journals. Another example can be found in *סיפורי תל אביב* (*Tel Aviv Stories*) (Ayelet Menahemi and Nirit Yaron, 1992), which captures the lives of young bohemian hipsters in the big city and serves as a time capsule of that era. The second story in this anthology film features a heroine who works as a journalist in a local newspaper.

As print media has been constantly declining, by the second decade of the 21st century only two Tel Aviv magazines, *City Mouse* and *Time Out*, appeared to preserve the spirit of the mythological 1990s local journals²⁵⁵. In an article published in 2016, even the hip *Time Out* had to admit that they, the journalists, are "out", and that the comedians are "in": "It appears that in the relay race of Tel Aviv which always seeks the new rockstars – the local newspapers' journalists in the 90s, the DJs at the early previous decade and the chefs at the beginning of the current decade – right now these are the comedians who hold the torch"²⁵⁶.

The reporters base this observation on appropriate data. From the 1990s until the 2010s only two major stand-up clubs operated in Tel Aviv: The Camel Comedy Club and The Comedy Bar. During the 2010s another major club opened, The Stand-Up Factory, and other cultural institutions, such as the Cinematheque and האוון השלישית, began to regularly host comedy nights. Furthermore, over ten pubs and coffee shops all over town started their own weekly stand-up nights. According to an owner of one of the major comedy clubs, the average number of aspiring comedians who show up to perform at an open-mic night tripled over the past ten years²⁵⁷.

Millennials (in the common generalizations) have exhibitionist tendencies and a desperate need for attention. Their self-worth needs to be affirmed by others, and they often achieve gratification by gaining a satisfactory number of views or likes on their social media posts²⁵⁸. This soft of gratification can also be achieved by standing on a

²⁵⁴ See (O. Almog 2004); (Peleg, Israeli Culture between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance 2008).

²⁵⁵ *City Mouse* closed in 2017. In 2019 *Time Out* made significant downsizing that included switching the publication rate from a weekly to a monthly basis. Not long after, it ceased publishing the print edition completely.

²⁵⁶ (Barzilay and Samarias 2016).

²⁵⁷ (Barzilay and Samarias 2016).

²⁵⁸ (McCain and Campbell 2018, 309).

stage, in the spotlight, telling jokes to an audience that (hopefully) supplies immediate affectionate approval. Stand-up, therefore, is a very desirable activity for Millennials.

Furthermore, the increasing number of people who wish to professionalize in comedy might also have to do with the relatively easy nature of the job. Stand-up does not require physical labor, routine, boring tasks, or ungrateful services. Another big motivation boost comes from the potential (even if in most cases it is a false promise) that fame and fortune are around the corner. These job attributes fit common Millennials' career expectations²⁵⁹.

The stand-up boom happened at the same time as the rise of social networks. The online interaction encourages everyday people, who do not necessarily have creative aspirations, to engage in a form of communication that is hyper-witty. Users are constantly exposed to many jokes in their feeds. They learn the patterns, and not long after they are able to duplicate them with slight adjustments and to construct jokes of their own (as illustrated, literally, by Memes²⁶⁰). Amateur comedians mundanely share their observations and punchlines on their profiles. These posts accumulate, and after a while they gather enough materials for a short and solid comedy set. The immediate feedback also serves as a test that enables filtering the weaker materials. The encouraging feedback strengthens their confidence in their comic abilities (whether their affirming friends are honest or not).

A positive aspect of the phenomenon is that nowadays females attempt to hop on the comedy train just as much as males²⁶¹. Among the successful Gen-Y comedians who started at open mic gigs and turned into prominent figures in mainstream media are Galit Hoogi (also a member of the online group Everything that is Funny in the World) who co-created *המוצלחות שלי* (*Sisters*) (Yes, 2016-2019); Gitit Fisher (whose videos as her alter-ego Tutit were viral hits) and Oshrit Sarusi (who co-created and starred in the web series *Maccabib and Hanael*), who together made *זאת וזאתי* (*Zot VeZoti*) (Reshet13, 2019); Shir Reuven who co-created *ילדות סכסכניות* (*Sad City Girls*) (Hot, 2021); Tom Yaar who is in the cast of *A Wonderful Country*.

In 2007 Christopher Hitchens published a notorious article in *Vanity Fair*, titled "Why Women Aren't Funny". One of his arguments was that men are funnier because audiences desire to hear filthy jokes, and women avoid telling such jokes. The author

²⁵⁹ (De Hauw 2010); (Hassan 2020).

²⁶⁰ (Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture 2014).

²⁶¹ (Izikovich 2015) ; (Regev 2016).

Fran Lebowitz added, "men obviously like gross stuff. Why? Because it's childish"²⁶². While Hitchens' arguments have been largely refuted, Lebowitz's observation could be substantial in explaining why women take a more central part than before in the recent comedy boom. Lebowitz associates crude, wild, and irreverent humor, which is perceived as "masculine humor", with immaturity. In Generation Y, displays of infantile behavior are more acceptable, and so women take part in it too. This sets the terms for females to practice filthy humor. Indeed, Almog and Almog note that "in previous generations, women loved to laugh but usually avoided trying to be funny. This gap has greatly narrowed in this generation and comes into play with female sarcasm and 'dick jokes' that were mostly once the domain of men"²⁶³. "In the past, when the boys told dirty jokes the girls would be quiet and blush, whereas today, sexual gags are exchanged freely between girls and other girls... and between girls and boys"²⁶⁴.

Yet the gender dynamics are still far from equal. Women have to struggle against the prevalent old stigmas as if they cannot be funny²⁶⁵. Female comedians, in Israel and abroad, report chauvinistic and toxic environments in stand-up clubs, including cases of sexual harassment²⁶⁶. They face skepticism from some audiences, including aggressive hecklers, and from powerful industry professionals, such as club owners, TV producers, and famous stars. Despite the unpleasant atmosphere, most comedians still cannot afford to completely avoid the stage and remain solely online. Performing in front of a live audience enables one to develop and perfect necessary professional skills, like presentation, timing, and improvisation. It builds a reputation. It provides exposure to new crowds beyond the borders of the algorithm. It can also provide income from the box office (even if in most of the new stand-up lines the offered payment is symbolic, and not enough to make a living. But it is still more than the social networks have managed to offer).

The web, however, can be seen as a relatively safer space for female comedians. At least online they should not worry about physical abuse. They still encounter other forms of violence, and comments from misogynistic trolls. But these can potentially be blocked or hidden. Israeli Comedian Hagit Ginzburg described her relationship with

²⁶² (Hitchens 2007).

²⁶³ (Almog and Almog 2019, 139).

²⁶⁴ (Almog and Almog 2019, 188).

²⁶⁵ (Hitchens 2007); (Lockyer 2020).

²⁶⁶ (Bar Stav 2020); (Edut and Shpurer 2020); (Lopez 2017).

internet trolls as a "love-hate relationship" where in some cases, she can even exploit them for her own benefit. According to her, the direct interaction with commentators on social media is not more troubling than the interaction at the clubs, where "veteran comedians will approach you after the show and mansplain you that you should do this and that"²⁶⁷. Furthermore, Sudha Rajagopalan notes that in the case of female celebrities, often "the initial shaming and silencing on social media lead to an 'affective solidarity' [...] that emerges in safe enclaves where [the woman] is hypervisible, and where articulations of support fuel both her celebrity and discursive mobilisation against misogyny"²⁶⁸.

More importantly, the web allows comedians to create new non-patriarchal spaces for creative and professional development. For evidence, the initial whistle blowing regarding harassment and sexism in the leading comedy clubs in Tel Aviv took place in a close female-only Facebook group for comedians. The online community enabled the members to share their experiences comfortably and discreetly without fear of revenge or denial. The group allowed them to find support and solidarity in their struggle against toxic masculinity. It proved to some of them that they were not alone, validating their claims and exposing active predators in the comedy scene.

²⁶⁷ (Senior Shneur 2018).

²⁶⁸ (Rajagopalan 2019). It should be noted that despite these advantages, she also points out problematic side effects, mainly the promotion of "individualism, mediatised self-sharing and emphasised femininity vital to maintaining, rather than disrupting, a neoliberal, bourgeois, masculinist social order".

Chapter :2 Rethinking Distinctions between Amateurish, Independent, and Professional in the Age of Social Media: Udi Kagan's Messiah and the Genre

Blunder

The fictional comic character Messiah has a catchphrase about "להיות בטופ" ("reaching the top"). Messiah's creators, Udi Kagan and Dana Pollig, certainly did reach the top. They became a textbook example of the fierce underdogs who figured out how to use new media to blaze a trail to the limelight.

Initially, the aspiring creators wished to produce their own TV shows around the character (that Kagan also plays). Messiah is a washed-up singer who nowadays manages a shady events hall. He still dresses in 1980s fashion and speaks in jargon from the same decade. Messiah is completely unaware of his irrelevance. The mockumentary show follows his attempts to revive his musical career, in parallel to running his business, with the aid of his loyal and equally pathetic sidekick, Ziv (Amit Itzcar).

"The original idea was to develop a TV series with episodes of thirty minutes. For months Dana and I moved from one network to another and offered them to produce it, but everyone said 'no'"²⁶⁹. The inexperienced creators contacted several professional producers, hoping that they would help them get the project going. At one point they even received development funding from a TV channel, but the executives eventually decided to abandon the project, and explained that "it is funny – but too niche". The creators tried to take their business elsewhere but were turned down by executives who claimed that this kind of project "is not right for them"²⁷⁰.

Other creators might have given up at this point. Or perhaps they would be trying to come up with a new idea that is tailored to meet the TV executives' expectations and preferences. But Kagan and Pollig refused to let go. They reckoned that if their project does not fit the industry norms, they should execute it themselves. So, they teamed up with Yuval Netter (who is credited as co-creator of the web series but was not involved in other Messiah projects afterward), re-edited the scripts, minimized the production to an affordable scale, and launched it independently online.

²⁶⁹ (Alexander 2013)

²⁷⁰ (Kairys 2013).

The gamble proved successful. The first episode was published on YouTube in April 2013. It was shared on social networks and instantly became viral. Kagan and Pollig proved the big networks wrong. At the time, Kagan said: "Now, after the first episode is on YouTube, we are suddenly flooded with inquiries. I continuously get offers for projects, whether it is turning Messiah into a TV show or completely different ideas"²⁷¹.

Seven more webisodes were released throughout the following year. Then, the web series was adapted for Television. Messiah starred in a successful eponymous TV show (Cellcom TV/Keshet, 2018 - 2021) that ran for two seasons. Kagan has been using Messiah's character in other gigs, including commercial campaigns on television or billboards.

Kagan and Pollig's journey, from an almost hopeless beginning to an acclaimed show on mainstream TV, affirmed the vision in which independent, pluralistic, and widely accessible content usurps the traditional media's place. It is still too early to announce the collapse of traditional media, but this case serves as an important local indicator of processes that have already been changing long-standing practices in other countries.

An obvious question is why traditional media allow this kind of agency to independent creators? (And to what extent?) But although this is a good question, this chapter examines a less obvious obstacle, that tends to be overlooked. We cannot blame someone else, like competitors from traditional media, for placing this obstacle in the way of independent online content creators. It is a problem that stems from the independent creators themselves, who appear to cling to old thinking patterns. These pre-digital perceptions prevent them from reaching their full groundbreaking potential²⁷². The solution to this problem can perhaps be found in cinematic theory. If André Bazin famously asked, "what is cinema"²⁷³? then this chapter presents issues that stem from the question "what is independent online content"?

²⁷¹ (Alexander 2013).

²⁷² I am aware that there is a certain irony in criticizing independent content creators for clinging to pre-digital conceptions while using film theory and jargon from the field of documentary studies. However, this initial discussion - "what is independent online content" - is meant to set a starting point for the development of new relevant theories and ideas. It is not my intention here to build a new theory which will replace the old ones, but to point out what I recognize of the failure of the old patterns to grasp and suit the contemporary digital content. We can use tools from cinematic philosophy to establish what digital content is not. Also, since I argue that the content creators themselves work through the earlier conceptions, it is necessary to use these pre-digital or early digital methodologies in order to trace their thinking patterns and examine them.

²⁷³ (Bazin 2005).

Home Videos, Independent Filmmaking, and Cultural Status

The new digital discourse has been optimistically cultivating the vision of power shifting from the traditional professional guilds to common internet users. This narrative has been promoted in the works of scholars²⁷⁴ and popular media²⁷⁵. They highlight examples of web stars who created viral hits and launched successful careers. As a result, the digital world enjoys an image that is inclusive, innovative, and exciting. This tough competition caused traditional media to make efforts to appear more accessible. For example, through initiatives like the reality TV show *Project Greenlight* (2001-2003, 2015, HBO; 2005, Bravo) which nurture first-time filmmakers. Another example is the Israeli reality talent show *Comedy Star* (2020, Reshet13), which was meant to expose less known content creators, cultivate them, and upgrade them to the "big league" of commercial television.

However, the positive and appealing image of the digital world cracks now and then. *The Guardian* even declared already in 2014 that: "The web series is dying – and Netflix and Amazon Prime are responsible"²⁷⁶. David Buckingham, Rebekah Willett, and Maria Pini remain "very skeptical of the more grandiose claims about the impending democratization of media"²⁷⁷. Even though traditional media try to present an embrace of the new digital culture, Laurie Ouellette reminds that "the notion that ordinary people might make TV instead of just watching poses a potentially subversive threat to capitalist control of the media"²⁷⁸, and so the established media (explicitly and implicitly) resist the rise of "ordinary" independent creators.

This resistance resembles an earlier discourse about the alleged threat that was posed to the professional industry by domestic filmmaking in the pre-digital days. According to Buckingham et al., "In the early part of the [20th] century... the amateur was seen to enjoy a degree of freedom from commercial imperatives, and hence a degree of creativity, that was less available to the professional... However, from the 1910s to the 1950s, the innovative potential of amateur filmmaking was steadily

²⁷⁴ (Christian 2018); (Hannon 2008); (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* 2006). Even if the users have no interest in being content creators, they still, according to some approaches, gain authority and influence which turn them into active partners. Not merely viewers, but viewersers.

²⁷⁵ (Liao 2017); (Miller 2015); (Nguyen 2019).

²⁷⁶ (Rawson 2014).

²⁷⁷ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 3).

²⁷⁸ (Ouellette 1995, 33).

channeled into a narrow focus on the nuclear family"²⁷⁹. Furthermore, "...ideological construction of amateur film in publications and marketing was reinforced by industry practices... the industry maintained barriers to entry for amateurs, for example, by standardizing distinctions between amateur and professional gauges of film (16 mm versus 35 mm, and subsequently 8 mm versus 16 mm)"²⁸⁰. Even the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, in an article titled, "in defense of amateur", was skeptical regarding the layperson's ability to keep up with the industry's standards: "[usually the amateur will have] no success whatsoever, as he will attempt the grandiose of visual and audio with penny-whistle means... and he will buy equipment beyond any need or real joy in it (usually penny-dreadful-junk-stage-props for the 'production' of his imaginary profession...)"²⁸¹.

Similarly, when during the last two decades of the 20th century affordable and user-friendly camcorders became a popular product that was purchased by many households, the power holders in the professional industry, Ouellette claims, had shaped a discourse that functioned as a border, to keep the nonprofessional out. She suggests that those discourses "guide amateurs toward domestic representation and the accidental witnessing of spectacular events, thereby continuing... a long tradition of hegemonic containment by keeping amateur participation in the media within a safe and controlled place". She explains that "the camcorder has not been marketed as an extension of the television experience but rather as an updated electronic version of the home-movie camera... since television has been naturalized as beyond the realm of ordinary producers, it was unlikely that participatory TV would be considered a viable marketing theme"²⁸².

The main case study in Ouellette's essay is the bloopers TV show *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1989 -, ABC), which features materials sent by the viewers. The program allegedly has offered an interactive platform that granted any camcorder owner an invitation to a moment on national prime time. However, in practice, the nature of desired materials once again guided users to adopt the domestic mundane usage, and "the final product does not present us with an example of participatory television but rather with a ritualistic formula that upholds the power and authority of

²⁷⁹ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 17). Based on (Zimmermann 1995, 46).

²⁸⁰ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 18).

²⁸¹ (Brakhage 2001).

²⁸² (Ouellette 1995, 34).

commercial television"²⁸³. The iconic bloopers TV show also fits Buckingham et al. more general argument that "Media representations of home video making tend to portray it as a rather comical, even somewhat ludicrous, practice ... The films themselves are generally deemed uninteresting, unimaginative, and unwatchable"²⁸⁴.

Ouellette's article was written shortly before the digital revolution. Since then, technological advancement further blurred the distinction in production values between amateur and professional filmmaking, hence making it harder for the hegemonic content creators and distributors to preserve their power. If in the past, the necessity to master the technological process of postproduction and devote time to it deterred unprofessional camcorder owners from attempting more than basic usage²⁸⁵, nowadays the entire filmmaking process is a lot simpler and more intuitive. Any group of ambitious amateur teenagers should be able to create a production on the same scale as *Messiah's* webisodes. The gaps between the amateur, the semi-professional, and the professional have been narrowed²⁸⁶. Nevertheless, the independent director and scholar Vladan Nikolic wrote about how despite the technological advances, contemporary independent digital filmmakers still face many challenges, some of which are new problems that stem from these advancements²⁸⁷.

But these processes do not undermine Ouellette's claims or make them dated. If anything, they verify her prediction that "the camcorder provides unprecedented means for nonprofessionals to produce television images. As such, it opens up new spaces in which we might reimagine television as a participatory, democratic form of communication. But only if large numbers of people can somehow conceive of camcorder practices in relation to such a vision of popular television will the necessary participation and audiences for such a system be secured and the economic and policy changes necessary to sustain them demanded"²⁸⁸.

²⁸³ (Ouellette 1995, 37). See also (Fish 2017, 8).

²⁸⁴ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 7).

²⁸⁵ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 59-62).

²⁸⁶ Most of the discourse around the independent content creators refers to layman. See for example the article titled, "This Filmmaker Taught Himself Everything He Needs to Know on YouTube" (Bernstein 2015). It should be mentioned that Kagan and Pollig were film school graduates with more knowledge, skills, and experience than the common home-camera user. Therefore, Kagan and Pollig, despite being independent, working without funding, and without professional cast, are still different from casual users.

²⁸⁷ (Nikolic 2016).

²⁸⁸ (Ouellette 1995, 42).

Messiah's generic framework also serves to reduce the gap between the professional and the independent or amateurish. "Fake documentaries are so popular to watch and easy to pull off as parody because their target text is arguably the least complicated, least expensive, and least respected kind of film to make... In an increasingly media-sophisticated society, fake documentary allows a cheaper and easier route to a text richer than either of its fictional or documentary parts"²⁸⁹.

Therefore, in contrast to any skepticism regarding the potential of independent productions to penetrate professional industry, Messiah's case proved the possibility of a successful crossover from the web to the TV screen. But as this chapter argues, Messiah presents an intriguing case whereby his trailblazing creators appear to have been still bound by old perceptions that have been dictated by the traditional powerholders. Their example also proves that the norms that were determined by the capitalist establishment in an effort to suppress "ordinary people's content", had not vanished. They are still influencing and shaping media, both old and new.

Not Another Webisode: Messiah's Wedding Special

Presenting and discussing the cultural status of films that are made outside of the industry sets the proper background for the phenomenon. We can now return to focus on the case study and scrutinize it accordingly. The web series *Messiah* (משיח) was created and distributed by independent content creators online. Its cultural status, as will be elaborated, has been determined by several factors. Some of them are external and beyond the creators' control – fans, journalists, fellow comedians - and some are the result of their own ideas and actions. However, as will be shown, even the creators' thoughts are not always in their control and full awareness, since they might be indoctrinated by cultural norms that have been shaped and assimilated by traditional power holders.

When *Messiah* was first released in 2013, it was uploaded to Udi Kagan's personal YouTube channel, called משיח והברים (Messiah and Friends). Currently, aside from the webisodes, the channel includes several playlists with additional features. Some playlists offer content that extends the franchise with additional materials that take place within the diegesis, as customary in the age of Cinema 3.0, in which every

²⁸⁹ (Juhasz and Lerner 2006, 6).

piece participates in a world of cross media interaction²⁹⁰. Other playlists contain materials from outside the diegesis, such as footage from behind the scenes or blooper reels. There are also some playlists that are not at all related to *Messiah*, and feature other works by Kagan, like sketches starring a different character (Alex the aspiring actor), or segments from his live standup comedy shows.

Despite the variety of materials in Kagan's YouTube channel, there is one video that is starring Messiah, and was created by the same makers, but did not find its place there. I will refer to it as "the wedding special". The episode is not mentioned (at the time of writing) in the web series episode list on IMDB²⁹¹, and neither in the series' episode list on Wikipedia²⁹². It is also absent from Messiah's section in the extremely popular (and illegal) pirate streaming website *Sdarot*, whose catalogue offers the two series of the TV show, plus 8 webisodes, yet excludes the wedding special. (Cellcom TV streaming platform, the legal option for watching the TV show *Messiah*, does not offer the webisodes on its library at all).

Special Messiah: Yaya and Amit's wedding (ספיישל משיח: החתונה של ידה ועמית) was released on November 8th, 2013, on Yuval Netter's YouTube Channel. It is between the release of the fifth and the sixth "official" webisodes. When Amit Itzcar, who plays Ziv, shared the video on Facebook he wrote: "here is a wedding video of 'Messiah' that we shot. Enjoy! And don't forget – next week episode 6"!²⁹³. His statement excludes this video from the official counting.

The special was produced as a "wedding video". Not in the sense of documenting the marital celebration, but as a popular custom in which the couple's friends or family prepare a humorous short film that is kept as a surprise for the newlyweds and is screened for the first time during the wedding party²⁹⁴. Only in this specific case, the video is arguably identical to every other webisode in Messiah's web series. This raises questions about the alleged distinctions between the official webisodes and the "unofficial" special.

²⁹⁰ (Daly 2010). For example, a videoclip of Messiah's fictional song *חתיכה, קטפת לי את הלב* (*Girl, You Stole My Heart*).

²⁹¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6047272/episodes>

²⁹² [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%97_\(%D7%A1%D7%93%D7%A8%D7%AA_%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%98%D7%A8%D7%A0%D7%98\)](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%97_(%D7%A1%D7%93%D7%A8%D7%AA_%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%98%D7%A8%D7%A0%D7%98))

²⁹³ <https://www.facebook.com/amitzcar/posts/10202505676430074>

²⁹⁴ (Almog and Almog 2019, 199).

First, the average length for an official *Messiah* webisode is twelve minutes and nine seconds. The wedding special is 10 minutes and 51 seconds long. Roughly the same length. There are also no changes in the setting (Messiah's event hall) or the heroes (Messiah and Ziv). The plot follows the basic pattern of Messiah's tales – he tries to produce a gig at the hall but annoys and embarrasses everyone. The narrative structure is the same as all webisodes: It opens with a pre-credits scene, then an opening logo, and a slide naming the episode's serial number and title. In this case פרק 1.11 חתונה טופ (*Episode 1.11 Top Wedding*). The plot unfolds in a chronological ongoing narrative. First Messiah finds an exciting new scheme (in this case to arrange a wedding for his life coach's sister). Then he tries to execute it in an unprofessional way (in this case, the preparations for the wedding, through several scenes of arrangements and encounters). Eventually, the plan falls apart.

The visual style is also identical to any other webisode. A mockumentary in which the comic situations are filmed by a camera crew who silently observe in a "fly on the wall" approach. There are also cut outs to amusing mock testimonials²⁹⁵.

The guest participants in the special episode are family members who play themselves. This might contribute to the impression that the piece is no more than a simple domestic video. However, the credits of almost every regular webisode also reveal the participation of the creators' family members (appearing in small roles, usually as extras who remain anonymous and so could be playing themselves there as well). Also, it is possible to read the casting of the family members as another aspect of reflexive meta-humor, instead of an attribute of a simple home video.

Hence, there are many similarities between the regular webisodes and the wedding special. But there are also differences. First, in the special, the events depicted are not entirely fictional. There is indeed a real-life couple called Yaya and Amit, they were about to get married at that time, and their relatives, who appear on screen, were truly planning an event for them.

²⁹⁵ I am using the term "testimonials" since this is the common term used in the Israeli reality TV industry. However, some writers may refer to it as "confessions" (N. Murray 2015) or "talking heads" (as these bits are described at *The Office's* official YouTube channel). In reality TV, testimonials are "a direct-to-camera or looking-just-past-the-camera interview with the participants, filmed later but usually edited and phrased to come across like an immediate commentary on whatever just happened" (N. Murray 2015). In mockumentary, faux testimonials are often used to express an ironic gap between how people act and what they think.

Other than that, the only major difference that signifies the wedding special as an irregular webisode is that at the end there are no ending credits. Since the video was produced for a family event, there is no need to introduce the participants. Most of the originally intended viewers are friends and family who know them. Instead, slides appear briefly, dedicating the episode to the newlyweds: "Yaya and Amit, you are hot. Keep on top. Totally loving you" ("אתם אש, תמשיכו להיות בטופ. אוהבים אתכם לאללה"). However, web viewers who wish to know who the cast members are can easily find the credits in YouTube's video description.

The wedding special is classified as public on YouTube, which means that anyone can find, access, and watch it. This rules out the possibility that the video was excluded from the official channel because some of the participants refused to turn it into a public domain, or were embarrassed to be seen outside the family circle.

At the time of writing, the wedding special attracted hundreds of thousands of views. In the comments section, the most liked comment (22 likes at the time of writing), published around 2014, is by the user Kirsi Laholer who wonders: "I cannot understand why this does not appear on Messiah's channel"²⁹⁶. It is claimed here that the wedding special is not classified as an official webisode because a "wedding video", even when made within the format of a scripted series, is still perceived as belonging to the domestic mode which is treated in a "dismissive and judgmental way". As Buckingham et al. explain, "the home mode has been viewed pejoratively, as somehow insufficiently serious, artistic, or indeed politically challenging"²⁹⁷. However, these old thinking patterns require reevaluation in the digital era.

²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, not all comments are in favor of the special, and some viewers felt that it is inferior in comparison to the previous webisodes. For example, the user Eldar Eldadi, who appears to be lacking the meta-knowledge about the family connection between Messiah's co-creator Netter and the families who appear in the episode, complained (the inarticulate phrasing is in the original Hebrew post): "funny that [they used to take] the character seriously and for money sold the character, a shame that it is on YouTube". His comment received 4 likes (at the time of writing). There is also a reply to his comment, from another user, Cocomixermachine, published 4 years after, who says: "what?".

Interestingly, Messiah's TV commercials for Cellcom, that are also available on YouTube (For example: *משיח חש ומוחש*; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilxPWW_AOkE; *התירוצים של משיח*; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPR8SZfbY0o>) did not provoke a similar critique about a lack of artistic integrity ("sold for money") in the comments sections. Why does the wedding special aggravate some viewers more than the commercials? Why do the creators feel more apologetic about the wedding video than the decision to use Messiah in a commercial campaign? This supports the claim here that they are still bound by the old discourse, as if domestic production is an inferior work, without any artistic value.

²⁹⁷ (Buckingham, Willett and Pini 2011, 4).

The Decline of Classic Sitcom, the Emergence of Comedy Verité, and the Effect on Web Creators

Messiah's wedding special is a relatively complicated text regarding its relationship to reality. It can be read as a mockumentary, or a documentary pretending to be a mockumentary, or an amusing documentary from a sub-genre that allows manipulation of the events. I will elaborate on this later. But even in Messiah's regular webisodes, the series plays with reality, truth, and cinematic representation. This is because both the web series and the TV series are made according to the generic conventions of "comedy verité".

The comedic stratagem of adopting a documentary aesthetic and pretending to present unmediated truth existed long before the digital age. Due to the elusive definition of documentary itself, it is debatable exactly how to define mockumentary, and even if this is the appropriate term²⁹⁸.

The murky borders between documentary, fiction, and fake also make it quite impossible to agree upon the exact starting point of this cinematic style. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner mention that "throughout film history there are numerous instances of these sorts of hybrids. Silent cinema, to begin with, is full of anarchic, seat-of-your-pants mixtures of actuality and acting..."²⁹⁹. Robert F. Reid-Pharr suggests that "...one can rightly make the argument that modern filmic practice derives from the production of the fake documentary as evidenced by Robert Flaherty's 1922 *Nanook of the North*. That is to say, even though we may no longer regularly see the wholesale manipulation of fact that we now know was part of the making of *Nanook*, all of us should be aware that the production of film, including documentary, involves staging scenes, manipulating environments, and, most important, editing"³⁰⁰.

Furthermore, Lebow claims that "If the histories of the nonfiction film are to be believed then all of the most exemplary early documentary films, whether those of Flaherty, Grierson, Vertov, or even Edison's and the Lumières' actualities, are also exemplary mockumentaries. In fact, with Flaherty's 'cinema of romantic

²⁹⁸ Some scholars prefer the term "fake documentary" over mockumentary because, as Alisa Lebow explains, "it is considered that mocking is only one possible stance that the fake documentary can take. It can also copy, mimic, gimmick, play with, scorn, ridicule, invert, reverse, repeat, ironize, satirize, affirm, subvert, pervert, convert, translate, and exceed documentary style" (Lebow 2006, 223).

²⁹⁹ (Juhasz and Lerner 2006, 19).

³⁰⁰ (Reid-Pharr 2006, 140).

preservationism,' Grierson's 'creative treatment of actuality,' and Vertov's 'higher mathematics of facts,' prompted as that arithmetic was by an albeit ideologically laden conception of 'truth' or 'pravda,' we have a veritable set piece for mockumentary (*avant la lettre*) as the foundational discourse of documentary itself³⁰¹.

In its modern phase, after the discourses tied the documentary with the prominent concept of truth, the mockumentary genre became associated with light humor, parody, and satire. This was mostly credited to cult films like *This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984) and *Waiting for Guffman* (Christopher Guest, 1996)³⁰². Such comedies popularized the term mockumentary and made it common among general audiences. The term is also used by most culture journalists for describing the sort of TV programs that are discussed in this chapter³⁰³.

During the late 20th century, the mockumentary aesthetic had permeated from cinema to television. Brett Mills has recognized that "sitcom has begun to develop and mutate... such development... are representative of, and respond to, changes which have occurred within other television forms, such as the documentary and the docusoap"³⁰⁴. Similarly, Ethan Thompson mentions that around that time "scripted programs, which are more expensive than non-scripted, have necessarily decreased in number as reality-based television programs pick up the programming slack". As a result, "the aesthetic grammar of nonfiction TV is increasingly influencing scripted television"³⁰⁵. He explains that "from the perspective of the television industry, this televisual shift made sense both in terms of product differentiation (make sitcoms that look different) and material economy (the improvised style fits the limited budget and time constraints of the production)"³⁰⁶. Mills adds that when the sitcom began shedding

³⁰¹ (Lebow 2006, 232).

³⁰² (Juhasz and Lerner 2006, 3); Jason Middleton quotes film critic A.O Scott, who claimed that the mockumentary style of Christopher Guest's comedies "have become staples, or perhaps clichés, of the small-screen-sitcom" (Middleton 2013, 10) - (footnote #28).

³⁰³ Therefore, I also use the term mockumentaries here, instead of "fake-documentaries" or other alternatives. Even though I agree with some of the points raised by those who find this term somewhat insufficient.

³⁰⁴ (Mills 2004, 65). Philip Jacobi (2016) mentions that the docusoap format "emerged to dominate the British television landscape of the late 1990s and early 2000s". He defines it as "occupies a middle ground between the soap opera and the documentary".

Mills focuses on two popular and influential TV industries, the British and the American (US). Jacobi adds another market when he states that "The heavy influence of *The Office's* visual style and narrative form, [are] especially apparent in the American and Canadian market". The mockumentary sitcom *The Office*, particularly, had been exported to over 80 countries, and therefore can indicate that it is a global phenomenon.

³⁰⁵ (E. Thompson 2007, 64).

³⁰⁶ (E. Thompson 2007, 67).

some of its most obvious conventions and merged with characteristics of other genres, "the distinction between the ways in which the comedic and the serious are conventionally signaled have begun to be dismantled... in a manner that explicitly questions television's role in setting up such a distinction"³⁰⁷.

Early television productions, such as teleplays that were produced in sound stages, sometimes in front of an audience, have their roots in theater. Contemporary television aesthetic has its roots in cinema. Hence Thompson suggests that the new mode of TV mockumentary "makes both stylistic and semiotic references to what Bill Nichols has described as the 'observational mode' of documentary, including both cinema vérité and direct cinema"³⁰⁸. The documentary style offers viewers a method of interpretation. "Whether audiences associate the look with Maysle's documentaries or [the reality TV program] *Survivor*, the connotation is understood to be the same: this is 'real'—at least relative to other television"³⁰⁹. Angela Krewani also recognizes the origins of contemporary TV aesthetics in cinema. She marks the starting point at "the documentary or semi-documentary approaches of the artificial naturalism of the earlier documentary or semi-documentary films, an aesthetic that finds itself continued in contemporary working-class flicks such as those by Ken Loach and Stephen Frears". Other examples from British television are social-realist soaps such as *Eastenders* (1985 -, BBC One) and *Brookside* (1982-2003, Channel 4). When this style is mixed with the generic traditions of sitcoms the outcome is comedy Verité³¹⁰.

The creators of contemporary mockumentaries know that their viewers are sophisticated and well-practiced in interpreting visual texts. This is why, for example, modern viewers do not need indicators such as canned laughs to cue them on punchlines. Does this sophistication make it harder for mockumentary creators to be convincing? Not necessarily, and not quite. For example, even in cases where viewers are immediately able to identify some of the more famous actors in the cast, they still do not reject the pseudo-documentary, just like they have watched classic sitcoms without questioning the absence of the fourth wall, or the fake-looking cardboard sets. Why do they cooperate and suspend their disbelief? Mostly because they are bored by worn out patterns which they have seen too many times before. "Comedy vérité, then,

³⁰⁷ (Mills 2004, 68).

³⁰⁸ (E. Thompson 2007, 64), *Following* (Nichols 1991).

³⁰⁹ (E. Thompson 2007, 71).

³¹⁰ (Krewani 2016).

is comedy for audiences raised on television formats... television comedy made by, and for, generations of viewers for whom the music hall experience is meaningless"³¹¹. In other words, comedy vérité is Gen-Y Television³¹².

The move towards this new practice, which incorporates a realistic mundane aesthetic, sets ideal terms for independent filmmakers who create content for the web. The scanty aesthetic minimizes the gap between the affordable and the professional standard. As Thompson reminds, "in the cases of both cinema vérité and comedy vérité, technology has been an important catalyst for the emerging aesthetics"³¹³. Back in 1961, the appearance of relatively light cameras and mobile sound equipment enabled Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin to go out to the streets of Paris in pursuit of truth in *Chronicle of Summer*. Around forty years later, new production capabilities enabled television comedians to step out of the studios and film on location. Two decades or so later, every smartphone is a cinematography device, and it is easier than ever not only to record but also to screen and distribute moving images³¹⁴. Could the online screening platforms take creators a step further beyond the professionally produced comedy vérité TV shows? Could they develop a new and original web aesthetic? Based on this case study, not yet. As will be explained below, it is not because of the available means, but because of the human factor.

Comedy Plus Documentary Does Not Always Equal Quality

The desire of established fiction creators to imitate the documentary style raises questions about the status of "spontaneous" filmmaking. Why are home movies generally looked down on, while documentaries often enjoy a respectable image of art-house quality? The answer might be found in John Grierson's much quoted definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality"³¹⁵. A long time has passed since Grierson's era and quoting him may sound dated³¹⁶. Yet his well-known definition

³¹¹ (Mills 2004, 78).

³¹² In the sense of Gen-Y viewers. The programs were often made by Gen-X creators.

³¹³ (E. Thompson 2007, 65).

³¹⁴ Kagan and Pollig did not use smartphones and apps but semi-professional equipment. Yet thanks to the recent technologies they were able to produce and distribute a whole web-series independently.

³¹⁵ (Grierson 1933).

³¹⁶ In general, despite the huge advancement in research since Grierson's days, it is not as if any definition of documentary reached consensus. One may wonder if such a definition is even possible. As Lebow mentions: "The category of documentary has always been an elusive one. Every definition of the term has proved partial and of limited use, whether Bill Nichol's 'discourse of sobriety,' Brian

remains very influential, and although it has been interpreted in several different ways, the concept seems to have been more often validated than refuted³¹⁷. So, by adopting Grierson's approach, it can be argued that the act of recording itself is not sufficient but must be used to articulate an insight. Therefore, a layperson who acquires and operates a camcorder/smartphone does not automatically become a documentary director. But what happens when comedy is added to the equation? What if the treatment of actuality is meant to entertain, and to arouse laughter? Does it validate the artistic quality of the independent piece, or does it undermine it even more?

Simply filming funny circumstances is not enough. Grierson's classic axiom disqualifies the blooper reels on *America's Funniest Home Videos* since there was no treatment of the actuality that was captured by the lens, entertaining as it may be. But what about the genre of candid camera? When Juhasz and Lerner discuss documentation of a hoax they argue that it "is not a work of fiction, yet it is certainly at the very least a close cousin, if not a member, of our 'fake documentary' family"³¹⁸.

The hit Israeli TV show *פספוסים* (*Bloopers*) (1994-2008, Channel 2), for example, featured several kinds of sub-genres, with varying degrees of intervention and manipulation. The main segment was a carefully produced practical joke on a candid camera. In addition, there was a competition between viewers who sent their funny home videos. There were also compilations of foreign bloopers that were taken from similar shows in other countries.

Bloopers was a later television transfiguration of the career of its creator and host, Yigal Shilon, who began playing practical jokes on film. During the 1980s, following the huge financial success of *ישראלים מצחיקים* (*It's a Funny, Funny World*) (Zvi Shissel, 1978), the candid camera genre dominated the Israeli commercial cinema, with a string of blockbusters like *חייך, אכלת אותה*, (*You've Been Had, You Turkey*) (Yehuda Barkan & Yigal Shilon, 1980). Haim Lapid writes that "few, if any, had noticed that this local cinematic success story does not have an equivalent in the whole wide world. In no other film industry the candid camera films take such a central place". He suggests that it is because "while in the US and other countries a wide and varied population was exposed to such shows", in Israel, which until the 1990s had only one

Winston's 'scientific inscription,' or Paula Rabinowitz's 'instruct[ion] through evidence'" (Lebow 2006, 226).

³¹⁷ See for example (Kahana 2016); (Kerrigan and McIntyre 2010).

³¹⁸ (Juhasz and Lerner 2006, 20).

public channel, and whose most popular radio networks are owned by the government and the army, the official nature of the contents allowed very small room for pranks. Those who sought such humor could find it in the cinema, which had a looser and wilder nature³¹⁹.

Around the world, the prank genre continues to exist until this day in modernized versions. It is sometimes made by esteemed creators, for example in the prank TV show *Punk'd*³²⁰, in the improvised scenes in comedies like *Bad Trip* (Kitao Sakurai, 2021), *Jackass Presents: Bad Grandpa* (Jeff Tremaine, 2013), and in mockumentaries like *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* (Jason Woliner, 2020). In Israel, there have been several attempts to revive the genre on commercial television, as in *Ambush* (2013, Channel 10; 2020, Reshet) and *גראה איתך* (*Deal with It*) (2010-2013, Channel 2), yet they did not arouse the same enthusiasm as in the glory days of *Bloopers*. Nowadays, those who look for "looser and wilder" content, even compared to the much less formal and strict mainstream television, will probably find it online. And indeed, pranks seem to have found a new platform on the web. Israeli YouTubers like *Kevin Rubin*, *ShockerTV*, and *Sioba* use simple equipment to record themselves playing jokes on their friends or harassing random bystanders on the street and sharing the videos online. Those who are independent and budget-less tend to produce short gags. But an established popular YouTuber like Rubin manages to produce a whole scene around a goofy situation, just as they do on prank TV shows or in older Israeli prank films³²¹.

In both early and modern candid camera, there is a manipulation of the recorded situation, and documentation of the responses by the unknowing bystanders who were caught in it. The planning and the staging take place during pre-production. The events

³¹⁹ (Lapid 1992, 26). It should be mentioned, however, that Yehuda Barkan did air pranks on national radio before he moved on to create candid camera films (whose nature was much raunchier).

³²⁰ *Punk'd* was created by actor and entrepreneur Ashton Kutcher and producer Jason Goldberg in 2003 and was originally broadcast on MTV until 2007. It was later revived for an additional season in 2012, and another season in 2015 which was aired on a different network, BET. Interestingly, in 2020, a reboot was planned to be produced by the new media streaming platform, Quibi (Aniftos 2020). Since Quibi's format was different from television, mainly by limiting videos' length, and aiming for them to be watched on smartphone screens, it would have required certain refreshments of the genre conventions. However, the failed company was shut down before it managed to realize the plan.

³²¹ For example, in what seems like a commercial cooperation / covert advertising for the Safari in Ramat Gan, Rubin documented a nighttime safari tour with his friends, when suddenly an escaped gorilla on the loose turned the visit into a stressful nightmare for the group, and to a hilarious comedy for the viewers back home (assuming they enjoy this kind of humor).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2cNKTx8GQA>

are then filmed, allegedly in one take, capturing the spontaneous reactions, and afterward screened or broadcast as is. So, unlike the documentary director who collects footage and then edits it to phrase an artistic idea, the candid camera director's creative work, it appears, is almost entirely concentrated on pre-production³²². Therefore, it is debatable whether and to what extent the criterion for creative treatment of actuality applies in this case. And if it does not, since the result is more of an act of witnessing than creative documenting, it could explain the low status of candid camera in comparison to documentary.

There are several additional explanations for the candid camera's inferior status, which seem more trivial. The filmmakers mostly do not seek artistic insight or aesthetic experience, but commercial low-brow entertainment. The prank genre has inherent vulgarity and offensiveness since the jokes are always at someone's expense. Those being fooled are not always superior in power relations in comparison to the famous star or wealthy producer who is staging the prank. And even if they are, there is still an ethical question regarding their public humiliation. Is it morally right to deliberately cause them distress, and then to present them when they are not in control, in a state of panic, anger, or confusion? This is not the place to resolve these ethical issues. But it is a crucial precedent and a steppingstone for the examination of the relationship between comedy and reality, which are the central axis in this examination of Messiah's wedding special.

Comedy *verité* shows, on the face of it, do not belong in the discussion about treatment of actuality, because they do not have anything to do with actuality to begin with. There is only an aesthetic that is meant to convey actuality, but in fact, everything on camera is staged. In *Messiah's* case, the regular webisodes are scripted fiction that pretends to be an unmediated reality by aesthetic means. However, in the wedding special, there is a certain treatment of actuality. It is a hybrid form that incorporates elements of spontaneous reality into the script. Even though the amount of spontaneity is unclear (were the family members expecting what Messiah is about to say? How

³²² This is of course in ideal terms, in which it is agreed to treat these films as proper candid camera as they proclaim to be. In reality, the Israeli prank films are notorious for staging some of the segments which are presented as unscripted occurrences involving real people who were unaware of the filmmaking. The directors confessed and admitted it in later interviews, or during court appeals. See (Mefik Yefatze Sahkan Shenifga Menetiha (A Producer Will Compensate an Actor Who Was Hurt by a Prank) 1980) and the documentary *בלי בושה* (*No Shame: How Candid Camera Took Over Israeli Cinema*) (Oren Shai, 2014).

much room was given for improvisation?), there is still a much stronger attachment to reality – real people appearing as themselves, in a real location, where they are getting ready for an event that really happened. The special shifts *Messiah* closer to the prank film genre. The artistic quality of a prank film is placed on a spectrum that moves between the esteemed on the one end, like the well-built satirical agenda of *Borat*, to the derided cheap exploitation on the other end, like *גברת תפתחי זה אני* (*Lady Open Up It's Me*) (Yehuda Barkan, 1992). Where is *Messiah*'s wedding special placed on this spectrum? It is certainly not as vulgar and offensive as Barkan's film. However, it does not have any of the ambitious purposes of the satirical *Borat* films. It is simply meant to amuse wedding guests. Could this be the reason why the special is excluded and disregarded from *Messiah*'s official corpus?

The Office's Revolution Comes to Messiah's Workplace

The next part includes an in-depth comparison between *Messiah* and *The Office* (2001-2002, BBC Two), a groundbreaking series that has become somewhat of a synonym for comedy verité. Mills calls it "the apotheosis of this new form of sitcom"³²³. *The Office* initially suffered from low ratings. But it was critically acclaimed, won BAFTA and Golden Globe awards, and generated massive buzz, which eventually made it into a worldwide phenomenon, exported to over 80 countries³²⁴. In 2005 it was adapted to an American version, *The Office* (2005-2013, NBC), that leaned more toward the mainstream and reached an even larger audience, becoming a major international hit by itself.

Before the comparison to *Messiah*, there is a need for a brief introduction of the influential series, and how it revolutionized television comedy. Thompson and Krewani point out the mockumentary origins of the comedy verité. Fittingly, *The Office*'s co-creator³²⁵, Ricky Gervais, has been "regularly citing *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and the American comedy *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992 – 1998) as inspirations"³²⁶. The BBC's official website, which is meant for the general public and therefore does not use jargon from the field of television theories, supplies an interesting generic definition, which for media scholars might seem an oxymoron: "The sitcom was

³²³ (Mills 2004, 65).

³²⁴ (Jacobi 2016).

³²⁵ Gervais created the show along with Stephen Merchant.

³²⁶ (Jacobi 2016).

presented as a mock documentary, based in the Slough branch of the paper supply company Wernham Hogg³²⁷. This definition labels the show as a sitcom and presents the mockumentary not as a genre but merely as a visual element. However, as will be further presented, the mock documentary aesthetic also significantly affects many aspects of the show, including the storytelling, the humor, the acting style, and others. Hence it can be claimed that the BBC website's definition is misleading. The show should not be defined as a kind of sitcom in disguise but as a different genre – a comedy verité.

The Office documents the allegedly humdrum working routine in a generic corporate office. The small insignificant moments, watercooler chats, practical jokes among the workers, and the manager's desperate attempts to impress and entertain which always backfire. Despite the emphasis on the banal, there is also a more conventional narrative drama. There are plot arches that develop throughout the series, such as the threat of downsizing, or the romantic potential between two co-workers, Tim and Dawn.

As Philip Jacobi writes, on the one hand, *The Office* is "firmly placed in a definite generic context and, on a structural level, featuring programmatic sitcom tropes, such as a single setting, a singular narrative disruption per episode and recurring characters and foils...". Yet at the same time, it is a televisual text that carries the distinct visual markers of the docusoap. For example, "Instead of being shot in a well-lit studio space with a three-camera set-up, the series employs only one shaky handheld camera whose field of vision is often haphazardly blocked... with an array of fluorescent lights providing naturalistic, diegetic lighting that replicates the cheerless palette inside the office"³²⁸.

The perfect combination of classic sitcom tropes and innovative fresh aesthetic created a new comedy genre that has been replicated all over the world³²⁹, until it arguably became the new standard. Some of these evolved sitcoms have left the accompanying documentary film crew outside of their diegesis, and do not acknowledge it, yet kept common documentary metonyms such as shaky handheld camera movements, filming on location, and testimonials. Examples of shows that were

³²⁷ (History of the BBC: The First Episode of *The Office* n.d.).

³²⁸ (Jacobi 2016).

³²⁹ Various international broadcasters have adapted *The Office* for their respective domestic markets. At least ten localized remakes had been made so far. For more on the show's international franchise see (Jacobi 2016); (N. Smith 2018); (Turner Garrison 2011).

made in this advanced style include the American programs *Arrested Development*³³⁰ (2003-2006, FOX; 2013, 2018-2019, Netflix), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015, NBC), *Modern Family* (2009-2020, NBC), the Canadian *Les Invincibles* (2005-2009, Radio-Canada), and the Israeli קופה ראשית (*Cash Register*) (2018 -, Hinuchit, Kan). The Comedy Verité is popular among online creators as well. For example, the Canadian web series *Pure Pwnage* (2004-2008) and the American web series *Dorm Life* (2008-2009). The list of examples can also include *Messiah*, in both its web and TV versions.

Messiah and The Office: Similarities and Differences

Before delving into the irregularity of the wedding special there is plenty to examine in *Messiah's* "regular" webisode (and TV episodes). The series has been one of the most prominent examples of comedy verité in Israel. Has the fresh imported style been localized? And if yes, how? These questions call for a transnational analysis and comparison. *The Office* is chosen as the object of comparison not only because it sets the standard for the genre, but also because, it is claimed here, that *Messiah* follows its specific formula³³¹. Even though there was an official Israeli adaptation of *The Office*, called המשרד/*Hamisrad* (2010-2013, yes comedy), *Messiah* created a different and unique local version based on the same formula. It strays just far enough from the original so that it is not being blamed for plagiarism, and yet all the main features remain. The resemblance is both in form and content.

Form

First, the form. It adopts a mockumentary aesthetic. *Messiah*, both the web series and the TV series, belong to the new style of comedies which "does not look like a sitcom", and adopts the visual signifiers of the docusoap³³². In both *The Office* and *Messiah*, the visual style includes typical signifiers: one shaky hand-held camera

³³⁰ Thompson mentions an irregular moment in *Arrested Development*. This moment demonstrates a potential pitfall of comedy verité, in cases where it is used aesthetically and not thematically. "[the courtroom incident] is the first—and only—time *Arrested Development* overtly suggests there is an actual camera crew within the show's diegesis that is responsible for the documentary 'look' of the show. No character addresses the camera or complains about the presence of the crew in his or her car and bedroom" (E. Thompson 2007, 63).

³³¹ Several Israeli TV critics also associated *Messiah* with *The Office*. However, their observation remains quite superficial. They simply mention *The Office* as a general example of a television mockumentary comedy. See (Olivier 2018); (Shiloni 2018).

³³² (Mills 2004, 69).

instead of a three-camera set-up, rapid camera movements, occasionally blocked field of vision, cheerless set design, naturalistic lighting, etc³³³.

However, the reasons for choosing this style are not necessarily similar in both cases. TV shows, like *The Office*, are funded and produced by networks. They have a relatively large budget, and the "casual" visual style is a matter of choice. The creators could have picked any style to tell the story, whether it is a mockumentary or a sound stage with a live studio audience, a virtual environment with special effects, or almost any form they wished. On the other hand, an independent web production like *Messiah* has less choice. When the available means are limited, cinema verité is a convenient method of production. As it happens, the change of norms, which legitimized and normalized this kind of filmmaking, narrowed the gaps between the professional and the amateurish. This trend in screen comedy contributed to the transition of independent content creators from the web into mainstream TV. Such a transition would have been harder for them to make in other periods, where TV production required a set of technical skills that were not easy to acquire independently.

The classic sitcom is "one of the few genres that are still, on the whole, shot in front of a live audience"³³⁴. Allegedly, this is another potential obstacle for independent web productions, which cannot gather and accommodate a live audience. According to Mills, the live studio audience has been used to create the group atmosphere necessary for a social phenomenon such as laughter (although in many sitcoms the soundtrack does not include the real recording of the studio audience. Instead, they use a laughter track that serves as "the electronic substitute for collective experience")³³⁵. In some aspects, comedy verité proves the perception that Mills mentions as dated and false. It proves that comedy is not negatively affected by the absence of a collective experience (whether it is a laugh track on TV or the audience in the cinema theater). This can be seen as another signifier that narrows the gap between independent web comedy and TV comedy. Yet one might wonder whether the viewing experience on YouTube or social networks can indeed be treated as a personal experience.

Digital content can be consumed everywhere. Many decades passed since there was a need to go to the cinema to enjoy screen comedy. In the last decades, there is not even a need to meet your flatmates while sitting in front of the TV set in the center of

³³³ (Jacobi 2016).

³³⁴ (Mills 2004, 65).

³³⁵ (Mills 2004, 65).

the living room. Screen content consumption turned into an action that a viewer can do privately. Web series can be watched on mobile smartphone devices wherever one may be (even while sitting on the toilet). Nevertheless, even if the viewer is physically alone, it is arguable whether it is genuinely a private experience. Every time someone watches a video on YouTube, they are immediately exposed to the number of other people who watched the same video, and their impressions. Other viewers have already rated the video, liked or disliked it, or published a comment. Can YouTube's comments section be treated as an electronic substitute for collective experience? The comments would often repeat favorite punchlines or catchphrases from the video, sometimes followed by the acronym for laughter, as the abbreviation "LOL" or the "rolling on floor laughing" emoji 🤪³³⁶. This can be seen as a substitute for the experience of sharing a laugh with the other, unseen, audience that is heard after a punchline on a TV sitcom. Furthermore, if the webisode is shared through live streaming (as can be done on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms) the viewers' comments appear on a sidebar in real time. So, in its way, the web certainly supplies "the group atmosphere necessary for laughter". This also enables the independent creators to smoothly implement the verité style, without worrying about being misunderstood or not setting the right mood.

Another significant method to convey the desired sense of realism in comedy verité is through casting. In *The Office*, the people who inhabit the space are "ordinary", just like the naturalistic array of fluorescent lights and the cheerless color palette inside the workplace. Therefore, instead of glamorous stars, who look like top models, the cast members look like the people in the viewer's neighborhood. The "star quality" or "X Factor" that talent show judges or Hollywood casting agents usually seek is dropped in favor of the "normal". This approach is another element that serves independent content creators, most of whom begin as anonymous. In some cases, these aspiring performers do not have the "photogenic" physical features that are traditionally sought after by producers. In both *The Office* and *Messiah* there is plenty of room for actors who are yet unknown³³⁷. This sort of ensemble strengthens the sense of "non-acting", and the illusion of following and watching real people.

³³⁶ See, for example, the comments by users Zanga919, Maor Whilack and itai1984 on *Messiah*'s first webisode on YouTube.

³³⁷ The cast in *Messiah*'s web series was anonymous when it first aired. In *Messiah*'s TV version, despite the addition of few famous actors in supporting roles, there is still relatively a lot of room for unknowns. For example, Dani Avnaim, who plays Iluz the cook. Avnaim was as a soccer player in his twenties, and then moved on to work at the department of sports and cultural events in the

Content

After comparing and discussing the visual side of *The Office* and *Messiah*, we now move on to the content. Alexandra Beeden and Joost de Bruin argue that "a key part of the success of a format adaptation appears to be the ability to adapt to and incorporate the context of the new country—to interpret rather than copy the original program"³³⁸. Indeed, whenever the successful format of *The Office* is sold for adaptation, it goes through a process of localization by the local writing staff, according to the national cultural traditions and viewers' preferences. However, the writers are obligated to preserve several key elements. In an interview for the Israeli Screenwriters' Guild's website, the writer of *Hamisrad* (the official Israeli version of *The Office*), Uzi Weil, was asked whether the BBC posed any limitations. He replied that they "pushed to make it Israeli, even in the plots... [BBC] more or less gave us the freedom to do whatever we want. They did want us to keep the three-four main characters. Avi Meshulam... who is David Brent, his secretary... and her romantic interest [with co-workers], and the assistant manager, that seemed important to them"³³⁹. These four main characters are therefore the core component that makes *The Office* into what it is. Interestingly, the exact same core tropes can be recognized in *Messiah*.

Core Characters: The Manager

First and foremost, the lead. In the foreign versions of *The Office* "David Brent [UK] and Michael Scott [US] are managers who want to impress their workers and be seen as comedians, and both announce their wish to be 'a friend first, a boss second—probably an entertainer third'". In addition, "they are both characters who cause acute embarrassment to those around them..."³⁴⁰. *Messiah* also suffers from a huge gap between his perception of himself and how he is perceived by other people. Like Brent, he is certain that he has artistic talent, and tries to keep up a career as a musician aside from his day job. Other than the professional attempts, both characters see themselves as no less entertaining in their casual conduct. They overestimate their sense of humor

municipality of Or Akiva, a provincial town in the northern Haifa district. He says that he always aspired to become a famous actor, but before *Messiah* the biggest roles he ever achieved was as an extra in a small number of TV commercials. See an interview with Avnaim in a local newspaper, that is titled: "The Department Manager Who Turned into a Star by the Age of 67: 'I Wish Myself to Die Onstage'" (Abu-Tuama 2019).

³³⁸ (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 4).

³³⁹ (Israeli Writers Guild 2015).

³⁴⁰ (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 12).

and disrupt any attempt to communicate with their coworkers by over-trying to impress, bombarding them with jokes that either fall flat or offend. Since the people who are disturbed by the tactless remarks are subordinate employees, they are afraid to talk back, and so the boss is deprived of feedback that would help him get a true sense of how he is perceived by others.

Unlike Brent, who is completely talentless, Messiah had it but lost it. The show presents evidence that he once had a legitimate celebrity status (although he is only seen along with other "has been" from the Israeli music industry, and never with the veteran big shots who maintain a popular status in the present). He is holding on to his long-gone glory days and fails to acknowledge his current irrelevance. If Brent wishes for a better future, Messiah wants to turn back the wheel.

Brent, Scott, and Messiah are all middle-aged single men who failed to form a family or make friends. In all cases, the characters' passion for show business is derived from a deep need for validation, acceptance, and love. "Brent, who repeatedly states how he and his colleague Chris Finch should be on television... clearly performs not only to entertain his workers but also to impress the film crew and the audience at home. ... It is clear that Brent senses an opportunity to be noticed by a talent spotter"³⁴¹. This characteristic also justifies the verité format since viewers can easily assume, even when it is never explicitly said, why these characters chose to appear in this alleged "documentary".

Ronen Gil highlights the unique features of *Hamisrad*, the official Israeli adaptation of *The Office*. If the British version offered satire about the country's social class relations, the Israeli version exposes and mocks the tensions in the fragmented society which is comprised of many different sectors. The Israeli office "is turned into a microcosm of most of the familiar Israeli representations..."³⁴². *Messiah*, in

³⁴¹ (Mills 2004, 72).

³⁴² (Gil 2020). Although Gil eventually reaches the conclusion that the Israeli version "calls for a shift from the collective to the personal, from the big social questions to a more low-key discourse of love, intimacy and relationships", this argument is questionable. He is basing this conclusion on his impression that, "the soap-like plot... which in the British series serves as a central pillar of the genre's hybridity and the reflexive discussion of the medium itself, is used by Weil for offering a small, mundane and personal alternative to the polarized, strenuous, aggressive and merciless nature of Israeliness". This reading is inconsistent with his earlier claims about the show's attempt to create a microcosm of the Israeli society, that draws it closer to the national than to the personal. This reading also seems to give Weil too much credit, as if he is intentionally using the romantic plotline as part of a wider plan, not necessarily being aware of the obligations that were imposed on him by the original copyrights' holders.

comparison, has much more modest comedic aspirations. Its bunch of weirdos is so idiosyncratic that it can hardly be read as representing anyone but themselves. The conflicts between the characters in *Messiah* do not typically revolve around ethnicity, religion, class, or any other major social issues. The story remains in the realm of the personal, with the same kind of detached approach which attributes the digital creations of Gen-Y.

Discussing the main character of the office Manager in *Hamisrad*, Gil claims that "while the British *The Office* sentences its hero David Brent to his demise for being a bad comedian, Uzi Weil punishes Avi Meshulam for his racism and bigotry. Being funny is very important for Meshulam, but being perceived as a morally upright, conscientious, patently non-racist and non-discriminating boss is equally crucial". *Messiah*, in comparison, is indeed insensitive, occasionally offensive, and sometimes has dated perceptions, yet he is not at all mean spirited and bigoted as Meshulam is. In the TV series, for example, *Messiah* employs old workers who are somewhat stereotypical immigrants (who most notably speak in stilted accents), but their ethnicities are not the basis for their funny interactions with him. *Messiah* is presented as genuinely tolerant and pluralistic, for example when he forms a friendship with Malek, an African refugee, or when he mistakenly thinks that Ziv is having a gay relationship.

Gil adds that "Meshulam's secondary characterization as a comedian lends a reflexive dimension to his stereotypical categorizations, so that his own character becomes a representation of the construction of mainstream Israeli humor. Through it, the series aims its criticism not only at 'Israelis' in general, but at Israeli writers-producers-directors"³⁴³. The rebuffing of mainstream ethnic humor is not necessarily a new idea for Uzi Weil, who is one of the prominent voices of Generation X³⁴⁴, in Israeli literature, press, and television. He was part of the writing team for the sketch comedy *החמישייה הקאמרית* (*The Chamber Quintet*) (1993-1995, Channel 2; 1995-1997, IBA) which was marked by critics as the elitist alternative to the popular low-brow sketch show *הקומדי סטור* (*The Comedy Store*) (1994-1997, Channel 2) which was broadcast at the same time. However, in *Hamisrad*, Weil still deals with the old ethnic humor and even makes it a central component of the show, in order to reflexively criticize it.

³⁴³ (Gil 2020).

³⁴⁴ (Taub 2008). See also (Peleg, *Israeli Culture between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance* 2008).

Messiah poses an alternative to the mainstream in its own way, by simply denouncing the ethnic and social aspects of its comedy. This attitude marks in general the works of Generation Y web creators in the new digital era. Many of these creators also belong to a stand-up comedy movement called "alternative comedy". In a 2014 comprehensive interview that explains the new phenomenon, movement members said that they want to avoid the "racism and sexism" of traditional popular stand-up. Some of them were also stating that they do not perceive television comedy as a role model, (although a few of them have already been working as writers for prime time shows), with one specifically mentioning *The Comedy Store* as an example of what they are not³⁴⁵.

Core Characters: The Assistant (to the) Regional Manager

The second core character in *The Office* is Gareth Keenan (UK) or Dwight Schrute (US), the odd assistant to the regional manager³⁴⁶. Messiah's loyal right hand is Ziv, who is also characterized as an odd loser. His manager often treats him ungratefully and disrespectfully, but they do form a friendship. Messiah often refers to Ziv by the belittling yet fond nickname "Zivi". Ziv is very different from the assistant managers of *The Office*. They are butch, trigger happy, almost fascists, and "both have volunteer jobs outside of the office that carry particular national connotations"³⁴⁷. Ziv, on the other hand, is soft, humane, and introverted. *Hamisrad*, which, as noted, foregrounds national and social issues, had already made the most out of utilizing the trope of the power-loving assistant to satirize the common Israeli admiration for the IDF, generals, and militarism. Ziv offers the alternative. He is also devoted to eccentric hobbies, but they are geeky and artistic (for example, taking part in a magicians' course, in which all the other participants are kids).

Core Characters: The Couple in a Workplace Romance

Completing the essential group of core characters are Tim and Dawn (UK) / Jim and Pam (US), the two lovable and frustrated co-workers. They have unrealized potential for both personal success and a romantic relationship with each other. "In keeping with the typical characteristics of the American sitcom, which often incorporates romantic serial narratives... love interest and unresolved sexual tension ... This type of interrelationship is an effective method of ensuring audience loyalty to a

³⁴⁵ (Goraly, Ein Kan Misheu MiBeer Sheva: Hagal Hahadash Shel HaStand-Up HaIsraeli (There is No One From Beersheba Here: The New Wave of the Israeli Stand-Up). Timeout 2014).

³⁴⁶ (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 12).

³⁴⁷ (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 12).

long-running series"³⁴⁸. *The Office* enhances the melodrama by creating a love triangle. The cute secretary who flirts with the co-worker is engaged to another man (Lee/Roy), who is portrayed as a worse match for her than her work spouse.

Usually, a television series is produced after a season has been ordered by the broadcasting network. The plot unfolds according to the defined number of episodes that had been agreed on. *Messiah*, however, began as an experiment on social media, without preplanning³⁴⁹. This freed the web series from the desideratum of "romantic serial narrative". Since the webisodes do not come out weekly like on traditional TV, the creators were less in need of a plotline "ensuring audience loyalty to a long-running series". Yet after the initial testing and the overwhelming results, it appears that the creators changed their minds and began thinking long term. Subsequently, the narrative moved closer to a more familiar TV format. The third webisode introduced a romantic plotline, which continues as a narrative arc throughout the web series. It develops into a love triangle between Messiah, Ziv, and a cook called Carmela.

The shift from short webisodes to full length TV episodes of around thirty minutes each allows, or necessitates, to extend the story. There is more room for the supporting characters, and they get to lead their own plot lines (as will be elaborated in the discussion about *The Office's* webisodes). Full length episodes also, as said, push the narrative toward the patterns of classic TV sitcoms. Therefore, when *Messiah* turned into a TV series, it once again extended the romantic sub-plots and followed familiar tropes of romantic/sexual tension (be it *The Office's* Jim and Pam, or Sam and Diane in *Cheers* (1982-1993, NBC), or Fran and Max in *The Nanny* (1993-1999, CBS), or Dave and Lisa in *Newsradio* (1995-1999, NBC)).

Messiah's TV version introduced a new character of a cook, Meiravi, and left out the previous cook characters from the web series³⁵⁰. Meiravi (played by the acclaimed actress Dana Ivgi) is more intelligent and reliable than her bosses and co-workers³⁵¹. She is a single mother struggling to support her kid and therefore

³⁴⁸ (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 14).

³⁴⁹ Kagan claimed in an interview that he was skeptical about the web series' potential, and that it was impossible to predict whether there will be demand for further episodes (Alexander 2013).

³⁵⁰ In the web series there are two cooks, Carmela and her substitute Miri. Miri was played by the co-creator Dana Pollig. Pollig first appeared on the webisodes as the director of the pseudo-documentary, whose voice is heard off screen, interviewing Messiah in his testimonials. Mid-season she also took an on-screen role, as Miri.

³⁵¹ In the second season she is pregnant, and the hormonal processes and lack of sleep change the character's attributes.

compromises on a physically exhausting and underpaid job. Viewers get the sense that she has unrealized potential and that she could do better both professionally and romantically. These attributes for one of the main characters again bring to mind *Messiah's* resemblance to *The Office's* core formula. Beeden and de Bruin describe Tim Canterbury (UK)/ Jim Halpert (US) as a worker who "seems much more capable and understanding than those around him... [he] is trapped within his current situation"³⁵².

The first couple of episodes in *Messiah's* TV version set up a storyline about a love triangle among the young and relatively more attractive characters in the ensemble, which resembles *The Office's* formula. Meiravi develops a crush on the young meat supplier, Kfir, while her ex-husband Rami reappears in her life, sparking a chance to renew the relationship that had crumbled. However, at a relatively very early stage of the season, this storyline appears to be quickly solved. This plotline is then deserted in favor of a different, less trivial, workplace romance. This one happens between Armond and Tanya, two old, immigrant, and "unsexy" workers. This decision does not only step away from the worn-out sitcom cliché but also contributes to a less common characterization of elderly TV characters as libidinal. This subplot also advances very fast, and a few episodes later the old couple gets engaged. However, the 'will they/won't they' tension remains, for example when Tanya refuses to move in with Armond. Meanwhile, during the final episodes of the first season, Meiravi's love life returns to the front, as she is facing a romantic dilemma.

Group Dynamic

As a workplace comedy, most of the scenes take place within the different corners of the workplace, as the characters do their day jobs. The location affects the group dynamic. In *Messiah*, it is an old second-rate guesthouse. The positioning of a fixed main location in every episode is much like in the classic sitcoms, with theatrical sound studio stages, where the main stage/location was usually broken into several sub-spaces³⁵³. In this example too, TV productions (according to the industry standards of the 21st century) have a choice, while for independent web creators the location options

³⁵² (Beeden and De Bruin 2010, 13). They do mention that being trapped in a situation is a "common trait within the sitcom tradition", but my comparison is more specific, among two cases in which "the situation" is very similar.

³⁵³ For example, in the working place sitcom *Newsradio*, many episodes are placed entirely within the same few sets: the main open space with employees' desks, the manager's private office, the office kitchen, the lobby, and the broadcasting studio.

are often limited. The verité norms minimize the gap between the independent and the professional standard³⁵⁴.

Jacobi argues that in *the office*, "most visibly, the setting again emphasizes the 'fragmentary' lives of its audience by shifting towards the workplace as the most coherent approximation of, but ultimately ersatz, family space". This observation is relevant for the next point - the ensemble. The characters who regularly meet at the workplace, and spend most of their day together, form an "alternative family". The back cover of *The Office's* DVD edition even invites viewers to "follow middle-manager David Brent and his 'family' as they work hard, play hard, laugh, cry, fall in love..."³⁵⁵, a phrasing meant to market the innovative series by associating it with classic domestic sitcom tropes. Since *Messiah* was first created for the web, with a smaller cast, it focuses on Messiah, Ziv, and the cook, who have a different dynamic. Later, When *Messiah* turned into a TV show, it expanded the cast to a full ensemble, with family dynamics.

This elaborate comparative analysis of *Messiah* in relation to *The Office* is important because it sheds light on the web series' influences from television. Obviously, web series did not appear out of nowhere, and were inspired by what preceded them. However, the creators' statements and their framing in the media coverage emphasize their groundbreaking nature. Revealing the limitations of their work can push them even further. In *Messiah's* case, the series heavily relies on TV tropes and plays it safer than some credit it. It is crucial to establish this before moving on to the discussion about the wedding special, which signals a more experimental, daring, and potentially revolutionary direction.

Messiah and The Office: From Web to TV and From TV to Web

The comparative discussion is still not complete, since so far it has only referred to the iconic TV show. But at a certain point, *The Office* franchise spun off a web series. The analogy between *Messiah* and *The Office* (US) sheds light on two successful cross-platform programs. *Messiah* was initially aimed for television, rejected, and was exiled to the internet's no man's land. There, online, it developed, shaped, and gained the

³⁵⁴ TV shows will sometimes use their ability to move out of the basic location, as in the episode where the British office staff goes out for a pub quiz. Web series with lesser budget would usually avoid scouting and hiring new locations. In a few episodes *Messiah* does include locations outside the guesthouse, for example when he visits his accountant's office, yet it is rare.

³⁵⁵ "The Office 10th Anniversary Edition: Complete Series 1 & 2 and the Christmas Specials" DVD boxset.

reputation which eventually led to the project's acceptance by traditional media. Contrarily, *The Office* began as a successful TV show and expanded into the web as a spinoff/side project, which was produced in parallel to its ongoing made-for-TV episodes on NBC.

Since *The Office* was already enjoying the prestige of its spot on the pinnacle of prime-time television, the decision to expand into the (allegedly) non-hierarchical arena of online content could have potentially dimmed the brand's glorious status. What were the incentives for this decision? Two members of *The Office*'s regular writing staff, Michael Schur and Paul Lieberstein, claimed that the web offers creative freedom and room for experimentation. Whenever they attempt to explore these sorts of ideas on TV, it usually ends up on the cutting room floor³⁵⁶. But there are other incentives to move from TV to the web that are not so romantic.

When the webisodes became a point of disagreement during the 2007–2008 Writers Guild of America strike, it was revealed that the broadcasting network, NBC, classified them as promotion for the series, instead of content that stands on its own. This definition also implies the dichotomy between commercial and artistic and positions the webisodes as inferior to television scripts. Showrunner Greg Daniels rebuffed the network's definition saying, “in a sense, they [the webisodes] do promote the show, but they’re [NBC] selling ads on it”. Although the webisodes certainly promote the brand, of both the show and the network, they also stand as a substantial income source by themselves. “‘The Office’ has received 7 million downloads. It generates the most traffic at NBC.com... The CPMs on Internet ads is double what they are for TV”³⁵⁷. In addition to the commercial advantages of the web series, Daniels also emphasized that the webisodes won a Daytime Emmy award. By pointing out the prestige and critical approval he undermines the dichotomy that is implied by the network's view.

Which view on web series is more appropriate to examine *Messiah* by? If adopting the network's approach, *Messiah*'s web series can be classified as merely a promotion for a (non-yet-existing) TV series. (Even so, the debate regarding the artistic value of commercial promotional materials remains). However, the showrunner's approach, which sees the web series as an artistic creation that stands for itself, appears

³⁵⁶ (Zoromski 2006 (updated 2012)).

³⁵⁷ (Schneider, Greg Daniels: We've Seen the Future, and it is Us 2007).

to be more in line with statements by *Messiah's* creators. After the first webisode generated buzz, Kagan downplayed aspirations to get into the TV industry and expressed his excitement about finding an alternative to the market that previously rejected and disappointed him³⁵⁸. (His stand changed later, after he failed to monetize the web series' success, and traditional media offered him the kind of money the web simply cannot provide, especially to creators who only appeal to Hebrew speaking viewers).

However, the arguments of both sides should be taken with a grain of salt. The writers' statements, in an interview promoting the launch of the first web season, portray the production as a generous opportunity to realize a passion project. But the production process can also be read as a capitalistic scheme that is meant to maximize profits from a brand proven to yield them. The writers say, "we just worked on them [webisodes] whenever there was a crack in our schedule where we could find fifteen minutes or twenty minutes", not realizing or downplaying the fact that their welfare had been sacrificed for the sake of this project. The cast and crew were not compensated for this overtime work. "...we focused on the accountants and whoever else wasn't shooting in the episode that was being shot at the same time. We would pull them in and we would schedule their scenes around the larger shooting schedule"³⁵⁹. So, the producers were able to maximize actors' output. They talk about the actors' "dead time", which others would define simply as a "break". The cast members have been hired for a shooting day, at the same rate as before, but the amount of work per day grew.

The writers emphasize the opportunity to give the lesser-known cast members leading parts and hint at a new spectrum of storytelling³⁶⁰. "We sometimes think it'd be a whole different TV show if you had positioned the cameras back there [with the minor supporting characters] instead of on [the four core characters] Michael, Pam, Jim and Dwight". But could there be another reason, one that is less likely to be mentioned in publicity interviews? The stars of the show earn more money, enjoy better terms, and have more negotiating leverage. Their breaks cannot be as easily filled with extra scenes to be performed voluntarily. No matter which narrative we choose to adopt, the result is that online content appears to be (at that time) a space too small for big celebrities,

³⁵⁸ (Alexander 2013); (Kairys 2013).

³⁵⁹ (Zoromski 2006 (updated 2012)).

³⁶⁰ The first season of *The Office* web series, *The Accountants*, focuses on three workers at the accountancy department who notice that 3000 dollars are missing from the books and start an investigation. In each webisode they question a different coworker.

and more suitable to accommodate personas who pass as "ordinary". *Messiah's* case demonstrates the same principle. This independent production began with anonymous actors in the lead roles. When it moved to television, and enjoyed bigger budgets, famous stars were added³⁶¹.

The Office's first web series turned out to be a triumph. NBC expressed its satisfaction with the results and its will to expand web activity³⁶². The next seasons of the web series appear to have growing resources. While the first and third web seasons, for example, remain within the realm of the familiar sets, using the regular cast members who are already on the payroll, the second season incorporates exterior shots, and scenes with new guest characters. Moreover, although the fifth and ninth seasons also use the already available locations, cast and crew, they also feature a full-length music video spectacle to an original song. These are no longer products made from surpluses, but full-scale productions.

Yet even if the network believed in the product, the viewers still perceived the show as inferior to the TV series. Fans suspected that the web series was a deception, a way to serve them second-rate materials that were left out of the show. When the entire fifth web season was uploaded to *The Office's* official YouTube channel, User BarVad V commented "I can't believe they thought this scene wasn't good enough for the show 😬😬 one of the best scenes EVER", and over 3.1K other users expressed their agreement. User Annie Monahan wrote "the fact that this wasn't considered good enough to be aired in a show appalls me" and gained 16K likes.

Interestingly, when *Messiah* made the opposite transition, from web to TV, the fans' discourse, as appears in the comment section of TV reviews, did not judge the TV series in comparison to the web version. The points of reference were other TV sitcoms, such as *The Office* or the classic *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979, BBC 2). Almost all the Israeli TV critics who reviewed the TV show did not treat the web series as inferior to

³⁶¹ One might claim that the famous actors joined *Messiah's* cast in supporting roles, so the lesser-known actors still enjoy the center of the stage. However, by the time this change was made, the leading actors were no longer anonymous. They gained recognition online, even gathered a fan base, and proved that they can attract viewers, who would want to spend time with them.

³⁶² An official press release by NBC stated: "our experimentation with ground-breaking storytelling, new functionality and platform offerings will really pay off for the fans of our shows in the months and season to come. We are rolling out more original content from the shows they love, more community around those shows and more top of mind content" (NBC Digital Entertainment Serves Up Users' Favorites. The Futon Critic 2008).

the TV version³⁶³. One claimed that there is "a bit more money, characters, and locations, but the soul is the same soul". Others mention television's superiority in terms of production budget - "The sets are bigger and more equipped, the cast was broadened, and so did the number of plots" – but not in terms of quality. One reviewer, Ben Ari, takes a slightly different stand and places the TV version as better than the web series, claiming that "the budget, the episodes length, the opportunity to deepen the plot and broaden the exposure - the shift to television is an upgrade". The same critic also underestimates viral success and sees it as a lesser achievement than being on TV, claiming "the web's low-tech vibe allows us to lower expectations...most of us watched it on smartphone... watching Messiah on the small(er) screen, we do not compare the series to Louie, but to an Ariana Grande clip or to the cat video we watched the previous moment...". This view might remind us of the responses of *The Office's* fans, who perceived the web series as a waste bin for materials that were not good enough for TV. But inconsistently, Ben Ari expresses less enjoyment from watching the TV version compared to the web series. She claims that "what worked in a 7 minute episode feels a bit 'more of the same' in the half hour version". At the same time, she also argues that the TV version "manages to upgrade [Messiah's] character from a successful gimmick to a protagonist which enters the heart".

In general, critics seem to agree that the transition to television pushes *Messiah* towards the sitcom tradition by building a fuller world, in which the relationships between the cast members become more family-like. The change softens the protagonist, which also makes him appear more human and sympathetic. This is not surprising considering the axiom that ruled the TV industry for many years, and is still common in mainstream networks, which states that characters must be positive and loveable enough so that viewers would want to invite them into their living room and spend time with them³⁶⁴. To a certain extent, something indeed got lost on the way from YouTube to Keshet channel. TV had smoothed Messiah's rough edges.

³⁶³ (Ben Ari 2018); (Rak, Messiah' Hahadasha Merageshet Kemo Shehi Matzhika, Veatem Holchim Lehitmaker (The New Messiah is as Touching as it is Funny, and You are About to Get Hooked) 2018); (Shiloni 2018). See Also Menuhin's review, that completely ignores this aspect (Menuhin 2018)

³⁶⁴ (Mittell 2015).

Cringe, Embarrassment, and Shame

After analyzing the resemblance and difference between *The Office* and *Messiah* in both form and content, including the implications on the pieces' cultural status, there is another important foundation to be discussed – humor. Mills observes that *The Office's* humor often arises from presenting embarrassing situations as laughable. The series "...plays on the notion of embarrassment by incorporating many shots of Brent's employees looking aghast at what he says and does; that is, their response is as vital to the comedy as the events themselves are"³⁶⁵. Weil, creator of the Israeli version *Hamisrad*, described the same principle: "one of the things that works here, unlike in many sitcoms, is the power of the reaction. Someone would tell a joke and then someone else would look at him with an expression of 'are you dumb'? The reaction is what makes the joke. The joke must be there, the joke is the joke, but what makes it funny is the reaction, and there will always be someone who will react"³⁶⁶.

Jason Middleton defines a humoristic style called "cringe comedy" or "awkward humor". This humor "existed as a kind of undercurrent or potentiality throughout the history of documentary film", and "emerged as a prominent aesthetic in the 1970s and 1980s"³⁶⁷, but experienced a notable revival in a new cycle on television with the appearance of comedy *verité*. "Creators of such shows exploit the mock-documentary framework to heighten their awkward humor, through devices including long periods of dead air, and contradictions between characters' self-representation in interviews and their behavior captured on tape"³⁶⁸. The development of *Messiah's* persona began from the concept of 'lack of consciousness'³⁶⁹. The lack of self-awareness is the character's core. Hence it is no wonder that the creators turned to a style of cringe humor. Since at that time cringe humor was mainly associated with comedy *verité*, it dictated a certain aesthetic. This mundane aesthetic was suitable for independent productions with low budgets, and for online content that is consumed on smaller screens (in contrast to, for example, special effects spectacles whose marketing campaigns urge viewers to experience them on an IMAX screen in all their glory).

Middleton wonders why awkwardness has emerged as such a significant cultural formation in the 21st century. He presumes that it is because: "[awkward

³⁶⁵ (Mills 2004, 69).

³⁶⁶ (Israeli Writers Guild 2015).

³⁶⁷ (Middleton 2013, 7-8).

³⁶⁸ (Middleton 2013, 2).

³⁶⁹ (Hinuchit 2014).

moments] are moments when an encounter feels *too* real: unscripted, unplanned, and, above all, occurring in person. Contemporary social interactions are increasingly virtual and mediated by social media through which we carefully tailor our self-presentation to others, and enjoy comfortable delays within which to draft and edit our conversations. In this cultural context, moments in which dead air or social miscues disrupt a face-to-face encounter feel awkward because they are too unmediated and immediate"³⁷⁰.

This is an interesting observation that again points out the cultural consequences of the contemporary digital environment. Also, it is true that entertaining acts of spontaneity are magnified and resonate against the carefully photoshopped and filtered images in social networks' feeds. However, Middleton's perception can be criticized as an exaggerated generalization. Every digital platform has its own degree of mediation. For example, watching and discussing a webisode of *Messiah* on Facebook is not the same as doing it on YouTube. On Facebook, you use your personal profile for viewing and interacting. Your social circle can see that you have watched it/shared it/commented on it, and so do strangers who share an interest with you and like the same page or group. On YouTube, you interact with anonymous strangers under false nicknames. Also, we can reject his claim that awkwardness does not belong to the virtual sphere. I suspect that any millennial whose "boomer"³⁷¹ family member commented on his post with an embarrassing remark (sometimes even without being aware that their correspondence is public) would beg to differ. In addition to that, the Covid-19 pandemic introduced the world to a new reality of communicating mainly by Zoom and other forms of video chats, which have supplied many awkward moments and difficulties in interaction³⁷². Actually, since Zoom awkwardness often stems from technological glitches and failures, in a sense, the consumption of a web series, that is streamed on sometimes blurry, low resolution, small screens, intensifies the cringe.

Cringly situations, or people who accidentally make fools of themselves, are the kind of materials that become viral. The people who were documented in these situations fall victim to public shaming, or become objects of admiration, or both. For example, the successful Israeli Facebook page, *כשאבא ואמא בני דודים* (*When Dad and*

³⁷⁰ (Middleton 2013, 2-3).

³⁷¹ (Mueller and McCollum 2022).

³⁷² (Hinde 2021); (Hsieh 2020); (Murphy 2020).

Mom are Cousins)³⁷³, that has over half a million followers, is dedicated to mocking stupid behavior or mistakes, from celebrities on media interviews to laymen Facebook posts. Another interesting example, almost a distinct sub-genre of viral videos on the Israeli web, includes newlyweds, Bar Mitzvah boys and Bat Mitzvah girls, whose happy day was tainted after footage of their tacky celebrations was subject to online mockery for their display of extravagant bad taste³⁷⁴.

Some of the events in *Messiah's* lame venue echo this sub-genre of viral videos (even though it is not always a direct parody of them). The first episode of the TV series is even called *Barat Mitzvah*. In a sense, and adopting Middleton's view, it can be claimed that by sharing *Messiah's* web videos the viewers get the chance to shame a "weirdo", who looks bad and acts in an embarrassing lack of awareness. When they shame a made-up character in a fictional scenario, they can do so without the moral implications, since the shaming does not really hurt anyone.

There are plenty of examples of innocent people who were caught in embarrassing situations and unwillingly became social media phenomena, without having done anything to "deserve" this cyber-bullying. A memorable case in Israel is the one that the media called "Herzmania". An old woman, with dental problems, whose only "fault" was being at the wrong place at the wrong time, found herself as a national laughingstock. The woman, who was looking for her husband, Herzl, and calling his name, accidentally stepped into the frame of a live news report. The blooper became viral. However, the woman was not amused by the unwanted attention, and refused to cooperate when reporters contacted her. Her expression of unpleasant feelings and humiliation appealed to the conscience of some journalists, who tried to curtail the "Herzmania", reminding that the woman is a helpless victim, and claiming that the viral video is morally flawed³⁷⁵.

This correlates with another part of Middleton's discussion about the web as a habitat for cringe. He points out the website *Awkward Family Photos*, which preceded the age of social networks, and offered an interactive experience. As the name suggests,

³⁷³ <https://www.facebook.com/%D7%9B%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%91%D7%90-%D7%95%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%90-%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%93%D7%95%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9D-282194871980980/>

³⁷⁴ (Dubilensi 2011). The popularity and viral qualities of footage from Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations correlates with the Israeli online content obsession with youth and coming of age, as discussed in another chapter in this dissertation.

³⁷⁵ (Bohbot 2018).

it invited people to view, and to share, old family photos where "people proudly sporting fashion and hairstyles that now appear terribly dated and unattractive"³⁷⁶. Messiah's unfashionable mullet, shabby suits, and overall 1980's style make him a living "awkward family photo". In this case too, people are invited to mock Messiah without the scruples of ridiculing real people who might get hurt.

The people in these photographs from the pre-digital era intended them to be viewed by their close friends and family members. Middleton suggests that "the family photos on the website appear awkward precisely because the subjects cannot anticipate the public gaze that is directed toward them through the images' recirculation"³⁷⁷. So, by deduction, it can be argued that participants in pre-internet era domestic videos (and some of the contemporary ones as well) appear awkward. They can cause viewers unsettling cringe. This might suggest another reason for the inferior and artistically illegitimate status of domestic camcorder videos.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Stan Brakhage has tied between amateurish aesthetic and cringe: "It is The Critic in each man that does give credence to The Professional Critic's stance against The Amateur, for when any man feels ashamed of the lack of drama in his 'home movies', he does put something of his shame into his making (or his talking about the pictures he's taken) and does, thus, achieve the drama of embarrassment". Furthermore, Brakhage notes that this cringy aesthetic can be used for a comedic effect: "as if to protect himself and his images from criticism by making them obviously foolish... as if to say: 'Look, I know I'm a fool—I intend to make you laugh at me and my pictures!'"³⁷⁸. Therefore, while usually the discourse about comedy *verité* connects the chosen visual style to values of truth and documentation, it can also be seen as serving the creation of a comedic effect, especially the one that derives from embarrassment and shame.

What about the status of the much-despised candid camera? Like in Middleton's definition of cringe, pranks are also situations that feel *"too real"*. The pranks involve non-actors who respond to real life situations, often in public. But unlike in the encounters in a shared office space, weird dance moves during a Bar Mitzvah party, or old family photos, in candid camera situations there is a guiding hand. This aspect does not fit into Middleton's definition of an unscripted, unplanned, in-person social miscues.

³⁷⁶ (Middleton 2013, 3).

³⁷⁷ (Middleton 2013, 3).

³⁷⁸ (Brakhage 2001).

Since the person who reacted did not misunderstand but acted precisely as s/he was manipulated to act. One might say, but the scripted comedy *verité* is also carefully planned, so how can we scold the pranksters' manipulation of real events? Well, these are two different approaches to the representation of reality. The mockumentary is fiction that denies its fictionality, and tries to fool the viewers, or at least lessen the awareness of fictionality. For example, as Mills notes, "while clearly scripted, the whole is performed in a faux-improvizational style, so that the performance is noticeably different to that in the majority of sitcoms"³⁷⁹. The candid camera, on the other hand, constantly declares the manipulation. In the candid camera films of Yehuda Barkan, or Yigal Shilon's pranks on television, the pranks are accompanied by the director's narration, detailing what has been done and what he aims to achieve. His remarks are patronizing toward the naïve prank victims. At the climax of the scene, the prankster steps into the scene, and the bluff is called. Somewhat paradoxically, the candid camera's allegedly "unmediated truth" is experienced under a constant reminder of the manipulations on the scene.

This observation contributes to undermining the alleged value of a candid camera prank as more "real" or "authentic" than a fictional mockumentary prank, for example, Jim/Tim placing Dwight/Gareth's stapler inside a jelly in a memorable scene from *The Office*. Are the spontaneous expressions of anger or stress by common people who were pranked in the middle of the street more surprising than the scripted reactions of Dwight, as played by actor Rainn Wilson? Are they funnier? Do they expose insights into human behavior?

So, in which cases do pranks have an additional value that cannot be conveyed through scripted fiction (and hence a superior artistic value)? This question once again brings us to the ancient but still relevant definition of "creative treatment of actuality". When Sacha Baron Cohen manipulates real people to expose their bigotry, as part of a well phrased examination of America's treatment of foreigners and minorities, the effect could not be achieved in scripted scenes. Viewers are amazed by how easily the skillful interviewer manages to influence people to behave in ways that we would like to think are not common, or at least considered unacceptable by social codes. If viewers had watched an actor react in such an ignorant and hateful way, they could have continued to bury their heads in the sand, denying the unpleasant truth, claiming "this is only

³⁷⁹ (Mills 2004, 69).

fiction, it is not real". This is why Baron Cohen's work is (mostly) considered artistically viable and enjoys a superior status.

The ninth episode of *Messiah's* TV series takes place on April 1st, April Fool's Day (which Messiah describes as "my favorite of all the Israeli holidays"). Most of the episode does not revolve around the day's traditions, but it does feature an opening sequence that is all about pranks. In *The Office*, Jim's pranks are a running gag and serve as an opportunity for both the diegetic character and the extra-diegetic writer to display their creativity³⁸⁰. In *Messiah*, this kind of situation only happens in this sequence, and the humor does not derive from the original creativity nor the impressive execution of the prank, but exactly the opposite. Messiah uses corny schoolyard tricks (like asking Ziv to smell his bottle of water, and then squeeze it in his face), or cheap gadgets which are sold at toy stores (like a fake hand). His pranks are as dated as his clothes and uninspired as his music.

Unlike Jim's passive-aggressive practical jokes that are meant to get even with a hostile co-worker, Messiah's pranks are meant to display his abilities as an entertainer, and to establish his superiority and sophistication over his allegedly gullible staff. Messiah forces the camera crew to become an active participant in the prank. He addresses the camera directly, urges the cameraman to follow him, narrates his plans, and tells condescending jokes about his coworkers. His vulgar display of humiliating "humor" has a lot more in common with the style of the Israeli candid camera films than with *The Office's* workplace shenanigans. If in *Hamisrad* Weil presented the manager's cringy attempts at humor in order to reflexively criticize Israeli humor, then in this case *Messiah's* creators manage to reflexively criticize cringe comedy – while using cringe comedy to do so!

This discussion of cringe humor can help to chart cinematic comedy genres that are associated with a strong sense of the "real"/ "unmediated truth", and their perceived artistic value. This is an important step toward the analysis of the wedding special. That peculiar webisode is a more complicated hybrid text that challenges generic boundaries, and hence, also challenges common perceptions regarding independent and domestic filmmaking, especially in the age of digital media.

³⁸⁰ Mills argues that in *The Office*, Michael constantly plays for the camera. It can be argued that Jim is also performing for the enjoyment of the audience. In a way, whenever he comes up with a prank, he is creating original content for the diegetic camera crew who documents the office.

The Wedding Special: Beyond Definitions

Messiah's wedding special, to a certain extent, stretches beyond comedy verité and into its authentic object of mimicry, the thing itself, documentary. The special is a recording of the preparations for a real wedding. Like in cinema verité, it features the real wedding guests appearing as themselves. It is shot in the real location of events. It uses (relatively) simple mobile equipment and natural light. But this is not a fully observational "fly on the wall" documentary since the makers intervene and set up the situations. It is a "what if" scenario, in which these real people react to *Messiah's* semi-planned antics. Therefore, in this webisode, *Messiah* switches genres from comedy verité to something closer to reality TV or a prank film.

The comedy verité precursor, *The Royle Family* (1998-2000, BBC 2), was a groundbreaking show that invited viewers to join the eponymous family's living room for 30 minutes, while the characters sit in front of a TV set and do, well, nothing special at all. Despite not being filmed as a mockumentary, the show conveys a strong sense of reality. It was hailed for denouncing the familiar concepts of narrative and situation comedy. Some critics even associate it with the works of Chekhov and Beckett³⁸¹. The unique format, which has been described as an "extreme reduction in narrative topics, places and characters", can be seen as a major step towards the legitimization of domestic and independent production scale. According to Krewani, what makes up for the scanty aesthetic is the quality of the writing and the sophisticated humor. She recognizes three main elements: "theatrical improvisation, media awareness and a parodistic approach to gender and class"³⁸². These factors can be applied to *Messiah* as well. But what is more interesting is that they can also be applied to the wedding special. Arguably, these qualities are prominent there even more than in the regular webisodes.

First, the unscripted elements are evident whenever some of the non-actors fail to keep a straight face in front of Kagan, or in reaction shots of family members who seem genuinely puzzled by him. Some of *Messiah's* dialogues with the family members also appear to be improvised.

Second, media awareness is inherent in the mockumentary format, which utilizes traditional filmmaking practices to pretend to be something that it is not. In the wedding special, the reflexive spoof is not just playing with the concept of a

³⁸¹ (Christy 1999); (Keal 26.10.2002); (Marks 10.06.2001).

³⁸² (Krewani 2016).

documentary, but also with the concepts of a wedding video (in both potential meanings of the term: a domestic recording of family events, and a short film that is amateurishly produced for the purpose of being presented at a wedding party).

Third, a parodistic approach to gender and class. These issues are not always on top of *Messiah's* agenda but are certainly present at the wedding special. It sneers at the family's social status. Viewers are introduced to an Architect and a Medical doctor ("not everything should be paid for in money. I am a doctor, I can help you... it is called barter... you will walk into the clinic whenever you want, for you the door will always be open..."), and their yuppy-bourgeoise lifestyle ("in our family, we don't eat this kind of stuff. We eat healthy. We only eat raw"). Gender issues are also ridiculed. After *Messiah* gives unrequested and unhelpful sporting tips to a male family member who is training for the 'Iron Man' tournament, the scene cuts to *Messiah* with three of the family's women, as he instructs them that "the sister or sister-in-law's role in the wedding...[is] to bring out the bride's beauty". He then gazes at them as they are practicing dance and continues to blurt sexist remarks such as "not so much pelvic movement, this isn't an active birth" or "less seduction with the shoulder".

Kerwani claims that "against this background of conceptual and pragmatic change within the medium, *The Royle Family* seems to ignore narrative complexity. The sitcom's seriality offers neither the heterogeneous narrative of a soap opera nor the episodic structure of a serial with a closed narrative". This approach is closer to the form of narrative in a blog, an Instagram account, or a YouTube channel, which can be updated whenever its operator desires, without necessarily planning ahead. *The Royle Family* was so revolutionary precisely because it chose an approach that defies the constraints of the strict programming schedule in a TV channel³⁸³. On the Web, this approach would have appeared more natural.

Another thing that makes *The Royle Family* a particularly good case for this discussion, is that the only few narrative elements that Kerwani recognizes in the TV

³⁸³ *Messiah* began as an experiment, and its makers could not tell whether there will be demand for further episodes. Webisodes were filmed in batches, with relatively long periods (few weeks) between them. The frequency of webisodes release affects the viewing habits, and the storytelling. For example, in *The Office* web series, the entire season was scripted before the shooting began. The writers foreknew the developments and created a coherent and continuous storyline that unfolded from one webisode to the next. However, in the independent production of *Messiah*, each episode stands for itself. Some elements of diegetic memory were added after the initial successes of the first webisodes, but they still did not create a coherent continuity. Binging the web series would give the impression of patches stitched together, not an organic unity.

show revolve around the daughter's marriage (in the first season) and the birth of the baby (in the second season). These are the kinds of life events that are usually perpetuated by home videos³⁸⁴. The final episode of the first season takes place during the daughter's wedding day, the climatic event that the slight narrative of the series was building up towards. The episode presents the final arrangements before the ceremony, all taking place at the family's house, and it ends right as the family members leave for church, without showing the ceremony itself. It avoids the melodramatic clichés and corny "happy end" in popular films and TV shows. It proves the capability of bringing out impressive dramatic, comedic, and realistic qualities through mundane low key "anti-dramatic" filmmaking, which attempts to capture an actuality as if in its most unmediated manner. This precedent could be used to advocate *Messiah's* wedding special.

As a hybrid between scripted mockumentary and cinema verité, *Messiah's* wedding special more fully realizes what *The Royle Family* aspired to be, and everything that it was praised for. Both shows use the vague premise of "preparing for a wedding" as an excuse to focus on the experience of "dead time" and everyday interactions. Both throw in a few kooky characters into the mix and produce comedy gold. As *The Royle Family* creators put it: in sitcoms things happen, but real life is just people sitting around and sometimes saying funny things³⁸⁵.

In *Messiah's* wedding special, the sense of "real life" should be even stronger. Unlike the actors pretending to be family members on *The Royle Family*, *Messiah's* special webisode features an extended family cast, appearing as themselves. This fact implies (potentially, allegedly³⁸⁶) a more accurate and realistic piece. Yuvel Neter, who is credited in the web series as one of the creators along with Kagan and Pollig, is the bride's brother. It is his real family members, whom the creators of the webisode know well, who are incorporated into *Messiah's* diegetic world. Neter also appears on camera as himself.

³⁸⁴ Home videos are associated with a family member holding his camcorder or smartphone. But even when a semi-professional camera crew is hired to film a wedding celebration, the product is still closer to a photo album than to a feature film, a TV show, or a scripted web series.

³⁸⁵ (B. Thompson 2004, 273).

³⁸⁶ The restrained phrasing is deliberate. In this example it is arguable to what extent this potential is fulfilled. Mostly since there is not much deepness or complexity in this sort of comedic narratives anyway. The family members, most of them serve as mere extras, are not required to act but to react (as in Weil's explanation about the role of comic reaction in comedy verité). However, if this form of filmmaking would had been employed throughout the whole series, and not only in the wedding special, then the potential could have been closer to realization.

The opening pre-title scene, for example, is played by Kagan, as Messiah, and Rafik Yedidia (Yuval Netter's half-brother), as himself. Yedidia is better known to most viewers (above a certain age) by his birth name, Tamir Kimchi. He is a former popular radio and TV host, who famously went through a "spiritual awakening" during his stay in an ashram in India, changed his name to Rafik, and returned to Israel as a spiritual mentor. He published books and produced masterclasses and festivals about meditation and tantra³⁸⁷. The scene uses Yedidia's real-life persona. In his case, being a celebrity, the joke is not wasted on viewers from outside the family circle since they also "know" him.

Yedidia is giving Messiah a coaching session. The spiritual guide instructs him in meditation, asking to look "beyond the mind screen". In a testimonial, Messiah says that he has been seeing his coacher for ten years. Yet a few sentences later indicate that he had learned nothing and has a superficial (if any) understanding of the Eastern philosophies. He lacks basic terms and distorts others. He describes how the coacher entered his guesthouse "waving a pendulum" (meaning a thurible) and claimed that the "Shang Fui is not good here" (mispronouncing Feng Shui). But more importantly, despite his spiritual guidance Messiah remains materialistic and greedy. The vision that he sees in meditation is "me making tons of money". Then he immediately brags "Wow, I had an out of body experience... does it happen a lot in your sessions? Am I entitled to a discount for this"? The joke is on Messiah's character, which might be damaged beyond repair, but it can also hint that Yedidia's methods are futile, and it even, one might say, suggests that life coaches are charlatans.

The webisode then moves on from what could have been a general sketch that ridicules meditation enthusiasm. Yedidia says "my little sister Yael is getting married" and puts Messiah in charge of the event. The excited Messiah turns to the cameramen and says "finally something good came out of all the money I have been giving him over a decade. I could have bought two Lexus cars". While he says that, Yedidia fails to remain in character and smiles. He breaks character even while playing himself. There are several layers of reality here. Whether Kagan was improvising and surprised him or not, the creators could have cut out his reaction from the frame or re-shot the scene. Choosing to keep it signals to viewers that this is just a joke that should not be treated seriously, thus reaffirming Yedidia's professionalism (he is not really a charlatan

³⁸⁷ (Swissa 2016).

life coach, he just plays one here). But it also undermines the realistic illusion of the mockumentary. Stepping out of character is "unprofessional" acting. But in this case, the person is a non-actor, so is it possible to accuse him of acting "unprofessionally"? If anything, a reminder that we are watching a real family playing around, and real people being pranked by Messiah and reacting in genuinely surprised amusement, enhances the realistic quality, emphasizing the "unmediated truth". The necessity to maintain the illusion could therefore stem from the creators' need to hide the fact that it is merely a home video.

Indeed, any TV series could have also cast Yedidia as a life coach and thus enjoy the meta wink at the audience and provoke a certain sense of authenticity. It is not an uncommon trick, for example, the celebrity psychologist Phil McGraw, better known as Dr. Phil, has appeared as himself in comedies like *The Simpsons* (1989 -, Fox), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000 -, HBO) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019, CW). By now it is a common practice, hence if Yedidia had appeared as himself on a TV episode of *Messiah*, it would have been just like in the case of Dr. Phil, a simple meta humor gag. It would not undermine the ontological concept of the TV series. However, in the case of the wedding special, this casting decision has a much more significant effect on the ontological viewing experience. In a regular TV series, the actors trick viewers (who suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to be fooled), to establish a viewing experience of "a fly on the wall" in an ordinary family's living room. However, in cases like the wedding special's concept, viewers get the thing itself, a direct cinema documentation of an ordinary family's living room (or in this case, events hall), "just people sitting around and sometimes say funny things".

Here lies the paradox. Now it is possible to point out why the wedding special has been rejected from the web series' corpus, and what it says about the ontological crisis of comedy verité, and the limitations of independent content creation in general. The creators of comedy verité struggle to walk a fine line: The closer they are to accurately capture unmediated reality, the more authentic and relatable their art becomes (and in this genre, arguably funnier. Which is why the authentic cringe moments in Sacha Baron Cohen's are more effective than the cringe moments in his scripted films, which are not as appreciated³⁸⁸). But, beyond a certain point, the further

³⁸⁸ See Sacha Baron Cohen's filmography on the reviews' aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/sacha_baron_cohen

the filmmaker moves toward an unmediated reality, the less compelling the viewing experience becomes. The filmmaking would seem too effortless. The notion of creativity dissipates, and viewers are left with only the actuality. As said, people just sitting around can and will come up with funny things that will be enjoyable to watch. This is the whole point of Jerry Seinfeld's web series *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* (2012-2017, Crackle; 2018 -, Netflix). However, Seinfeld's web series is a talk show. It is not treated, both by viewers and critics, the same as his classic eponymous TV show (1989-1998, NBC), even though it was famously labeled "a show about nothing", and Seinfeld appeared as himself. There is an elusive border of artistic legitimacy. This certain elusiveness is precisely what makes filmmakers anxious. Especially if they are independent content creators who are not just filming an afternoon with their family on their phone but take a risky investment in a small-scale semi-professional production (as *Messiah's* creators did).

Similar anxiety is also evident in an interview with Kagan, where it seems that it is very important to him to distinguish his work from other online content. He emphasizes the work and creativity that are put into his work. Kagan said: "it is not a half-assed gag like [popular content creators who post simple mundane videos like] I took a video of my cat, check it out"³⁸⁹. Even though domestic home videos of cats are extremely popular, and could be no less viral, successful, discussed, or even entertaining as a semi-professional comedy web series can³⁹⁰. Still, it is crucial for Kagan to distance himself from this kind of content, the kind that can be found in *America's Funniest Home Videos* and *bloopers*, the kind that is associated with the domestic camcorder, with just people sitting around in their living room.

In Conclusion of Messiah's Case

This chapter examined the web series and TV series *Messiah*. The series is one of the most famous and celebrated cases of web-to-TV media transformation in Israel. It is almost always mentioned as a positive and successful example of media convergence, and in many ways it is. However, this chapter offered a more critical analysis, that exposed the underachievement and limitations of independent content creation. *Messiah* was used as a case study, in which the prime example is the most

³⁸⁹ (Hinuchit 2014).

³⁹⁰ (Myrick 2015); (O'Meara 2014).

overlooked, deliberately neglected (arguably hidden) part in *Messiah's* story – the wedding special. This webisode differs from the other webisodes and TV episodes that are in the style of comedy vérité. The wedding special is a complex hybrid text. Its most prominent feature, ontological ambivalence, is what poses problems for its creators, viewers, and the discourse on independent content creation in general.

The old pre-digital revolution axioms, which were formed by power holders to preserve their status, and to repress independent filmmaking by amateur laymen, are still perceived as valid. These thinking patterns haunt and limit contemporary Youtubers and web creators of the Web 2.0 era.

At the same time, other cultural processes have been setting the ground for cross media and convergence. Most relevant for this case has been the shift in television comedy. The generic patterns of the sitcoms were refreshed. The modern incarnation, called comedy vérité, adopts codes, aesthetics, and production values that narrow the gaps between professional and independent filmmaking.

The seminal comedy vérité series, *The Office*, was used as a reference point in an in-depth comparison to *Messiah*, in both their web and televised versions. The investigation of categories like form, content, narrative, platform, and humor, revealed *Messiah's* mechanism.

At its core, *Messiah* relies on *The Office's* successful formula. But it localizes it by using a different approach than the one that was taken by the official Israeli adaptation. Instead, the creators pick an approach that is closer to patterns of Israeli gen-Y web comedies. Nevertheless, in some aspects, *Messiah* is also revealed as conservative in its artistic approaches, which remain bound to the mainstream, and heavily influenced by the norms of commercial TV, without seeking to undermine or defy them.

The wedding special is an exceptional webisode in the ways it manages to detach and stray far from the older televisional and cinematic conventions and discourses, into the new free zone of the lawless web. It is precisely the controversy that it sparks, the difficulties that it poses, and the way it destabilizes categories, that make it the most subversive and groundbreaking component in *Messiah's* revolution of paving a new path between the web and the TV screen.

Chapter :3 TV Killed the Web Video Star: Dudu Faruk, Online Fame, and the Challenges of Stardom in Convergence Culture

A new generation of celebrities has emerged in Israel over the past decade, during the time when social networks have become inseparable from the online experience for most people (especially teens). These stars, who achieved their fame on the web, have been crowned directly by their devoted fans. The fans actively follow web-stars' profiles and share their content, and they are the ones that are making them "go viral"³⁹¹. This new form of fame raises various questions. Would the fans continue to be loyal or simply scroll down their feed and move to the next hit? Had these web-creators developed proper skills and experience before entering the limelight? Can anyone with an internet connection get a fair chance to break into the industry? Are the online creators freed of commercial considerations? The gap between the often-frenzied coverage in entertainment news and more serious academic research is significant and needs filling.

In this chapter, I begin to address these questions in the hope of filling some of this lacuna. The previous chapter, about Udi Kagan's *Messiah*, examined independent content creation mainly from the prisms of ontology and genre. This chapter focuses on the rise and fall of Israeli rapper-comedian Dudu Faruk, who makes an instructive case study of modern forms of stardom. Scrutinizing Faruk's Persona also enables to analyze the nature of the web as an artistic platform, and to challenge the "convergence culture". Henry Jenkins defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want"³⁹². Faruk's case is instructive because it shows how convergence, the shift from one platform to another, is not necessarily natural, fluent, and easy. In fact, it can be disastrous.

³⁹¹ I am adopting the terminology suggested by Aymar Jean Christian, who uses "fans" to "denote communities of viewers who mobilize around texts". When I use the term "viewers" I mean users/consumers who do not actively follow the texts. It relates to his definition of "viewers" as a term to describe communities "as constructed by producers, organizations and institutions who seek to profit from their attention and activity" (8).

³⁹² Ibid, 2.

Dudu Frauk, a “stage” persona created by a teenager, Ori Comay, was the hottest sensation in Israel in 2018. As in a disturbing twist on "Cinderella stories", he was a perfect example of an anonymous amateur who posted his "radical" materials online (in his case: parodies of ultra-violent, misogynistic, racist trap songs) and quickly became a sensation that spread virally through social networks. His videos attracted immense numbers of views on different social media sites, especially YouTube. In 2018, he was one of the top ten most searched Israeli musicians on Google, and, a year later, he was the number one most searched person by the site's Israeli users³⁹³. The entertainment magazine *Pnai Plus* chose him as 2018's "sexiest man in Israel" in their prestigious annual ranking³⁹⁴. His persona was used in numerous commercial campaigns³⁹⁵. When he began to leverage his online stardom for money, he performed live shows in small clubs that regularly sold out. However, his meteoric success came to an abrupt end, which is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this case study. What currently looks like the premature death of Faruk's career, is ascribed by many to an unsuccessful television interview. This interview is discussed below. Despite several ambitious comeback attempts, so far, he has failed to recover his former glory.

In cyberspace, the offensive comedian's video clips easily skipped over presumed hurdles, such as amateurish production values, dirty language, and ethnic humor that allegedly made them unsuitable for the mainstream. In addition, his outrageous behavior attracted a group of fans, who appreciated his satire and his deconstruction of a star's persona. They were willing to accept the mock persona as "authentic", (sometimes through "suspension of disbelief"³⁹⁶), as long as it remained consistent, existed within the social networks, and adhered to their codes. The nature of the post-post-modernist web allowed them to interpret Faruk's persona and creations as they wished, in accordance with the limits of their values and tastes. Damon Young characterizes Web 2.0 as "...text and images devoid of referential stability... suspension of any agency of adjudication... rendering both the status of the énoncé and the authenticity of the énonciation fundamentally uncertain". The attempt to pinpoint a stable meaning to the image is doomed to fail, since online "the skeptical position itself

³⁹³ Lago; Yardeni.

³⁹⁴ "Atem Bahartem".

³⁹⁵ Bieler; Elram Siti.

³⁹⁶ "The phrase means that the audience accepts limitations in the presented story, sacrificing realism, and occasionally logic and believability, as well as the media content's aesthetic quality for the sake of enjoyment", see Böcking.

is undermined through a *mise en abyme* of further negations"³⁹⁷. Furthermore, the nature of what Daly defines as Cinema 3.0, in which "viewers" are invited to continue their engagement with the audio-visual text even after they finish watching it (in avenues like forums, chats, social networks, etc.), allowed them to take an active part in the interpretation, but also in the definition, of Faruk's persona.

Yet Faruk's attempt to converge with and his transition to other media or venues in the real world, where the lack (or suspension) of skepticism does not apply, led to his downfall. His live interview on the popular talk show, *אופירה וברקו*, *Ofira and Berko* (2017 -, Keshet), was disastrous because the confrontation between him and the hosts shattered Faruk's web-image. It dispersed the ambivalence and illusion that could have existed online. Moreover, the interviewers lived up to their notorious reputation as they acquired some of the same crude characteristics Faruk assumed online. Except that instead of playing with it as he did, they excoriated him, and dispelled his appeal by disambiguating him, so to speak. This turning of tables questions the boundaries between fact and fiction in any star's persona, in cyberspace or outside of it. However, at the same time, it makes the discussion about Faruk's stardom as a web persona even more unique and fascinating, since it sharpens the distinctions between stardom in each medium, and what might happen to it in transitions between them.

It is Authentic, it is Just Not True

In Classic Hollywood, star personas were carefully curated by professional publicists who worked on behalf of powerful media moguls - "the star machine", as Jeanine Basinger puts it³⁹⁸. Back then, movie stars, like the stars in the sky, were distant and unreachable. Common people learned about their favorite actors almost entirely through selected information that the studios fed to the media (even if occasionally gossip columnists such as Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper spoiled their plans with an embarrassing scoop). However, through the years the stars' image has changed, moving towards authenticity and normalcy. The gap between stars and fans was narrowed. "As the market for paparazzi photos, video... [sensational magazines] and gossip blogs expanded... the demand seemed to be for 'authentic' celebrities who communicated via New Media technologies, whose images did not signify as

³⁹⁷ Young.

³⁹⁸ Basinger.

manufactured... but who, at the same time, lived glamorous lives... These contradictory impulses — one towards authenticity and normalcy, the other towards glamour and superlativeness — have helped guide the production of star images since the first generation of Hollywood stars"³⁹⁹.

Stars are aided by a team of agents, publicists, and new media experts to achieve this delicate balance in the design of their public persona. The mission keeps getting more and more complicated, as in the social networks the stars are expected to be accessible to their fans and to communicate directly with their followers. It is also getting harder to manipulate the fans. In the past, studio executives could monitor potential problems, conceal them, negotiate with publishers and gossip reporters, or minimize expected damages. Nowadays, a career-wrecking scandal can be documented by any passerby with a smartphone and spread immediately all over the world before professionals get a chance to act. Contemporary fans are media savvy and actively seek and gather information from a variety of sources. Therefore, the list of challenges that independent content creators online have to face while establishing their record stretches beyond the creative aspects. They need to build and maintain a public persona, gather and cultivate a fan base, and all without any assistance or guidance from experienced professionals.

In his seminal work, Richard Dyer pointed out that "[T]he whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of 'really' – what is [the star] really like"⁴⁰⁰? Dyer also notes that "It is this effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma"⁴⁰¹. Following Dyer, Melanie Kennedy suggests using the term authenticity "within the context of postmodern and neoliberal, *reflexive* selfhood". According to her, "authenticity – used interchangeably with the terms 'realness', 'sincerity', and 'genuineness' – is a cultural, discursive construct, and in reality authenticity cannot exist naturally or inherently within anyone or anything. As such, authenticity, particularly in celebrity, is contradictory and at odds with the very values it claims to embody"⁴⁰².

Expanding the theoretical framework beyond star-studies into other aspects of the entertainment industry will allow those who examine the current discourse to

³⁹⁹ Petersen, 400.

⁴⁰⁰ Dyer, "Heavenly", 22.

⁴⁰¹ Dyer, "A Star", 137.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 83.

recognize many additional examples of the modern modifications of the notion of "authenticity". For instance, reality TV shows can be seen as manipulative, a pretense of a "fly on the wall" documentation that creates artificial "authenticity". Alan Kirby observes that the digital technology which affects modern culture shares postmodernism's preoccupation with the category of the real. He discusses the mega-hit *Big Brother* (2000 -, CBS). Allegedly, the show has no author. The viewers are given the illusion of influence when they are invited to vote off participants. "By being 'real' – showing 'real' people just living with each other – and then creating and provoking situations, scenes, events, *Big Brother* focuses on the shift from the unmediated actual... into structured and recognizable narrative form". Kirby points out three devices the show uses: First, the participants are never ordinary people picked at random, but "the same types recycled, like most fictional genres", simplistic stereotypes to be booed or cheered. Second, giving the participants banal tasks which do not affect the advancement of the narrative. Third, using "artificial stimulus of 'conflict... to fabricate narrative out of the flux of the real"⁴⁰³.

Expanding the theoretical framework even further would enable those who examine the changes in the discourse over the past two decades to recognize the erosion in the connection between "authenticity" and "truth" in other fields. In Politics, for example, the perceived "authenticity" of populist leaders enables them to act in dubious ways, without losing popularity. Lev Manovich writes that "the leaders of the middle of the twentieth century were presented as invincible... true saints incapable of any human sin. Today we expect to hear about scandals involving our leaders, yet these scandals do not really diminish their credibility... Auto-critique, scandal, and revelation of its machinery became new structural components of modern ideology". He adds that "ideology does not demand that the subject blindly believe it, as it did early in the twentieth century; rather, it puts the subject in the master position of someone who knows very well that she is being fooled, and generously lets herself be fooled"⁴⁰⁴. Manovich's argument, along with Young's observations regarding the ironies of the web⁴⁰⁵, in which any statement can never be taken as is and open to interpretations regardless of whether it is true or false, brings to mind the commercials made by popular content creator Roy Kafri. His uniquely absurd humor made him one of the most viral

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 191-193.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 208-209.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

and beloved Israeli web comedians (initially as part of the comic duo Nitza and Lechem). In addition to creating sketches and music, Kafri has been creating commercial campaigns for big companies which gave him a lot of artistic freedom. And so, when Kafri advertises Milkey Cakes Minies under the slogan "Yuck"⁴⁰⁶, he, and the food corporation that hired him, heavily rely on the viewer's skeptical position and ironic reading, which flips the meaning of the message. Otherwise, the commercial will not only be ineffective but will also cause damage to the brand. The same marketing approach is also expressed in the works of Ido Katzir, another web comedian who is also a copywriter and celebrity endorser. This subject is worth further research, but here is not the place for it.

Another skeptical, humorous, and self-aware way of relating to stars is suggested by Dyer, "a way that is essentially deconstructive, that refuses the guarantee that appearances are not deceiving. The most widespread, habitual form of such deconstructive reading practice is camp"⁴⁰⁷. There are many interpretations of the term 'camp'⁴⁰⁸, but it appears that Faruk's over-the-top exaggeration and vulgarity can be read as campy.

It is suggested that due to fans' awareness of the inherent "fakeness" of any celebrity, which is merely a signifier of a certain marketed image, they willingly accepted Faruk, choosing to treat him as if he were a real person. As singer Rotem Shefy, better known as her alter-ego Shefita, puts it: "All artists, whomever they may be, are somewhat disguised... every person who goes on stage must disguise themselves a bit"⁴⁰⁹.

Faruk's "disguise" is based on the American trope of the gangsta rapper. This trope is imported from distant cultures, which do not resemble the local Israeli one, or even a foreign Jewish culture. Therefore, an Israeli rapper's authenticity is questionable to begin with. Rap and Hip hop originates in Afro-American culture. Less than one percent of African Americans self-identify as Jewish⁴¹⁰. Therefore, authentic Afro-

⁴⁰⁶ The video, מילקי - הקמפיינג, have been viewed on Youtube over 1,900,000 times since it was uploaded in 2018. The comments section is full of enthusiastic responses, with many commenters (for example Yarin Gohar and Naor Israeli) crowning it as no less than the best commercial they have ever watched. However, the compliments are almost all addressed to Kafri, and there is hardly any discussion about the product.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxyc11pFS5A>

⁴⁰⁷ Dyer, "A Star", 136.

⁴⁰⁸ Cleto.

⁴⁰⁹ Bin Nun.

⁴¹⁰ "Religious Landscape Study".

American identity almost does not exist. Israelis mostly know it through representations in the media. The Israeli viewers' detachment from the authentic rap culture could be making them more willing to adopt a sarcastic point of view. From their perspective, Faruk is not that different compared to other internationally famous rappers, whose "authenticity" is anyhow treated as no more than a commodity and exploited for commercial purposes⁴¹¹. Faruk's satire undermines and ridicules the early, somewhat gullible, view in the American rap scene as if "the performer must be symbolically collapsed onto the artist, so that, when O'Shea Jackson performs as Ice Cube, the experiences Ice Cube reports are accepted as Jackson's 'speaking from authentic experience'"⁴¹². But can a hoodlum-turned-millionaire-celebrity like Jackson remain an "original gangster" when he sells his biographical anecdotes in the shape of rhythmic dancefloor hits?

In his research about hip hop, Uri Dorchin suggests that an author's character is defined by the merging of the private persona, the creating persona, and the performing persona. Hence, by definition, every author has to design a public/stage persona, that is not themselves, yet it is also not entirely fictive. Rappers adopt nicknames and are seldom called by their birth name, but they share details from their private lives to validate and rationalize their public persona. Therefore, claims Dorchin, "it is not the game of honesty but the honesty of the game that buys the performer his integrity and makes his truth convincing"⁴¹³. However, this sort of viewer behavior is tightly connected to the platform or medium. Hence, what qualifies Faruk as a new form of celebrity that supposedly could only emerge online is the unique parasocial relationship that he formed with his followers⁴¹⁴. Even when it became widely known that Dudu Faruk is in fact Ori Comay, fans refused to accept Comay, the alter-ego that does not exist online, just as Faruk does not exist in real life. The other side of the coin is that once he tried to step outside his virtual habitat, he was doomed. He lost control over his exposure and did not manage to adapt to the rules of the new medium. As a result, he lost his "authenticity".

⁴¹¹ See Hess, who treats rappers that adopt a fictional persona as "uniquely positioned to subvert the cultural and commercial gaze by which the rap performer is judged" (309).

⁴¹² Hess, 298, regarding Krims, 95.

⁴¹³ "Real", 235-236.

⁴¹⁴ Parasocial interaction, that later evolved into the term parasocial relationship, is a concept that originated in the early days of TV, about intimate connections that viewers develop toward television personalities (Horton and Wohl, 1956). It prevailed in reception studies, adjusted over the years, and still applies to new media and social media (Rihl and Wegener; Tsiotsou).

From Rap to Trap: Early Israeli Hip Hop

It is common to mark the year 2000 as the starting point of Israeli hip-hop⁴¹⁵. Once the style broke into the mainstream, it became the hottest trend. But by the end of the decade, new musical fashions took over, and the rap scene shrunk as rapidly as it grew.

However, there have been earlier attempts at local hip hop already in the late 20th century. The notable ones are mostly perceived as anecdotes, partly because they were made in a tongue in cheek approach, an approach which resembles Faruk's later case. Already in 1986, musician and comedian Yair Nitzani released goofy rap songs under the mock persona of an Arab called Hashem Tamid. Other, more serious, yet unrefined, experiments in rap came out during the early 1990s. The most notable of these, frequently played by radio stations, was *חומס מטמטם* (*Hummus Makes You Stupid*) by Jamaican-born Yehoshua Sofer, AKA Nigel Ha'admor. Although this rapper was not a comedian, he still used plenty of humor in his songs. Dorchin describes his 1993 album as "smiley", saying that "the songs feature lightheadedness, and some of them are in a sense comedic stories". Nigel's album was distributed by "Ben-Mosh Productions", a company that had been identified with Middle Eastern (Mizrahi) music. Not long after, during the late 1990s, Fishy Hagadol (Adam Levinzon) combined rap with Mizrahi music, "signaling some of the popular motives which quickly became identified with the rap in Israel"⁴¹⁶. The unexpected yet popular mixture between hip hop and Middle Eastern culture is another connection that predates Dudu Faruk.

In 1995 the rap-rock-punk band שב"ק"ס (Shabak Samech) released their debut album, under the sponsorship of a major record company. This pioneering attempt caused controversy, and again shares surprising similarities to the launch of Dudu Faruk's career, which has been treated as groundbreaking although at times feels like a *deja vu*. According to Dorchin, Shabak Samech "offered a new musical and textual style. Their wordy songs are full of self-glorifying and unprecedented direct references to sex and violence. In media interviews, the band members introduced themselves as reckless youngsters whose only ambition is to 'smoke and fuck'"⁴¹⁷. The band's first video clip, *אימפריה* (*Empire*, 1995), was considered scandalous for its depiction of violent behavior and vandalism. In many shots the gang of rappers face the camera

⁴¹⁵ Dorchin "Real", 15, 47, 49; Mamon.

⁴¹⁶ Dorchin "Real", 39 – 41, 51. See also Crowdus.

⁴¹⁷ "Real", 42-43.

directly, shouting, leaning forward in threatening gestures. The video ends as the group charge at a passing car, force the innocent driver out, and lynch the vehicle until it is destroyed. The act is shot in a stylized montage, with plenty of zooms, which exaggerate the sense of brutality. An appalled reporter wrote in the daily newspaper *Maariv*: "Ice T, the black and violent rapper, called the American youth to shoot police officers. Here, in Israel, a lesson was learned from the Intifada, and [the band] chose stones and aggressiveness". The imported style was seen by the reporter as out of place, "an odd gesture towards another culture myth". In addition, she condemned the "blunt texts on a quite infantile level"⁴¹⁸.

Another shared feature among the early rappers and the early trappers is the technological aspect, used not only for creation, but also for alternative channels of distribution, consumption, and discussion. Rap artists used home devices for recording and marketing. Creators and fans used web platforms such as internet forums and the *MySpace* social network⁴¹⁹. With the introduction of third-generation internet smartphones, the operating networks developed a vibrant ringtones and music market, that challenged the traditional industry. One executive claimed: "nowadays, cellular is a lot more than just an income channel – it is part of the artists' career building... no less prestigious than being played on the radio... For the artists the production of a single turned cheaper... and so cellular distribution became relevant... It is a platform which enables the artist[s] to present [their] commodity without the barrier of playlist and editorial committees". He adds that the cellular market is "a parallel universe with its own rules", where the mainstream hegemonic artists are significantly less popular compared to Mizrahi and hip hop artists⁴²⁰. Dorchin also notes that the contemporary nature of music consumption is eclectic. Listeners wander across different sources and styles, patching together a mix that lacks coherence and hierarchy. This eclectic nature is largely realized through the internet, file-sharing software, and digital music players. This kind of consumption, he claims, emphasizes the difficulty of connecting [cultural, musical, or fashion] styles to concrete social spaces⁴²¹.

The similarities indicate that the 'trap revolution' of the 2010s can be seen as merely an intensified second wave of a phenomenon that began around a decade earlier

⁴¹⁸ Timen.

⁴¹⁹ Dorchin "Real", 69-70.

⁴²⁰ Ziv.

⁴²¹ "Real", 61.

(still within the Gen-Y period), before the age of social networks. However, this does not mean that the trap artists did not bring anything new to the table. Despite the similarities, there are also notable differences.

A distinct feature shared among many of the early Israeli rappers was their "choice to discuss the meaning of the style as an integral part of the piece. In other words, rappers devote a big part of their songs to the presentation of the style to their audience and explaining to them and themselves why they chose to deal particularly with it"⁴²². This process of mediation and justification paved the way for later content creators like Faruk or Arutz Hakibud, whose musical creations no longer need to devote time and effort to such issues since by that time the foreign styles had already been accepted and became well known.

Another difference is that the Israeli rap songs replaced the foreign rapper's raging rebellion with a positive attitude, and even educational messages⁴²³. Shabak Samech's provocations were not representative of the dominant players in the scene. The most successful and influential rap star of the early 2000s, Subliminal (Kobi Shimony)⁴²⁴, became known for his blunt patriotic-Zionist lyrics and iconography. He quickly teamed up with educational and governing bodies, appearing before students and in official national ceremonies. Although some of the rappers adopted gangsta rap costumes and tough-arrogant poses, they mostly abandoned the outlaw ideas and activities⁴²⁵. As Dorchin argues, Israeli hip hop, like Israeli rock and roll before it, began as a fringe protest movement that set an alternative to the mainstream, and inevitably ended up established and commercialized⁴²⁶. The local trap artists took the positive approach further, turning it into an almost detached hedonism.

This historical survey of the local rap supplies a necessary background in order to evaluate Dudu Faruk's artistic contribution and innovation. On the one hand, some

⁴²² Dorchin, "Real", 54.

⁴²³ "Real", 162-163.

⁴²⁴ According to Dorchin, Subliminal, who is "known to the public by his foreign nickname and not by his first name, symbolizes young Israel whose ears and face turns to what is happening the world". Unlike previous generations of Israelis who listen to, for example, the collective folk songs of the veteran group Hagivatron, or those who listen to Middle Eastern music, the young Israelis "place themselves in relation to a global culture, that is mainly influenced by America, no less that they place themselves in relation to familiar local categories" ("Real", 14").

⁴²⁵ The most obvious exception is a largely favorable approach to marijuana consumption. For example, by the popular group Hadag Nahash, whose songs preach for peace and fraternity, against music piracy, but also express enthusiastic support of legalization.

⁴²⁶ "Real", 232.

of the credit he received for groundbreaking seems to overlook or downplay how he leans on precedents by Israeli entertainers. On the other hand, Faruk distinguished himself from the dominant forms of Israeli trap/rap, and picked a more foreign approach, that suits the globalized virtual world. He breaks the rules in several aspects – the design of the public persona, his attitude towards creation, performance style, themes, and lyrics, among others, in order to stir things up.

"You Cannot Broadcast That. You Simply Cannot": Is Web Content Really Unique?

Ori Comay launched his main platform, an Instagram account, back in 2013 when he was still a high school student. But it was only when he reinvented himself as a trap musician four years later that he rose to fame. His first posts did not reveal the character's image. They were written in the form of first person singular and presented images that show the world through its eyes. All of these images are metonymies of the Hebrew term "Ars". Ars means pimp in Arabic and is commonly applied as a derogatory name to Mizrahi Jews in Israel (Mizrahim [pl.] are Jews whose origin is in the Middle East or North Africa), especially of Moroccan origin⁴²⁷. "In Israeli slang, it refers to males displaying bad manners, vulgarity, flashy dress, and contempt for social norms", write Nissim Mizrahi and Hanna Herzog⁴²⁸. In their contemporary research, they stress that the term is no longer necessarily associated with Mizrahim and describes "a type of behavior rather than a synonym for a specific ethnic group"⁴²⁹.

⁴²⁷ According to Adler, most of the Mizrahim were dispossessed and expelled from Arab states as a direct consequence of the founding of Israel in 1948. Compared to most Ashkenazi Jews who had arrived earlier from eastern Europe they were "less modern, less educated, more observant, and had larger families". There is a consensus among scholars that Mizrahim had suffered from discrimination by the Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony during their absorption. Some argue that they were seen as merely cheap labor and a quick way to enlarge the Jewish population in the country. Since the late 1950's, the Mizrahi community organized protests and demonstrations for equality. In the late 1970's as the leadership was taken by right wing parties, the "Ashkenazi elite" began losing its influence. In the 1980s a first political party for the Mizrahi religious sector, "Shas", was formed. Nowadays, Mizrahim "have a critical mass of intellectuals and politicians with which to articulate, together with dissident Ashkenazi, a different concept of Zionism...". Adler mentions that in the third and fourth generations, Israeli Ashkenazim and Mizrahim are detached from their diasporic culture, and therefore, the division is more complex and less dichotomous.

⁴²⁸ "Ars" can be regarded as a local expression of a universal phenomenon. Members of the weakest socio-economic sectors, who due to their state tend to be less educated and more associated with crime, are stigmatized and treated with contempt. "Ars" can be compared, for example, to the British term "Chav" (see Hayward and Yar).

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 428-429.

In Faruk's case, there is no doubt about the ethnicity that he appropriates. One of his Instagram posts features a picture of the late Mizrahi-music idol Zohar Argov, who, despite achieving legendary status in Israeli culture, had a problematic persona, suffered from drug addiction, and was imprisoned for rape. The post refers to Argov as "the king". Most of the account's humor comes from the dissonant juxtaposition of two stereotypical characteristics of Mizrahi Jews: traditional, family-oriented, religious, and humble as opposed to the criminal and lavish excess of the "Ars". Nissim Leon notes that in the Israeli entertainment field, "for many years the public had been exposed to the religious world of the Mizrahim through parodic characters... its essence comprised of basic religious knowledge and broken quotes of biblical verses"⁴³⁰. The images on Faruk's profile create a mosaic that combines commando knives, rabbis, fashion brands, and Judaica⁴³¹. The accompanying captions, phrased in a deliberately inarticulate jargon, are a mixture of bragging statements, aggressive slandering of cops, and pseudo-religious quotes. It is a satire of the hypocrisy of some traditional Jews, whose behavior had been denounced by secular Jews in several public disputes⁴³².

It was only on the 12th post, in the form of "a mirror selfie", that Faruk's image was revealed for the first time⁴³³. His face is still covered, yet he is wearing a baseball cap, which will become part of his iconic look. Since that post, he began turning the camera towards himself. After he began posting clips of himself, and not just pictures, Comay had to animate the character, and so, Faruk adopted unique mannerisms, including aggressive physical gestures and an artificial and exaggerated Mizrahi accent. The Instagram account also features earlier musical attempts, beginning in 2014, by a duo called "Faruk et Elbaz". These songs, which were not accompanied by videoclips,

⁴³⁰ Leon, 169.

⁴³¹ <https://www.instagram.com/dudufaruk/>

⁴³² For example, the devotees of the famous Hassidic leader, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, are encouraged to visit his grave in the Ukrainian town of Uman, yet the alleged spiritual pilgrimage had been reported to often involve sex tourism (Ifergan; Levinson; Yerushalmi). Another example is secular criminal suspects showing up to court wearing yarmulkes, hoping to manipulate the judges by creating an impression of moral, god-fearing persons, or at least to be locked down in a prison wing for religious prisoners, which has better conditions (Mizrahi; Nachshoni).

The same ideas are displayed in Faruk's music videos. As the music critic Matan Sharon notes: "When Faruk speaks to a pile of bills as if they were a phone – A silly and common act in the trap world – it happens next to a poster of Rabbi Nachman". Other examples can be found in the lyrics, like *King David*, which include lines that are both sexist and pretend to keep religious values, as "I bless her body and she replies Amen", or a spoken verse in which Faruk refuses to perform oral sex on his partner because "it is not Kosher". In some videos, as *יחסים של המין* (*Relations of Sex*) and *Armani*, he is performing his sociopathic misogynistic act while wearing a yarmulke.

⁴³³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/i9XDIXqDHn/>.

are generic parodies of Mizrahi music that failed to gain attention and indicate how Faruk's relation to trap music, and filmmaking, contributed to his breakthrough.

Faruk attracted attention once he started producing and starring in video clips. His big break came by creating original content on YouTube. Indeed, he is following in the footsteps of international musical-comedy stars such as Allan Sherman, Weird Al, Spinal Tap, Tenacious D, Günther, Garfunkel and Oats. However, nowadays, musical-comedy evolved into new forms, that suit new media. Some critics even suggested including the veteran-yet-still-prolific Weird Al along with contemporary artists like Lil B, 3Pac, and Yung Lean under the title of Meme Rap: "a sub-genre of hip hop that is created to become viral, normally as a parody of popular genres like trap music, but with lo-fi production, simplistic music videos, lazy rhymes, and intentionally stereotypical lyrics"⁴³⁴. Moreover, Faruk is following in the footsteps of Israeli musical-comedy mock personas such as Hashem Tamid and Deddi Dadon (Assi Cohen). He has just as much in common with them, if not more so, than with American trap stars like Gucci Mane and Jeezy. In addition, Faruk continues to be a visual storyteller in his video clips. The videos seem to be part of a series, feature repeating themes, even if they do not have a single coherent arch-narrative. Comay serves as producer (and "showrunner") which sets the tone even as different directors assist him in different clips. All the videos maintain his distinct style, which makes Faruk's case very relevant for cinematic and media research.

It is tempting to claim that Dudu Faruk is a perfect example of a celebrity that could have only emerged on the web. He had easily overcome many barriers that were assumed to limit his potential. As (at the time) music journalist and radio DJ (and currently Universal Music executive) Meytal Shevach wrote, "[Faruk] is necessarily un-radiophonic and not family-friendly. You cannot broadcast songs with lyrics [that glorify crack use and violent sex] in the middle of the day. You simply cannot"⁴³⁵.

Some of Faruk's video clips are also too provocative to be featured on mainstream platforms. At one point they were even removed by YouTube, and later returned with a content warning. The most notorious clip, מים (*Water*), is a porn parody that deliberately imitates generic clichés and adopts an anachronistic VHS aesthetic. It even includes some soft-core pornographic images starring Orit Fux, who was

⁴³⁴ Blunt.

⁴³⁵ Shevach. See also Lahav.

previously a starlet in the Israeli sexploitation comedy *החגיגה נמשכת 9: אסקימו לימון* (*Lemon Popsicle 9: The Party Goes On*) (Zvi Shisel, 2001). Yet the claim that "you cannot play this on the radio" collapsed in the face of [popular] reality. Once Faruk gained online success, traditional media embraced him, afraid to be left out. For example, he was invited to be a guest on the most popular radio station in Israel, *Glgz*, and perform live in the studio⁴³⁶. Even if he was not and could not have been included in the station's playlist, he was still invited and given a microphone. By performing in the station, he played acts that legitimized him by the establishment⁴³⁷.

A second possible reason for the assumption that Faruk could only thrive online is the racial aspect of his "art". The archetypical "Ars" is a common figure in the Israeli entertainment canon⁴³⁸. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, actors like Zeev Revach, Yehuda Barkan, Reuven Bar-Yotam, and Yosef Shiloach presented a variety of such characters in popular ethnic comedies known as Bourekas films⁴³⁹. In the 1990s, the character of "Zhozho Halastra", played by comedian Tzvika Hadar in the TV sketch show, *The Comedy Store* (1994-1997, Channel 2)⁴⁴⁰, ruled prime time. Both examples were highly popular among viewers, even though they were panned by critics, and still maintain their status as cult classics. However, because of the new Mizrahi discourse at the turn of the 21st century⁴⁴¹, such negative stereotypical portrayals became rare, progressively shunned by a politically correct discourse⁴⁴². Films that would dare to present such a character today would probably be bashed by critics and subjected to shaming campaigns online. A channel that approved such a TV show would be flooded with complaints by furious viewers. Indeed, Faruk had been denounced by angry

⁴³⁶ The show, hosted by Noy Alush, was not aired on prime time, and Faruk had to change a few of the lyrics, and was happy to do so.

⁴³⁷ *Glgz* is a popular radio station that broadcasts music and traffic reports. It is a subsidiary of the military radio station, GLZ, and therefore it is also owned and operated by the IDF. This is why Faruk's invitation to the studio can be read as a symbolic approval by the establishment.

⁴³⁸ Shifman.

⁴³⁹ Bourekas is an Israeli genre of commercial comedies and melodramas from the 1970s and 1980s that feature stereotypical ethnic characters in naturalistic plots, often resolving in a romantic unification of a mixed Ashkenazi and Mizrahi couple. See Neeman; Peleg; Shohat.

⁴⁴⁰ In March 2020, Hadar brought back Halastra's character to life for a *Comedy Store* reunion special. Interestingly, the reunion was not broadcast on commercial TV, as the original show was, but through "Teddy Productions" YouTube Channel.

⁴⁴¹ Alush Levron, 87-88.

⁴⁴² Similar processes happened outside of Israel as well. "Television programs that had used ethnicity with comic intent, and especially those featuring white entertainers pretending to be black, are no longer thought to be acceptable on national television" (Howells, 163).

critics⁴⁴³, and a protest by concerned parent organizations managed to cause the cancelation of the rapper's participation in public cultural events⁴⁴⁴.

This is why it is tempting to assign Faruk rebellious-groundbreaking traits, as someone who managed to avoid the gatekeepers who have the power to determine that "you can't do that". However, is not the exclusion of racist stereotypical images from mainstream arenas something we should be thankful for? Is not bypassing the groundskeepers through the web a step back rather than an innovative move forward? Before answering these questions, the claim that "you can't do that" should be taken with a grain of salt. These days Reshet TV channel is broadcasting *שנות התשעים* (*The 1990s*) (2022), a sequel series of the popular (though critically despised⁴⁴⁵) *שנות השמונים* (*The 1980s*) (2013-2020), that ran for five seasons. Both the original and sequel shows are throwback comedies that include ethnic humor, and stereotypical Mizrahi characters of crooks and goofs that all have thick accents.

Therefore, the claim that the web allows unique possibilities that are not available in other media should be rephrased – it is not the ethnic comedy per se that is breaking a taboo, but *how* ethnic satire is performed and expressed. Faruk's character means to offend. His persona unapologetically replicates, amplifies, and ridicules all the stereotypes that Bourekas films, or a series like *The 1980s*, cultivate⁴⁴⁶. Faruk emphasizes all their repulsive ugliness. Unlike the lovingly ridiculed characters from *The 1980s*, you would not want Faruk in your neighborhood. However, when Comay/Faruk does not accept the norm of what is "proper" he reinforces his classification as a "rebellious", "dangerous", and "non-conformist" artist, qualities that

⁴⁴³ Elmaleh; Hofman.

⁴⁴⁴ Ran Boker, "Horim"; Dvir; "Mesarim".

⁴⁴⁵ See Melamed, "Hagizanut"; Vollach.

⁴⁴⁶ The prevailing discourse focuses on the degrading representation of Mizrahim in the Bourekas genre. Faruk also duplicates and amplifies problematic stereotypes of Ashkenazim that are common in the genre. For example, the clip *Relations of Sex* presents Faruk's next door neighbor, Mr. "Levinshmitz". Faruk violently attacks the nerd, humiliates him, and by the end of the clip turns him into his slave. The Ashkenazi is portrayed as smart, with better understanding of advance technology. But his education does not help him when he is forced to fix Faruk's game console, while the rapper throws objects at him. The clips *בעלה מלמעלה/Bala Milemala (Come to her from above)* and *מים (Water)* present actors Amit Itzcar and Army Shik Blum (who became known through viral web content) in roles which typecast them as impotent losers. Their characters can be seen as successors of the Ashkenazi characters played by actors like Tuvia Tzafir and Menahem Zilberman in Bourekas films such as *Snooker* (Boaz Davidson, 1975) or *Shlager* (Assi Dayan, 1979).

are appreciated in the world of trap, and appeal to his teenage fan base, the early adopters who turned him into a viral sensation⁴⁴⁷.

Some critics claimed in Faruk's defense that his negative traits do not necessarily derive from Mizrahi stereotypes, but that drugs, sex, and violence are common motifs of the gangsta rap and trap genres⁴⁴⁸. However, this defense is not persuasive, since Faruk was presenting these problematic traits on Instagram long before he reinvented himself as a rapper. Therefore, he did not acquire them from the foreign musical tradition, but from stigmatizations about Mizrahim. Second, Faruk chose a politically incorrect, deliberately provocative casting of the Israeli "Ars" in the role of the Afro-American gangsta rapper. Despite the obvious gaps between Israeli Mizrahim and African Americans, connecting the two is not unreasonable. The Mizrahi struggle for equality in the 1970s found inspiration in the black civil rights protest in the US and adopted some of its features⁴⁴⁹. Yet unlike the local activists who felt solidarity with their "black brothers" over social problems they could relate to personally, Faruk binds the two groups together to degrade the Mizrahim and to confirm them as a menace to society. Third, Faruk cynically exploits this association to shape his star persona. By "passing" as an Ars gangsta rapper and reinforcing negative views about Mizrahim, his persona gains the desired image of an OG ("original gangster").

The main difference between Faruk's ethnic comedy and earlier 20th century ethnic comedies is probably in its reflexivity and self-awareness. Comay belongs to a

⁴⁴⁷ Much of the media discourse around Faruk, especially of the protests against him, emphasized the young age of his core fandom. As a "field hits" phenomenon Faruk's main presence has been in school yards and the dancefloors at class parties. As a social media influencer, he was communicated most with tech-savvy youngsters whose leisure habits are centered around private screens. This group ranges from teenage rebels who enjoy his vulgar attitude and foul mouth humor, to easily influenced kids. Furthermore, when Faruk was at the height of his career, he was mentioned as one of the most requested performers by 13-year-old boys for their Bar Mitzah celebrations. Such private shows were a significant income resource for the marginalized web star. See Bar-Zik; Dvir and Yaish; Lahav; Shevach.

In Dorchin's discussion of Israeli hip hop he notes that in the genre's early years, the vast majority of listeners were teenagers ("Real", 46). Furthermore, the kids and youth channels were the environment that gave most expression to the forming hip hop culture, more than any other media. He explains that a young environment is naturally more alert to stylistic changes and fashion innovations ("Real", 60). The common style of the kids' channels is colorful, flashy, videoclip-like, and affected by pop culture, in which hip hop is a prominent component ("Real", 60-61).

Also, rap band Shabak Samech's debut album, the first hip hop album to be released through a big record company, gained moderate success. For their next album, two of the band members left, and replaced by front man Nimrod Reshef (aka Nimi Nim), who was at the time a popular host at the kids' channel on cable TV. Their second album was very successful and reached platinum status.

⁴⁴⁸ Balaji; Quinn.

⁴⁴⁹ Chetrit; Shohat 118,123, 316,322; Yosef 93-99.

generation in which identity discourse is much more dominant, both in Israel and abroad. Richard Howells claims that "Race is the new sex. Just as with sex in Victorian times, race is not nowadays mentioned in polite company... And just like with Victorian sex, one suspects there is a marked gap between public pronouncement and private practice"⁴⁵⁰. Faruk acts against the rules of political correctness and revives dated offensive images. By doing so, he unveils the gaps that are not to be discussed, while maximizing shock value⁴⁵¹.

According to Jenkins, the circulation of content across different media systems "depends heavily on consumers' active participation". He explains that convergence does not occur through media platforms, but "within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others"⁴⁵². However, outrageous creators like Faruk have a limited potential crowd who will be willing to contribute to the viral expansion. So, if he aspired to expand his fan base into other groups, he should have adjusted his act according to the different media. Crossover requires change, and he failed to do that. When Faruk tried to move into different arenas, he found out that consumers there were not cooperating, and ended up a pariah.

Faruk's character and humor are very local and can probably not be fully grasped by people unfamiliar with the "Ars". Also, in the cases in which Faruk references Israeli history ("I did not cry over Gilad Shalit"), or paraphrases a quote from the Israeli Bourekas film *צ'רלי וקצי* (*Charlie and a Half*) (Boaz Davidson, 1974) - ("There is one girl who came to him and asked for a kiss/ She disappeared] / To this day no one knows what she has"), foreign listeners completely miss the idea. Even if they watch a subtitled version, a lot of the meaning gets lost in translation. Faruk playfully uses "Ars" jargon for puns and rhymes ("I cried over her/ I cried over the Leah [Goldberg, a national poet featured on the 20 Shekels] bill / I cried over the Meah [Hebrew word for hundred] bill"). Some jokes, however, are witticisms that work in translation as well (" [You wear] a necklace with an 'upside-down Star of David'. It looks exactly the same [as a normal Star of David], you dumbass"). Or jokes (both verbal and visual) that are just

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 155.

⁴⁵¹ On the web, where Faruk can restrict his dialogue to followers that actively chose to consume his content, he is able to display what "could not be broadcasted on TV". Supporting evidence to this statement is the case of the comic TV show *הכל דבש* (*It's All Peachy*) (2007,2010, Channel 2). One scene in the second series expressed similar critique about the hypocrisy of some traditional Jews and depicted a sexual encounter with a sex worker in front of a picture of Rabbi Baba Sali. The result was a huge controversy that significantly damaged the show (Binder; Kam; Prat; Shushan, "Al HaDvash").

⁴⁵² Ibid, 3.

plain nonsense (In the clip *Relations of Sex*, the gangsta rapper has a confrontation with the long arm of the law, which ends with the cop serving as Faruk's footstool and ashtray).

Faruk's violent, aggressive, ultra-macho-alpha-male persona is also a comic contrast to the common personas in his generation of Israeli hip hop. Dorchin notes that many of the current rappers, especially the most popular ones, who have been leading the scene during the 2010s (such as Nechi Nech (Ravid Plotnik) and Tuna (Itay Zvulun)), present themselves as an antithesis to the tough-rapper trope. Instead, they portray a "pensive, vulnerable, and indecisive man-child" ... "lacking confidence, with low body image – the Israeli rappers place themselves against two influential models in their cultural environment. The first is of course the character of the black American rapper, whose prominent representatives still play a hypermasculine narrative. The second model is of the 'proper' Israeli masculinity" as represented, for example, by veteran popular singer, Shlomo Artzi⁴⁵³. The soft and considerate persona of most contemporary Israeli rappers is hardly surprising. They fit perfectly well with Almog and Almog's portrayal of Millennials - confused, "snowflaky", reluctant to “man”-up and take care of their adult responsibilities⁴⁵⁴.

Dorchin points out that contemporary Israeli rappers continue and develop tendencies that last from the local scene's initial boom around the year 2000 (still led by Gen-Y, but from the older group on the spectrum). The Israeli rappers have largely been disowning machoism, chauvinism, misogyny, and homophobia, identified with the American source⁴⁵⁵. He explains that originally, in the early days of Israeli rap, one of the main reasons for adopting this difference was an attempt to avoid being labeled as American rap copycats⁴⁵⁶, and to convince in their own originality and authenticity. However, Faruk belongs to the next stage of rappers, those who emerged after rap had already established itself as a legitimate and successful musical genre in Israel. Therefore, he can adopt a different approach. Not only is he not apologetic over his

⁴⁵³ Dorchin, "Neum".

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ "Even Subliminal, the most 'American' of all in his approach [does not fully adopt the thug trope]... unlike the national machoism [expressed in his signature songs], his personal songs - that indeed received less attention – portrays him as a sensitive character... [he is] being macho only when his character represents the national collective" (Dorchin, "Neum").

⁴⁵⁶ Dorchin, "Neum".

choice of a foreign style, but he is also bluntly unapologetic about anything, instead being deliberately offensive.

Furthermore, the later-stage rappers could therefore move on to the realm of reflexivity and parody. Faruk not only mimics the American rappers but exaggerates and spoofs them. For example, some fans claimed (in the comment section) that Faruk's hit *דוד המלך / ערק ערק ערק* / *King David (Arak Arak Arak)* (released in March 2018) imitates American rapper Lil Pump's hit *Gucci Gang* (released in August 2017). While the foreign gangsta rapper boasts about his wealth, singing that he "spend three racks on a new chain" and "flyin' private jet", Faruk tops him by boasting "with my cash I make a cash sandwich". In the clip, he is seen literally stuffing cash between two slices of a bun and biting it. Lil Pump brags about his sexual conquests, singing "I fuck a bitch, I forgot her name". Faruk demonstrates his attractiveness by saying, "I say a blessing for her body, and she replies Amen". Like the chauvinistic American who does not bother to memorize his partner's name, Faruk also disrespects his girlfriend, ordering her to "take out the trash", and explaining that he "will not go down on her because it is not Kosher". In a common rap practice, Lil Pump is dissing (disrespecting, mocking, verbally abusing) by humiliating comparisons that are meant to prove his superiority, like "My lean cost more than your rent / Your momma still live in a tent". Faruk again creates a hyperbolic and absurd version, with lines such as: "When you ask [the neighbor] for milk you look disgusting, when I ask for milk I look amazing" / "I am like King David and you are [Former Egyptian president Hosni] Mubarak" / "You are on Rami Levy [cell company by a retailer known for its cheap products] and I am on Cellcom [cellular company]/ You are an Ashkenazi who says 'Salam Aleykum'" [A greeting in Arabic. The Ashkenazi here is a "wannabe" Middle Easterner]. And of course, while Lil Pump's song is named after a luxury brand, "Gucci", Faruk's repeated chorus states: "I dress [in] Armani and you are [buying your clothes] in Zara".

Do Not Believe Your Eyes: Digital Aesthetic in Service of the Illusion

Comay's personal biography couldn't be further away from the OG stereotype. After his rise to fame, journalists scrambled to reveal his true identity. Guy Lerer, host of the popular web culture magazine, *הצנרת (HaZaneret)* (2017-2019, Reshet), tweeted: "[T]he biggest hype on the web these days – Dudu Faruk. Tonight we expose the true story behind the wannabe criminal: Ori Comay, North Tel Aviv, son of Dror Comay,

owner of a cyber security empire that is valued at a billion (!) dollars"⁴⁵⁷. The report accentuated his parents' affiliation with the high-tech industry, his "wealthy home" in a fancy neighborhood in North Tel Aviv, his studies at a prestigious high school, and referenced his high school yearbook where he was described as a "sensitive kid... smart as Hawking the scientist" and a devoted guide in the local scouts⁴⁵⁸. This was not exactly a scoop, anyone who would have bothered to google Comay's name would have learned the same thing. Surprisingly, this information did not affect his popularity at all. The comments section of any of his videos or articles about him usually featured a blend of reactions by people who get the joke, those who do not get the joke and treat him as a real person, and others who pretend not to get the joke in an ironic manner.

For example, a thread in the comments section under Faruk's video *King David*, started as a user named Mini Orange revealed: "for those of you who do not know, 'Dudu Faruk's real name is Ori and he is an actor who invented a character when he was at a film course and got into this character really deep". The same user later added: "My brother has a friend who knows 'Dudu' and, believe it or not, his name is Ori". User Adir Elad claimed: "His name is David, I know him, not personally, he is a friend of my cousin". Itay Revivo also rejected the idea: "nonsense these are just rumors bro, get into the home office, DMV, all of those, and there is no record of anyone by this name". Other comments in this long thread include: Sun Sfk: "For real, he is not an Ars"? Mini Orange: "He is a stone-cold Ashkenazi". Yair Medina: "He is Arab, he has an accent". Nati desta Zoe4life: "If this is real bear in mind that he has played this character for over 4 years... it means he has mental illness if he created this character and adopted it". Daniel Biton: "Are there people here who genuinely take it seriously? This is hilarious hahaha".

⁴⁵⁷ <https://twitter.com/guylerer/status/1037041715075530752>.

⁴⁵⁸ Interestingly, the report in *HaZaneret* also confirmed that Comay is not performing in "blackface" and appropriates a foreign tradition but has a genuine connection to Mizrahi culture. His mother was quoted as saying that he expressed interest in this genre at an early age. Other reports revealed his family roots. His uncle is the CEO of The Israeli Andalusian Orchestra - Ashdod (that features traditional Sephardic Jewish-Arab and Andalusian music, combining classical Arab-Andalusian instruments, by musicians that are mainly of Tunisian and Moroccan origin). His Grandmother hosts an annual Mimouna (traditional Moroccan Jewish celebration) in her home in Ashdod. (Chen Boker; "Hasifa"). Faruk's Instagram account includes a few posts of footage from Mizrahi orchestra concerts. This form of "high culture" is not consistent with his thug persona, but it is moderated by reflexive cynical captions. Could this half-apologetic "I'm just kidding" approach hint at Comay's difficulty of expressing his genuine interest and identification with his Mizrahi roots in his upper-class North Tel Aviv elitist surrounding?

Other comments attacked Faruk regardless of his true identity. User Jord wrote: "OK..... I don't really understand what I just saw but it just made me nauseous. Shocking lyrics, I didn't get if this is an attempt to make [viewers] laugh or some other benefit. I didn't understand whether it is real or a parody [,] but it does not really matter. I don't understand how this thing gets a platform and why they still haven't removed all his videos [,] upsetting and disappointing". User Z B wrote: "Even in a parody there is need for a punchline, so that in the end you clearly realize that all that has been said is just to exaggerate and make the opposite point[,] here it does not happen[,] it is just a character that turned into a role model"⁴⁵⁹.

It is the kind of online discourse that Young describes, "...an overdetermined media context of pervasive irony, [in which] some combination of technology and form works to displace both conscious and unconscious intention, such that the author is no longer any kind of authority on the question of his own sincerity". In these cases, he explains, "even where there is an author or speaker — or where we can construct or imagine a plausible one — the ironies of web 2.0 function in such a way that 'speaker meaning' frequently cannot be determined, even by the speaker"⁴⁶⁰.

Elizabeth Ellcessor examines the star text in the context of social media and claims that self-representations in these spaces are perceived as authentic due to "illusions of 'liveness' and interactivity... quotidian rhythms of interaction, the (possible) lack of media gatekeepers such as publicists, editors, and paparazzi... and the availability of media tools"⁴⁶¹. This sort of attitude can be found in Faruk's accounts. His early attempt in Trap music, the clip *יום הרווקות* (*Day of the Bachelorettes*), is so amateurishly produced that it is not even presented at the right ratio for YouTube and appears in a "letterbox" format. It does not make any use of lighting design either. The camera is hand-held, and its movement tends to be shaky. All the extras who appear alongside Faruk are friends around his age, dressed casually. The males are young rappers, and the females serve as objects for Faruk to spray water on.

⁴⁵⁹Other, different, but frequent comments to Faruk's videos are meme-like verbal jokes that repeat the same pattern. For example, a user called Yes wrote: "I played this song to my cat... now he is a lion". Noam Grunewald wrote: "I played this song to my fish... now he is a shark". This kind of users' participation is connected to the culture of web humor, and even contributes to the digital aesthetic - beyond the frame.

⁴⁶⁰ Young.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, 52.

The same scanty aesthetic is dominant in most of his clips. They are usually shot in abandoned urban locations, such as a market before opening hours (*King David*), an empty swimming pool (*Black Belt*), an empty schoolyard. The song שלי שלי שלי (*Third Third*), which appears on YouTube under the title, פספוסים מגלשות במימדין 2014 (*Waterslides Bloopers 2014*), ends with a shot of the reflection of the "cameraman" – a young friend holding his smartphone – as seen in Faruk's sunglasses. The impression from all these clips is of high school kids' shenanigans. Moreover, these low production values and amateurish results demonstrate to teenagers that they are capable of producing such a video themselves. This poor aesthetic is exactly what serves the realistic sense of the fictional character.

Ohad Landesman argues that "[W]hen fast-paced editing in tightly scripted big-budget blockbusters becomes the norm, an alternative nostalgic longing for the real crystallizes the two everlasting aspirations in cinema: the utopia of authenticity against the antidote of falsification. Fiction films wholeheartedly embrace non-fiction aesthetics and move towards simplifying their film language in order to abandon any illusionistic aspiration and obey a strong documentary impulse"⁴⁶². While certain filmmakers choose to adopt such an aesthetic for artistic purposes⁴⁶³, Comay is conveying the same with lowbrow entertainment. Also, independent amateur producers usually do not have much choice but to use "simple" forms of filmmaking⁴⁶⁴. The underwhelming result is a mundane aesthetic, that creates a realistic impression. In the same sense that Ariel Rogers, while discussing digital aesthetic and the artistic purposes of the Dogme 95 movement, refers to the concept of realism not as perceptual verisimilitude "but to what was understood to be a lack of artifice – a form of immediacy concerned with preventing excessive mediation by the apparatus (even if this mediation would result in more legible or transparent images)"⁴⁶⁵.

There is a major difference between the serious, dramatic storytelling in arthouse films such as *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002) or *The Celebration* (Thomas

⁴⁶² Ibid, 34.

⁴⁶³ For example, Landesman describes *Ten* as "an experiment in minimalism, where aesthetic innovation is achieved through omission rather than excessive abundance of technical possibilities... Kiarostami makes use of digital video to bring cinema back to its 'point-zero', and fulfil the Bazinian aesthetic responsibility in its full extremity: observing life without judging it or intervening in its natural flow" (38).

⁴⁶⁴ Some may point out that Comay comes from a privileged background, and his upper-class family could possibly provide him support which would not limit him to simple forms of filmmaking. However, according to his statements, and what is evident in clips, he did not receive such support.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 229.

Vinterberg, 1998) and Faruk's rhythmic editing of fast paced trap video clips that are aimed to excite. The alleged dissonance between Faruk's realistic effects and his hypermediated style can be resolved using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's observation, according to which "[T]he social dimension of immediacy and hypermediacy is as important as their formal and technical dimensions"⁴⁶⁶. They give the example of staged rock productions, which are "hypermediated events, which no one interprets as transparent in the sense that the media are to be forgotten or erased. But by entering into an immediate relationship with the media themselves – the sound, the lights, the televised images – rock fans achieve an experience they regard as authentic"⁴⁶⁷.

Later videos, that were produced after his break, feature advanced use of cinematic means and more sophisticated visual storytelling. The clip *Kiki*, for example, was sponsored by the leading website Mako, and accordingly features higher production values, such as a rented location, props, makeup, colored lighting, advanced editing, digital after-effects, etc. According to Rogers, the use of the terms "intimacy" and "immediacy" often suggests that "in contrast to celluloid filmmaking, where larger crews and equipment were understood to interfere with the connection between filmmaker and subject, the digital apparatus intruded less..."⁴⁶⁸. Although the clip was not shot on celluloid, its production came much closer to the kind of filmmaking methods that Rogers mentions, compared to the previous clips. *Kiki*, which was funded by the media corporation "Keshet", is literally Faruk "Selling out", and the clip's polished and expensive style enhances it. A more interesting example is the Song *I Cume (Giraffe)*. It has reflexive lyrics about Faruk's career, persona, and controversies, with lines as "Smartass, good boy, son of a bitch"... "You've slandered, laughed, cried, what have you done"... "And when would he fall... all the rabbis on me, want ratings, it's pathetic". The video clip suits the theme since it sends Faruk's character, shown with a pixelated face⁴⁶⁹, on a journey to trace "missing person" ads that feature the singer's profile. He revisits locations from previous clips and reencounters characters that appeared in them (played by the same actors), only this time the cinematography is

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 71.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 226.

⁴⁶⁹ Pixelated face was also used for the character of Eliran - Dudu Faruk's possible alter-ego - in the video *Eliran Sabag*.

superior, the clothes and props are of better quality, and the lighting and mise-en-scene are more carefully planned.

At the end of the clip, he reaches a new location that had not been featured in previous clips. It is an underground shelter. Inside, he is amazed to find four Dudu Faruk look-alikes tied up. Sophisticated editing and special effects duplicate Faruk over and over, featuring the many Faruks in kaleidoscopic compositions. Faruk's quest for reestablishing who he is, his "true face", is completed when he finally addresses the camera without pixelation. The clip ends with a climatic special effect featuring an animated rocket that is shaped like Faruk's head and launched from the shelter up to the Tel Aviv skies. Despite what Comay wished the viewers would think, Faruk had not found and regained touch with his authentic self. He did not return to the same iconic locations from his filmography, but to an upgraded and glossier version of them. One that lost its grittiness, its natural flaws, its "authenticity". This phase signaled Faruk's career heading in a wrong direction, away from what the fans like and seek in the character. Even though he found sponsors and started making money from his web videos, it eventually turned out to be a mistake, since he was straying away from the character's original "authenticity" that attracted fans initially. The curtain was completely drawn and his image collapsed when he went live on television, as will be presented in detail later.

Keeping It Real: Between Ali G to Dudu Faruk

Some, like Damon Young, characterize the web as a unique sphere where "the digital image has lost what Barthes calls its 'evidential power'", and where Images "are no more reliable than words"⁴⁷⁰. Considering the digital ability to create and modify images without an indexical reference, the connection seems clear. However, one may still wonder whether this effect cannot be achieved in other media as well. To what extent Comay's fake persona is different than actors who play roles in traditional media? To answer this question, I will compare between Faruk and a famous mock persona from Television (and later cinema), Ali G, played by the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. In both cases, a privileged Jewish guy pretends to be a boorish black rapper for comic purposes. However, there are also many differences.

⁴⁷⁰ Young.

Many of Faruk's fans were first exposed to him as he popped up in their social media feed, lacking any context, which made the impression more confusing. Ali G was first presented in segments on *The 11 O'Clock Show* (1998-2000, Channel 4). Even if viewers did not know much about the character, the framing of a sketch show assured it is not meant to be taken seriously, and that there is an ironic distance between the performer and the character.

Viewers develop parasocial interactions with the stars they watch on TV as a matter of course. Baron Cohen attempted to dodge this by spreading a smoke screen of anonymity that served his bold comic intentions. At the time, his discreteness was perceived as exceptional. By refusing to give interviews or declarations about his methods, Baron Cohen presented "a moving target" that enabled him to "get away with it".

Howells notes that even after discovering that there is a real person behind Ali G, "doubts remain about whether he is even supposed to be black at all". Viewers were uncertain whether "Baron Cohen is a white man pretending to be a black man... [or] a white man pretending to be an Asian pretending to be a black man... [or] a white man pretending to be a white man who is pretending to be black"⁴⁷¹. As Robert A. Saunders puts it: "Baron Cohen, through the mechanism of Ali G, brings into question the entire notion of the black/white binary which pervades western culture. He accomplishes this through his playful exploitation of the tension between what is seen versus what is perceived"⁴⁷².

In comparison, Ori Comay was less sophisticated and was not ambiguous at all. If any doubts were cast, they were questioning Comay's ethnicity, not Faruk's. His character is terribly flat compared to the one that Baron Cohen created. Viewers would not and could not deny that Faruk is a Mizrahi "Ars". If there is something left for them to argue about it is whether Comay's act is a problematic and racist depiction or a self-aware joke that should not be taken seriously. As Young puts it, "The violence or extremism of the statement is, if not modified, put into a state of oscillation that is prevented from stabilizing by the multiplications of JK (JKJK)" [JK is an abbreviation of Just Kidding]⁴⁷³.

⁴⁷¹ Howells, 165.

⁴⁷² Saunders, 66.

⁴⁷³ Young.

The comedy in Ali G's TV appearances stems from his interactions with real people. He was posing as an interviewer and trolled unsuspecting guests. His unconventional interviews caught them off guard, exposed sides that they usually will not reveal in front of the camera, and so often they became the butt of the joke. Even when innocent guests did not deserve the trolling, the viewers still enjoyed watching privileged and well-educated people being outsmarted by an uncivilized rapper. In Faruk's case, unfortunately, he is always the dumbest person in the frame.

Whenever Baron Cohen promoted his early films, such as *Ali G Indahouse* (Mark Mylod, 2002), *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Larry Charles, 2006), *The Dictator* (Larry Charles, 2012), he tended to do it in character. Thus, he managed to preserve and extend the ironies of the web, as Young calls it, into other media. For Baron Cohen, as a brilliant improviser, every media junket and talk show appearance became an opportunity to create hilarious meta-texts that promote the main feature. Often these texts became viral videos and were watched online no less than when first aired⁴⁷⁴. Talent aside, as a professional, Baron Cohen knew exactly what he was aiming for when he went out to shoot his films and tried to minimize spontaneity. According to Daly, "the screenwriters wrote permutation upon permutation so that Baron Cohen would have options for whatever might happen, more like the programming of interactive video game software than the writing of a traditional script"⁴⁷⁵. Comay, as will be closely examined below, lacks improvisation skills, and had no sufficient preparation in appearing live before he tried to get out of the web and pass across to a different medium.

Yet even Baron Cohen himself had a shaky start the first time he tried to relocate a television personality into cinema. The feature film *Ali G Indahouse* received mixed reviews. Some critics specifically mentioned their disappointment with the revelation of Ali G's true identity in the film. "True identity" not in the non-diegetic sense, of who is the actor who plays him. The critics were bothered by the cinematic elaboration of the character's backstory, which solves the common questions about his ethnicity, class, and real name (which is revealed to be "Alistair Lesley Graham"). Derek Elley from *Variety* wrote: "Ali G was a racially vague, stereotypical pot-smoking

⁴⁷⁴ For example, *USA today* considers Baron Cohen's brief appearance on the 2012 Academy Awards red carpet pre-show to be one of the most memorable moments in his Career (Deerwester). *The Telegraph's* coverage of the ceremony emphasized the incident and hailed Baron Cohen for living up "an otherwise predictable Oscars night" (Singh).

⁴⁷⁵ Daly, 87.

rapper whose friends and self-contained world were only ever heard about... Pic's main leap of faith is making Ali G's universe concrete"⁴⁷⁶. Similarly, Sheila Johnston wrote in *Screendaily* that "[T]he film's biggest departure from the TV shows is the way it tries to flesh out the character. We meet [him and his world]... and realise in the process that he's less interesting than we originally thought"⁴⁷⁷. Howells shares the notion that "...some of the comic 'edge' may have been lost in that the film explained too much about Ali G" and adds that "...this may have been part of a well-chronicled pattern of television comedies that have transferred uncomfortably to the big screen"⁴⁷⁸.

Faruk failed because he stepped out of character. Ali G failed because he stepped deeper into character. In both cases the result was identical and disastrous – viewers were given a vantage point for choosing between satire and sincerity, from which the referential status of the utterance could be adjudicated. Contrarily, the web does not allow such a vantage point to exist⁴⁷⁹. In Baron-Cohen's next attempt to move into cinema, *Borat*, the approach was very different, and the result was a huge hit. There is more than one reason for why it happened, but in the context of this discussion, we note that while *Ali G Indahouse* was made as a traditional feature film, *Borat*, in his mockumentary style, was made in the fresh approach that suits Cinema 3.0, "where the thrill of the movie lies in the constant mental weighing of what is real and what is not, and in navigating the artifacts of which the movie is only one piece of the puzzle. Viewers could participate in the Borat world..."⁴⁸⁰.

Baron Cohen made a bad decision when he changed Ali G's context and moved him out of web-like-Cinema 3.0. Comay's case is more disastrous since it was not even entirely his choice to do so.

Will the Real Dudu Faruk Please Stand Up: From the Web to Berkovic's TV Show

After possibly hitting a creative dead end, while also struggling to match the peaking hype around him and use the momentum, Faruk set a live concert for January 2019 at "Hangar 11" at Tel Aviv port, a big venue that even veteran stars struggle to fill. The stage production included special effects, lighting, live orchestra, and required a big

⁴⁷⁶ Elley.

⁴⁷⁷ Johnston.

⁴⁷⁸ Howells.

⁴⁷⁹ Young.

⁴⁸⁰ Daly, 87.

investment. Concerns about the slow ticket sales forced the star out of his hideout in the web and sent him into a round of promotional interviews in media studios.

The most notable event in Faruk's publicity tour was an interview on the talk show *Ofira and Berko*. Vulgar, ignorant, and hot headed - the public persona of the host Eyal Berkovic suits the traits of an "Ars" (Even though Berkovic is Ashkenazi). He claims that these flaws make him more relatable to "the ordinary man"⁴⁸¹. In other words, he is "authentic". Jonathan Cohen notes that talk show hosts, who "appear repeatedly and regularly in the same situation", especially since they "appear as themselves rather than in a role" are "prototypical of the kind of personae with which it is easy to develop PSI"⁴⁸². On the other hand, Berkovic's informal style was so irregular compared to other TV hosts that for many critics it did not seem more natural, but on the contrary, it seemed exaggerated to the extent of lampoon⁴⁸³. In a review titled "...what is the original and what is the impression?", a critic wrote that Berkovic and his co-host "are both just as parodic". He compared the talk show to a candid camera show and treated Berkovic as "A comedy genius"⁴⁸⁴.

The clash between Ori Comay as the Fake "Ars" Dudu Faruk, and the "authentic" Ars, the boorish hosts of *Ofira and Berko*, as they met on the duo's home court, resulted in an impressive knockout to Comay's Career⁴⁸⁵. A close reading of the interview, which lasts for about 12 minutes, reveals step by step the setup of this "publicity train wreck". The interviewers do not only shatter Faruk's made-up Persona,

⁴⁸¹ Berkovic said in an interview: "... I am one of the common people, I do not pretend to be a genius... I ask the questions that anyone who sits and watches the show would have asked, but is too shy or afraid to do so..." (Shechnik, "Mechonat").

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Interestingly, several reviewers mentioned they are having a hard time telling the difference between the real hosts, and their intentionally exaggerated impressions on the satirical TV show *A Wonderful Country*, an Israeli equivalent to *Saturday Night Live* (1975 - , NBC). In a review titled "...like a long 'Wonderful Country' sketch" Smadar Shiloni wrote that Berkovic and Asayag "spend an hour parodying themselves". Einav Schiff wrote "The 'Eretz Nehederet' sketch writes itself, and it is redundant: it won't reach the original's standards anyway".

⁴⁸⁴ Farchi.

⁴⁸⁵ Ronel claimed that "Dudu's failure was noticeable from the get-go", adding that within minutes, Faruk turned from being the public enemy to a shy schoolboy. He doubted his abilities to perform professionally on stage or in a studio and determined that in the battle between "the two biggest cultural phenomena of the year", Faruk clearly lost. (Ronel's critique should be taken in awareness to the fact it was posted on a website owned by the same channel that broadcasts the talk show); Slonim wrote that the "terrifying interview" proved that "despite years of preparation, Faruk's character is still not fully developed"; See also Shechnik, "Ma Over".

but also appropriate it for themselves, thus enhancing Berkovic's persona as a true representative of "the ordinary man", and as a proud nonapologetic "Ars"⁴⁸⁶.

In order to define Asayag and Berkovic's persona, and the unease it caused critics⁴⁸⁷, one cannot stay within the realm of post-modernist subversion of hierarchy. There is a need to use a more up to date theory to explain their actions and status. Many theories attempted to define the post-postmodern stage, none of which were yet fully established⁴⁸⁸. But this case seems to fit Alan Kirby's term "digimodernism": "Where postmodernism ironically juxtaposed the high with the low, digimodernism aggressively champions the low over the high – and it does so not ironically but sincerely, in the name of the (formerly) postmodern value of anti-elitism"⁴⁸⁹. This is why nowadays Berkovic can indeed represent the hegemony. His version of the "Ars" persona is no longer merely a post-modern deconstruction of representation. It stands, legitimately, for itself, in a technological era that Kirby sees as the "rise of a dumbed-down populism". All the negative and problematic points that critics raised have become a blurry memory from a bygone era.

Berkovic is one of Israel's all-time biggest soccer stars, who had an international career that was also full of scandals. Ofira Asayag is a well-known sports journalist. The duo began working together on the radio, as co-hosts of a popular sports show ten years before moving to television. Their scurrilous and morally questionable style

⁴⁸⁶ Schiff points out the connection between Berkovic's approaches to global cultural changes: "Traditional media all over the world had been beaten and disgraced by Donald Trump, so now every presentation of vulgarity and opportunism constitutes some collective subconscious that should be admired".

⁴⁸⁷ A representative sample of reviews about their TV show features headlines such as "[...] Like watching a car accident" ("Zaam"); "A circus of humiliations: Ofira and Berkovic's embarrassing horror show" (Sikseck); "...Ofira and Berkovic is trash journalism" ("Gadi"); "A Firing squad could not make me sit in front of Ofira and Berkovic again" (Melamed, "Kitat"). During its first years, the notorious show did not only face bad reviews but also many complaint letters by viewers, regulatory fines, and even suspension. (See: Ran Boker ("Keshet suspended Ofira and Berkovic for a week due to the remark against the Arab MKs"); Katz ("30 complaints against Berkovic following the angry interview with Meni Naftali"); Swissa ("LGBT society demands an apology from Eyal Berkovic"). However, it should be noted that over the years, the show's reputation had somewhat changed. In some instances, the same media that once harshly criticized the show published flattering reviews. For example: Levin ("Came back fresh: Ofira Asayag's dramatic change"); Livneh ("How it happened that I stopped being shocked and started loving Ofira and Berkovic"); Ten-Brink ("How we stopped worrying and started loving Asayag and Berkovic (and Amdursky too)"). Since it's questionable whether Asayag and Berkovic truly changed their style, or implemented any of the critics' advices, the shift in their status might signify a change in the quality standards of the mainstream Israeli culture and journalism over the last few years. This issue requires further investigation.

⁴⁸⁸ Rudrum and Stavris.

⁴⁸⁹ Rudrum and Stavris, 271.

earned them a dubious reputation, so the decision to trust a prime-time television talk show to their hands infuriated many people. Berkovic was specifically rebuked for his lack of qualifications to serve as an interviewer and for not caring about it whatsoever⁴⁹⁰. While critics raged, the ratings soared. It is Berkovic's impulsiveness and persistence to "keep it real" that makes him an unusual and successful television persona. TV is appreciated for its inherent realistic qualities, and he suits the medium. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis puts it, "a film is always distanced from us in time... whereas television... offers a quality of *presentness*, of 'here and now' as distinct from the cinema's 'there and then'. It is television's peculiar form of presentness – its implicit claim to be live - that founds the impression of immediacy"⁴⁹¹.

Before the interview began, Faruk performed his song *King David* in the studio. Unlike the electronic beat in his album and YouTube clips, in this performance he was accompanied by a live ensemble of musicians. Some of the lyrics were "bleeped". In some talk shows, for example *The Graham Norton Show* (2009 - , BBC 1), the live musical performance segment is shot as a live-to-tape video clip, focusing only on the stage space, which is separated from the "couch" space where the interview is being conducted⁴⁹². In this case, the director chose to cut several times and include reaction shots of the hosts. While Asayag moves her head to the beat, Berkovic seems uncharacteristically stiff. Only his eyes move from side to side, suspiciously and uncomfortably. These are not reaction shots of an enthusiastic audience admiring the star on stage. These shots place Faruk as an object for Asayag and Berkovic's judging gaze.

Once the song is over, before Faruk even gets a chance to catch his breath, he sits at the hosts' table. Asayag welcomes him with "come over, breathe a little", and he heavily exhales. Not cool and effortless as viewers are used to seeing him. She greets him with "Shabbat shalom", and he replies while looking around, avoiding eye contact.

⁴⁹⁰ "He tends to boast [of his ignorance], and to pride himself on not doing any research before the show" (Melamed, "Kitat"); "...it was like a wild internet comment on live television... without the knowledge, curiosity, ability to run a discussion, or the legitimization to appear on television" (Sikseck).

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, 218; See also Bolter and Grusin, 187-188.

⁴⁹² In comparison, Faruk's musical performance on Ynet studio had no reaction shot by the host. When Faruk appeared on the morning TV show, *בוקר אור* (2016-2019, Channel 10), he performed 3 songs live, with a short chat with the hosts between them. During the first song there is just one brief reaction shot of the hosts, and they are dancing in their seat approvingly. During the second song there are two reaction shots of the hosts nodding their heads approvingly and giggling in amusement. The third song does not include reaction shots.

Asayag immediately scolds the guest "we are sitting over here". Faruk quickly makes an excuse, saying he was greeting the audience. "We come first" protests Asayag, once again establishing who is most important. Faruk reaches out to shake Berkovic's hand. Asayag asks if they know each other, and Berkovic says he had no idea who this guy was until 24 hours ago, thus minimizing Faruk's hype. The host claims that his kids introduced him to Faruk, positioning the allegedly provocative rapper as a youth entertainer. Then Asayag positions the two men as rivals, when she asks Faruk, "you know that you had beat him". "In what"? "Don't you know"? Faruk immediately steps back into character and smugly says, "I know of several things in which I had already beat him". As he takes the bait, Asayag belittles him, "several things? Only one thing. He was also nominated for 'sexiest man in Israel'". Berkovic presents his version of not being a sour loser with the dubious compliment "he is a pretty kid", emasculating the macho persona. Faruk's eyes again wander off stage, and Asayag increases his disorientation when she acknowledges an image that is projected on a wall behind him, making him turn in his seat to understand what she is talking about. After a commercial break, they officially begin the interview with a question about his declaration of an alleged run in the elections, a publicity stunt he wishes to promote. However, what Faruk does not know is that the banner on the bottom of the screen shows the viewers at home the narrative that the show wishes to promote: "Who are you Dudu Faruk"? In other words, stay with us as we disclose his secret.

"Are you serious or joking"? asks Asayag about his alleged political aspirations. However, this is the million-dollar question, that is set to neutralize the smoke screen of ambiguity that the web enables Faruk. Faruk says he does not wish to disclose details. It takes only twelve seconds until Berkovic loses his temper and refuses to play along with the story that Faruk came to promote. "Don't give me this bullshit", he grunts. Asayag plays innocent, "he said that he wants to do it", and Berkovic raises his voice, "so he said. Herzl also said"⁴⁹³. Berkovic tries to disparage Faruk, yet chooses a bad example, since the "Prophet of Zionism", Theodore Herzl's sayings actually came true. Berkovic's ignorance of history and his arrogant misuse of the idiom make him closer to the "stupid macho" persona that Faruk was hoping to portray. Asayag confronts Faruk with his previous statements. Faruk's answers are inconsistent and contradictory. Berkovic mutters, "nonsense". "Why nonsense, don't you believe him"? Asayag serves

⁴⁹³ "Herzl said" is the Israeli equivalent to the children's game "Simon says".

the ball to Berkovic. "No. I don't. Stop. Let's turn into a serious interview, I want to know who this person is", he reveals his agenda. According to Young, in contemporary digital culture there is a prevalence "of an irony of infinite reversibility, of texts that offer no critical vantage point for determining to what extent they mean what they say"⁴⁹⁴. This interview is set to supply viewers with the missing critical vantage point. But who says that the viewers are interested in finding the answers? According to both Young and Daly, viewers/viewers derive pleasure from the lack of clarity. In the age of Cinema 3.0, "the dominance of narrative, at least in the classical sense, is waning in favor of a form of cinema where navigating, intertextual linking, and figuring out the rules of the game provide the primary pleasures"⁴⁹⁵. When Berkovic will solve the riddle that is Dudu Faruk, the game will be over. Since Faruk's persona depends on the ironies of the web, that prevent any attempt to fully determine it, he is likely to fail in other media. There are rare counter examples, like Sacha Baron Cohen, who come up with impressive creative solutions for Borat's trans-media shifts. As long as the ambiguity is kept, it can even have a real-life effect, where fluidity has entered reality. However, Faruk's TV interview at *Ofira and Berko* marks a futility of convergence, and the fact that Faruk as an artist could only thrive online.

While Faruk mumbles, Asayag and Berkovic continue to assertively argue. The alleged tension between the hosts is meant to create drama. The opposing stands enforce classic gender roles of the tough masculine father versus the soft helping mother. Next to them, Faruk once again finds himself in the position of the kid, waiting for endorsement. The show's imagined family structure adopts and applies a classic Freudian approach, according to which the mother offers unconditional love and support, while the father's approval is harder to get and depends on results. The father is a threatening figure that provokes castration anxiety. The anxiety can be resolved when the son identifies with the father, the representative of normative culture, at the cost of suppressing his own individuality including his desires and libidinal impulses⁴⁹⁶. Throughout the interview, Berkovic tries to "educate" the rebellious teen. If Comay wishes to move from the personal smartphone or computer screens to the family-viewing medium of prime-time TV, he must accept and obey family values, at the cost

⁴⁹⁴ Young.

⁴⁹⁵ Daly, 83.

⁴⁹⁶ Adar-Bunis, 20,53.

of his individuality. But this cost is too high – he would then lose his ambiguity, and his appeal.

Despite the program's "spontaneous" nature, the hosts were probably asked to act in a certain way. On their table lies pages with research (instead of traditional hosts' cue cards). They often read statements from Teleprompters. The banner on the bottom of the screen was planned and written in advance. Faruk came to promote his publicity stunt but found himself serving *Ofira and Berko's* narrative.

At this point, Berkovic stops playing along with Faruk and challenges him "what is your real name". "David"⁴⁹⁷. "David what"? "David Hamelech" ("King David"). Berkovic refuses to cooperate. Faruk protests while slouching and avoiding eye contact. Berkovic then tries a "companionate" approach – while his subtext humiliates Faruk. "I'm asking because your name is not Dudu Faruk, your name is David something". Faruk's real name, as anyone who has done minimal research before the show should know, is Ori Comay. When Berkovic wrongfully assumes that his real name is indeed David, it is considered unprofessional. At the same time, he proves he has good instincts for calling a bluff. He is street smart, the real OG. "I see that you are a good kid, almost a nerd, who is pretending", he calls out Faruk's game, while referencing his biography as a scout from north Tel Aviv (although Berkovic takes pride in not performing research and is allegedly not aware to Komai's past in the scouts). For a moment Comay becomes Faruk, inflates his chest, and shouts "stop bullshitting"⁴⁹⁸, but then he recalls that he is on television, and immediately steps out of character and apologizes for his language. "This is our show. You came to us. We will ask you whatever we want", the hosts make clear that they are in the position to set the rules. This is false, of course. They need Faruk as much as he needs them. He came to promote a concert, and they got a provocative guest that draws viewers. After they

⁴⁹⁷ Dudu is a nickname for David, like Richie for Richard.

⁴⁹⁸ For comparison, when Faruk was interviewed in an internet broadcast on the news website Ynet, the interviewer (Lukash) mentioned that Faruk "is in character" and he protested: "you are in your character as well! [How dare you] talk to me like that... you are in your character", while he mimics "self-importance". This is a subversive response, where he reveals "proper interviewers" to be no more than an imitation of the anchorman cliché. Why didn't he manage to come up with such witty reply to Asayag and Berkovic? Probably because they break the rules and do not fit the mold of a "typical anchorman". Also, because they are more hostile. However, it is hard to say that his appearance on the Ynet interview is much more impressive. He avoids most questions and does not manage to provide funny answers while doing so. He steps in and out of character. After 9 minutes of interview, he pretends to receive a phone call and walks off stage. This was not done in response to any deliberate provocation by the host, who seems surprised by his sudden departure.

already secured the ratings, they no longer need him, and so they suggest "if you don't like it, you can leave". Faruk warns that he will go, but they say, "you do not scare us, cutie". After being attacked and shamed, Faruk loses his train of thought. Even when Asayag suggests talking about his music he does not know what to say. "What do you want to talk about", she asks. Faruk steps into character in what seems like a well-rehearsed monologue. He looks directly into the camera and invites the viewers to his concert. "How come there are still tickets available?" Asayag teases. Faruk cannot explain. Berkovic emasculates Faruk and reproaches "your music, with all the obscenities, is on a very low level... I'll tell you the truth, it just looks bad", even though Berkovic famously had never shied away from curse words, or even violence, during his years in football. Asayag, "the mother", states "I think you are a good kid. He also comes from a good family", pseudo compliments that mention his true identity, undermining his act.

Faruk argues, "you don't understand art. You deal with the Mickey Mouse and bullshit. I apologize, gentlemen..." he switches between high and low registers. Throughout the interview, he uses the weird phrase, "dealing with Mickey Mouse", instead of saying "bullshit". This allegory, a childish Disney Cartoon, is a poor choice that distances him from the gangster's world in his videos and brings him closer to the toddler's world where Berkovic tries to position him. "Where is the art here, standing on a stage and cursing"? Berkovic positions himself as a protector of "good taste". Faruk claims, "there is no message. I bring it from behind, from the side. If I announce my message to the camera, I lose my point. Art comes from the sides. You can't see it and that is your problem". Unfortunately, while saying these lines, Faruk stares directly into the camera, breaking his own rule. And he is right – he stepped out of the "sides", where "art" is, and walked into the range of the TV camera, indeed, "losing his point" – his wit, persona, credibility, and eventually, his fame and career. After delivering that line Faruk stands up and marches off stage, turning his back to the hosts, while Berkovic angrily shouts at him, "What is your name? Who are you"? The director cuts to a long shot. Faruk looks smaller as he leaves the host's massive desk and seems as if he is running away from the threatening aggressive Berkovic, who is confidently seated in the well-lit center of the frame.

Once Faruk leaves, Berkovic breaks his own character. Only seconds after being furious he suddenly starts laughing. Mission accomplished. Then, the sanctimonious duo denounces Faruk, the person that they invited to their studio and

whose song they played in prime time. Asayag says, "is this how an Israeli singer behaves? If you can call him a singer...". Berkovic adds insult to injury: "it's not his fault, it's his parents' fault, for educating such a thing. It's a shame", and then reveals his "enlightened" parenting approach claiming, "If I had a kid like that, I'd tie him up and wouldn't let him leave the house". "He is a good kid, pretending", Asayag tries to sweeten. "He looks like a drug addict", Berkovic replies. The segment comes to an end with an interesting ontological statement by Asayag: "And now, for a real singer", she says as she moves on to the next item⁴⁹⁹.

Version Update: Dudu Faruk 2.0

Four months after the interview Faruk released the clip *I Cume (Giraffe)* to unfavorable reviews. His next video, two months later, was not musical, but a sketch that announced his "end?". This, however, was not a genuine contemplation on retirement, but probably an attempt to stir up the buzz. Because Faruk's next video clip was already on the launching pad.

However, from that moment on, Comay tried to change strategy and reinvent himself. Initially, shortly after announcing the "end?", he released the clip *Summer King (TAK TAK TAK)*, an uncharacteristically family-friendly song, without profanities or disturbing images. Faruk's usual persona and outfit are meant to associate him with aggressive and violent types. However, in this clip, his usual attire is softened, almost self-parodying, as he adds a giant colorful sombrero. Nevertheless, this attempt to woo the mainstream did not appease the traditional media, the radio stations ignored the song, and it failed to generate the same buzz as his previous songs.

⁴⁹⁹ Symbolically, the next guest, the "real singer", was Nissim Sarousi. The Mizrahi singer fled the country in the 1970's after he was humiliated in a television interview. Yaron London, an intellectual anchorman who is identified with the elitist Ashkenazi hegemony, interviewed Sarousi on his talk show טנדו, *Tandu* (1975, IBA), condescendingly denouncing his style, and asking him questions not at all too different from those that Berkovic slammed at Faruk. "Are these lyrics? Is this a proper level for a song"? The original recording of the interview is missing from the IBA's archive. Some journalists claim it was deliberately destroyed. Therefore, I was unable to watch it. But Saroussi recalls the questions he was asked by London in his biographical interview for the Israeli Musicians Documentation Project (Kutner). Another substitute for the original recording is a parody about the interview that was presented at the satirical show ניקוי ראש, *Nikuy Rosh* (1974-1976, IBA). The infamous Interview caused public dispute and aroused the ethnic conflict in Israeli Society. Almost 50 years later, Saroussi was interviewed by two hosts who could not be more opposite to London's persona. He is hailed as "a real singer". While semi-Ashkenazi Faruk adopts an exaggerated overcompensating ethnic mannerism, attempting to blend in among the current Mizrahi artists that lead the charts, and is being ridiculed and humiliated until he has no choice but quitting.

Afterward, Faruk temporarily stopped performing and almost ceased to update his Instagram profile. But then, he tried a new stunt. On May 12 2020, Comay released a new video clip, but this time not as Faruk. He introduced a brand-new mock persona named Bobby Rzjulu. Dressed in a fat suit and pretending to be much older than he was, he created a ridiculous unattractive weirdo. This persona shares some similarities to Udi Kagan's successful web star *Messiah*. Both are forty-something year old singers with a dated style, and a severe lack of self-awareness. In this case, unlike with Faruk and *Messiah*, the character was not organically spread across the web. It was not built as a grassroots phenomenon. Although a new Instagram account was launched⁵⁰⁰, the news about the video release were delivered to the media through Comay's public relations office⁵⁰¹. Critics refused to accept the new incarnation⁵⁰². A few days later, On May 17th, a post on Faruk's Instagram account revealed that the new persona was merely another publicity stunt. Rzjulu was deserted, and Comay announced the return of Faruk, in a new incarnation, as "Dudu Faruk 2"⁵⁰³. A few hours later a new clip was released. Could a persona literally called "Dudu Faruk 2" manage to restore Faruk's authenticity? It did not. Other than a change in Faruk's hairstyle, which was dyed platinum-blond, everything remained pretty much the same. Faruk released provocative trap songs. The fans who (still) followed him on Instagram and YouTube consumed them. The media ignored it. He returned to his habitat, or should we say compound, as a niche web star.

Two years later, in May 2022, Comay changed his course once again. For the first time, he agreed to be interviewed as himself, out of character. But even the exclusive interview might not have been enough to get a ticket into prime-time TV. He was also required to apologize. The headline of the interview was: "Sorry for the provocations: Ori Comay, the person behind Dudu Faruk, speaks for the first time". In exchange for his acceptance of the "rules of the game", and aligning with the hegemonic culture, he received an extensive 11-minute profile piece in Keshet's news weekend edition⁵⁰⁴. The piece was used to introduce a total image makeover. Both in appearance and attitude. While he was away from the limelight, Comay grew long bright curls, a contrast to Faruk's iconic skinhead. At the start of the report, Comay is shot sitting on

⁵⁰⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/bobyrgyzulu/>

⁵⁰¹ Israeli.

⁵⁰² Haronski; Hoter.

⁵⁰³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAR3q2xgZCC/>

⁵⁰⁴ Barzilay, "Sliha".

the ground in a grove, in a pastoral village in the north of Israel, where he "isolates", away from the urban cultural centers. He is seen drumming an acoustic drum, a contrast to Faruk's computerized beats. The interview begins in the village, and then proceeds to his family's bourgeoisie house. The location is another contrast, not just from Faruk's previous surroundings in his clips, but also from Faruk's previous media interviews that were analyzed here. The reporter, a representative of the prime-time television, reaches out to him, in his cultural exile. He is still not invited back into the studio, into TV, into mainstream.

Unlike in the aforementioned interviews, this time the interviewer's tone is sympathetic. Comay is acquitted of his responsibility to the claims against him, as the narration argues that "he did not plan that what began as a joke, as amusing videos for [entertaining] his army buddies, will turn into a teen mega hit". Comay suddenly stops his flow of speech and appears to have a lump in his throat. "What happened"? asks the concerned reporter. Comay's attempt to shed a tear in front of the camera fails, and he apologizes for his inability to cry. The sensitive guy's emotional reaction is the opposite of macho Faruk, who in *(לילה טוב) אהותך* sings "I did not cry over Gilad Shalit" (an IDF soldier who was kidnapped and held in captivity for several years).

When the interview moves into the family home, the conversation topic changes from Comay's new life in the village to his heyday as Faruk. An interesting contrast to the earlier interviews happens when Comay's real father joins the interview and sits beside him. As mentioned, in Asayag and Berkovic's interview with Faruk, the male interviewer took the role of a symbolic father, who scolds and even castrates. This time, Comay is with his biological father, who supports and protects him. At this point, the reporter chose to insert footage from the career-wrecking interview with Berkovic. When it cuts back to the Comays, the camera focuses on the father in a close-up shot, as he replies to Berkovic's accusations about his failure as a parent. At this point, Ori Comay is excluded from the frame. It creates a direct conflict, and parallel, between the two "fathers".

The whole second part of the interview takes a more confrontational approach. The reporter scolds Comay for the character's chauvinism, and his contribution to normalizing sexism. He disagrees and claims that 11-13 year olds understand the irony a lot more than she credits them for. But then there is a noticeable jump cut, and Comay adds: "I want to soften this issue..." - mind the term "soften" - "... I feel like I am very protective of him, and I do not believe that this is what should be happening right now".

What appears to be a glimpse of truth, authenticity, and artistic integrity, is quickly being denied. Moreover, he proceeds to claim that the provocations were caused by instances where he compromised, and gave in to the pressures of managers, producers and publicists – the representatives of the so called professional and mainstream industry. Comay presents himself as a victim and denounces the persona that brought him to fame. "It was messed up, and I did not realize it in real time... look at how he talks", he says, again treating Faruk in third person, as a separate entity. "It sounds like shit to many people, and I understand it... Of course I understand [the critique and accept it]... If someone was offended this was not the intention... I apologize".

Critics and viewers were invited to judge whether Comay's apology is sincere or lip service. Young, based on several examples from the web, finds that "the formal properties that indicate 'authenticity'... are the very ones that arouse our suspicion... The confessing subject's position on the sincerity of his own confession fails to convince, or at least to allay every doubt"⁵⁰⁵. However, Young's observations address digital images on the web. Comay's tell-all interview as himself was done for Television, and not, for example, as a confession monologue on his YouTube channel. The medium, not only TV, but a journalistic show, is supposed to anchor the meaning, and provide referential value.

But contemporary viewers are less innocent regarding television's degree of truth, and this interview proves that they are right to be skeptical. Although the report shows that Ori Comay has been musically reinventing himself, working on a new project in the genre of World Music, and despite his public denouncement of Dudu Faruk, he has been continuing to appear in character in small clubs, private events and on social media.

Comay/Faruk's resonating failure seems to have impacted other web creators, especially musicians who aspire to perform live shows. Fictional personas continue to be a useful shtick to raise curiosity and attention. However, creators' attitude - or business strategy - has changed. Fake personas that gained attention before Comay/Faruk's crisis, had since shed their masks, renounced their avatars, and revealed their true selves. For example, singer Rotem Shefy, who was better known as Shefita⁵⁰⁶, and comedian Avi Dangur, who retired his persona of "Avi the Singer"⁵⁰⁷. Interestingly,

⁵⁰⁵ Young.

⁵⁰⁶ Barzilay, "Naim Meod".

⁵⁰⁷ Izak.

both cases, like Faruk, played on the character of stereotypical Middle Eastern music idols. Similarly, viewers struggle to determine whether it should be read as a satire about the domination of the genre in the Israeli music scene, as if the only way to succeed in Israel nowadays is by passing as Mizrahi, or as a demeaning stigmatization and cultural appropriation, with critics and viewers outside the web leaning toward the second option⁵⁰⁸.

There are also cases of younger artists, who launched their careers after Faruk's salad days ended. For example, the successful young singer Nomi Aharoni Gal, (representative of Gen-Z, born 1999), who is better known as her alter-ego, Nunu. Like Dudu Faruk, the cast of *Arutz Hakibud*, and other viral characters, Nunu is also eccentric. She has unique mannerisms, odd pronunciation, heavy makeup, flashy clothes, and colorful hair extensions. Music critic Ben Shalev compared her to Faruk and Shefita, saying: "The question that has been repeatedly asked about her – I have heard it dozens of times – was 'is she serious or is it some kind of a joke'? ... the uncertainty principle that holds together the 'serious' with the 'not serious' without demanding a clear resolution, stems from Nunu being a character..., not a new strategy"⁵⁰⁹. However, Shalev attributes the uncertainty and endless irony to the use of made-up Alter-egos in general. He is missing the irony's dependency on web environment, as Young points out⁵¹⁰. Considering that Shalev was reviewing Nunu's debut album, her shift to a more traditional platform after her prior popularity online, it is perhaps no surprise that his impression was negative.

A noticeable difference between Gen-Z Gal and the Gen-Y pop personas like Faruk is that she makes efforts to determine the relationships, and boundaries, between the artists and the persona, and to provide referential criteria. In an interview she claimed that "the main idea was that Nunu is not Nomi. There was no marketing plan, the purpose was to separate [between Nunu and Nomi]". But then she somewhat contradicts herself and enforces an overlap between the entities - "It is tricky, because it is a character, but it is also a part of me that I zoomed in on... she is a part of me, just more extreme"⁵¹¹. Even the character's name, Nunu, is a nickname based on the singer's

⁵⁰⁸ Bin Nun; Shushan "HaHaim".

⁵⁰⁹ Ben Shalev.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Pincu.

real name, Nomi. It is still her, not someone else⁵¹². It's a variation on the real name, as it is a variation on the real identity.

In order not to repeat Comay's errors, Gal makes sure to clear exactly who and what is behind the public persona. When asked about the failure to maintain the double life that led to the eventual failure of characters like Faruk and Shefita, Gal replied "I am not afraid... they are completely in character... [they] always interview in character, [whereas] Nunu has something else. She is not entirely a character, she is not totally distant from me, or fictional, but [she is] a part that is very personal within me". She mentions, for example, incorporating autobiographical experiences into her songs, like a breakup with her boyfriend⁵¹³.

Unlike Faruk and Shefita, who (at least initially) did not shy away from controversies, Gal makes sure to avoid hurting feelings or alienating audiences. She rejects attempts to find a saying in her performance, claiming "I understand the comparison [of Nunu to Faruk] because it is [also] a character, but it is not a parody, as I think that Faruk does, but simply a character who is using humor"⁵¹⁴.

Gal independently created and released her first song, בנים (*Boys*), in June 2021. The first days were disappointing, and the video did not reach beyond her immediate circle of friends. However, a few days later the editor of MTV Israel shared the video on her Instagram account. The manager is both a traditional trendsetter, which assigns legitimacy and value, and she is well networked with other key players in the industry. It required her social media platform to get the ball rolling, and indeed from that moment on Nunu's clip rapidly spread across the web⁵¹⁵. The singer entered G!glz's playlist. She was booked as an opening act for bigger starts, as Eurovision winner Netta Barzilai, and the American band Maroon 5 when they performed in Tel Aviv. But Gal credits her biggest career boost to TikTok - the social media which is considered trendier than Facebook among youngsters of the 2020s⁵¹⁶. When Nunu's third song, *Living the Dream*, was released, someone invented dance moves to accompany it, in an act of grassroots fandom. This choreography became a viral 'TikTok challenge', a meme-like creation, as more and more viewers create and share their variations of the

⁵¹² Gal said that she initially considered taking other names, which would have been completely different from her real name, for example, Dela Oma (Shalev).

⁵¹³ Tzomit.

⁵¹⁴ Pincu. See also Ben Shalev.

⁵¹⁵ Lior Shalev.

⁵¹⁶ Rach and Peter.

dance⁵¹⁷. "When I released [my first single] 'Boys', my audience was mainly 25 to 20 years old... [since] 'Living the Dream' exploded on TikTok, many teenagers follow me as well... it's unbelievable, as if I sent a song out to the world and it is no longer mine⁵¹⁸."

It will be intriguing to find out if Generation Z will change the rules of the game. This of course has implications beyond this case of questioning the boundaries between fact and fiction in stars personas. Especially as the Zoomers show different preferences for social media platforms. The prominent example is Tiktok, with its rapid 30-seconds video, cutting edge algorithm, and enhanced interactivity. On the other hand, as this chapter shows, sometimes a closer look at cultural development reveals that what is perceived by some as a groundbreaking revolution is merely a continuous development of long existing processes. At the same time, whenever there is a change in the context, particularly through digital means, it tends to shake things up, requiring adjusting by moving on to the next stage.

⁵¹⁷ "Ein Breira Ela Lehodot: Nunu Ve'Living the Dream' Trendiyim BaTikTok".

⁵¹⁸ Lior Shalev.

Conclusion

This dissertation analyses popular works by the first generation of Israeli independent content creators who gained their reputation by achieving viral success online. During the past few years, some of them paved their way to the front line of mainstream Israeli culture, yet so far, their fascinating innovations have not been researched. My examination makes an important advancement in filling this gap, by addressing, among others, issues of temporality, ideology, ontology, aesthetics, industry and commerce, stardom, and transnationalism.

I began by presenting a brief overview of early local independent web creation in Israel, from the late 1990s until the late 2000s. The pre-social-networks stage had produced widely popular hits already back then, including even the launch of (what turned out to be) mainstream careers. Importantly, in retrospect we identify that this stage was a harbinger of some of the notable trends and major outlines of the Israeli web creations, along with the dominance of key ingredients: comedy, music, and animation.

In comparison to examples from the earlier period, the recent online creations form a clearer and much more unified artistic phenomenon. Although the post-social networks creations are diverse, there is a common thread woven between them. This dissertation points out that they share a distinct style, aesthetic, humor, and agenda.

The first chapter focused on what is claimed here to be the fundamental aspect of this new digital wave in Israeli culture – its temporality. The online videos are affected by the crisis of the modern time regime. They feature the shift to presentism. This is expressed, for example, by a constant blur between past and present, chronologic dissonance, "ageless" characters, enhanced nostalgia, and arrested development.

The content creators' time perception has to do with their belonging to the first generation of internet natives. Although every generation in Israeli history has had to come of age in the shadow of traumatic national events, millennials had unprecedented exposure to information and media. Combined with the relatively thin skin of these delicate young "snowflakes", the result was a regression, or the (desired and imagined) freezing of time.

The national context leads to an additional reason for the Gen-Y creators' time perception. It has been affected by the change of hegemony in Israeli society over the past 30 years or so. Although the issue of who are the elite groups that hold power and influence in contemporary Israel is debatable, it is undeniable that the previously ruling left-wing sector had immensely shrunk and weakened over this period. Almost the entire group of online creators are liberal, secular, live in the Tel-Aviv region, and support the two states solution and peace negotiations. They were born into a world where their sector had been leading the country, but gradually it lost its power, and even more so, their values have been marginalized to the verge of illegitimacy.

The national atmosphere affects, of course, the local culture. While in Hollywood and other Western countries "Cancel Culture" is mostly identified with cases of celebrities who were "punished" because they were perceived as not progressive enough⁵¹⁹, at the same time in Israel it appears that most artists who risk "cancelation" are those who are perceived as not patriotic or nationalistic enough. There have been several notable incidents of this kind where prominent actors and actresses suffered from social media rage which managed to cancel some of their projects⁵²⁰.

The other side of the coin is that the artists that enjoy wide mainstream popularity are the optimistic ones. This issue has been more thoroughly discussed in the media in the context of Israeli music, specifically pop hits. Just have a look at the titles of some of the songs that dominated the top of the charts over the past few years: Hanan Ben Ari's *החיים שלנו חותים* (Our Lives are [Sweet as] Strawberries), Static and Ben-El Tavori's *טודו בום* (All is Well), *[לך, עולם, תודה]* (Thank [You, World]) by Rami Kleinstein and Keren Peles. Some critics even called them "propaganda songs"⁵²¹.

In other times, the Millennial liberals' frustration and alienation would have fueled their artistic creations with protest and harsh anti-establishment satire. Yet the current cultural climate in Israeli society, which denies unsettling issues and national critique, forces them to sublimate their negative feelings and nonconformism. If even

⁵¹⁹ (Ng) ;(Schocket).

⁵²⁰ During the 2010s, the list includes culture and media figures such as: Orna Banai, Menashe Noy, Gila Almagor, Achinoam Nini, Yair Garbuz, Anat Waxman, Alona Kimhi, Yehonatan Geffen, Oded Kotler, Gidi Orsher, Oshrat Kotler and Maya Landsmann. See, for example, (Moussafir); (Sharoni). The phenomenon appeared to culminate around the events of Israel's military operation Protective Edge in Gaza in 2014, and the 2015 Israeli elections. *HaAyin HaSheviyit*, an online magazine that investigates and criticizes the Israeli media field, defined Operation Protective Edge as "a landmark in the deterioration of the attitude towards freedom of speech in Israel" (B.Z).

⁵²¹ (Alpher 2016); (Eglash 2019); (Idan 2016); (Noy 2016).

established artists with a solid fanbase found themselves damaged after making mild critical comments, then the risk is too high for aspiring semi-professionals who are occupied with an attempt to gather likes to achieve virality and success. So instead, they prefer to turn back time in their fantasy worlds and yearn for their childhood days.

Generation Y's arrested development led to fresh characteristics of young native Israelis. In previous generations, they have been identified with qualities such as ambition, sturdiness, and maturity. Even more so, the contemporary works express intransigent resentment toward adulthood. Sometimes even ageism. They tend to present elders in a demeaning manner, rebel against parental authority, and reject the mature world.

In addition to their original themes and attitudes, Generation Y has developed a unique aesthetic. On the one hand, they place more weight on visual spectacle. This is true for both the frame design in their filmmaking, and for their appearance in real life, as evident in flashy clothes, fashionable brands, eccentric hairstyles, and infantile prints and patterns. Another significant source of inspiration is the culture of the trap music scene and its aesthetic. On the other hand, their videos are made using semi-professional equipment, or cheap and domestic appliances. Also, they are deeply rooted in the digital world and the images it produces.

Several iconic objects tend to show up in their videos, signifying common Israeli coming of age experiences, such as hookahs, electric vehicles, certain toys and games. Other prevailing symbols are borrowed from web culture, for example, software interface, Memes, Flash animation, and digital "Readymade art".

To refine the differences between millennials and previous generations, I conducted an analysis of Gen-Y digital works in comparison to mainstream Gen-X comedy films (which influenced them). Although the older comedians are also not short of immaturity, the movies treat the refusal to grow up as a problem whose resolution is a success. The millennials, however, prefer to maintain the regression, and they celebrate it. This is mainly due to the socio-anthropological characteristics of each generation, but there are several other reasons for this difference that are worth mentioning. For example, the platform (web/cinema) influences the narrative. Also, issues of masculinity and gender are dealt with through parallel strategies – the American protagonists are "Beta" men-child, while the Israeli heroes are ridiculously exaggerated ultra-macho "Alphas".

Another generational comparison was between the online content creators and Israeli Gen-X writers. The X-ers were also considered by critics as adolescent and immature when they were in their 20s-30s and published their first works. However, the new writers of the 1990s focused on romantic relationships as a mode of rebellion and indulged in the period of singlehood. Gen-Y creators choose a more childish approach, and their revolt is relatively innocent and almost a-sexual. This approach also differentiates the Israeli Gen-Y creators from their foreign millennial colleagues, as demonstrated in a comparison between local creators and notable American comedians-musicians who gained fame online, like Bo Burnham and Dave Burd.

Indeed, I also presented examples where Israeli millennials attempted to create controversial, extreme, or even disturbing online content. However, these tryouts tend to crash in any encounter with the mainstream. This kind of filmmaking is limited to the realm of "web ironies". Whenever there is an attempt to develop a sustainable career, or to cross over to other media or platforms, it results in backlash. This is why there has been relatively little influence of web creations on local television and cinema.

This discussion did not hide the fact that Gen-Y web creators may also be motivated to relate to kids for materialistic reasons. The entertainment industry in general, and cinema particularly, have been wooing the desired target audience of children and teenagers. In the digital world, the dominance of tech savvy youngsters remains and to a certain extent it even grows. At the same time, there is evidence⁵²² to support the claim that the content creators' juvenility does not stem from greedy or cynical motives, and that it does not necessarily compromise their artistic integrity.

Apart from juvenility, the millennials' sense of humor has more particular attributes. In Israel, young creators developed a progressive style as a declared alternative to traditional and mainstream comedy. They (allegedly) avoid hitting on easy targets, "punching down", and exploiting worn out stigmas (especially ethnic jokes that are still prevailing in the relatively young country of immigrants). At the same time, this style sometimes tries to distance itself from the mainstream by turning to the shocking and the extreme, and by tackling taboos. The discussion of Gen-Y's humor is

⁵²² In addition to the ones presented in the chapter, Shifman notes that the list of humor topics prevailing online may "serve as a comic reflection of some of the characteristics of contemporary Western society... the high percent of jokes about children and youth (in comparison to just a few jokes about the elderly) reflects its youth-oriented tendencies" (Shifman 2007, 201).

elaborated by presenting how the web forms as a comedy habitat, and how it led to a revival, and inflation, of the local stand-up scene.

The second chapter delved into an ontological examination of web videos. It dealt with a major question such as "what is independent online content"? My claim is that despite the many revolutionary advancements that social media have presented, the content creators themselves (like many of their viewers, and most of the traditional trend-setters that dictate the discourse) are still bound by pre-digital thinking patterns that prevent them from reaching their full groundbreaking potential.

I use the web series *Messiah*, and mainly its "unofficial" webisode, "The Wedding Special", as a case study that raises questions regarding the definitions, artistic validity, and cultural status of home videos, amateur filmmaking, and independent filmmaking, in the age of social networks.

The wedding special does not differ from *Messiah*'s other webisodes in terms of length, format, setting, characters, plot, storytelling, and aesthetic. However, there are a few dissimilarities, the most significant one has to do with its genre (and its relation to fiction/reality). The special was created as a wedding video, and it incorporates many elements that are not fictional. These qualities associate it with home videos, which are largely considered as not artistically viable. I claim that this is the (unjustified) reason for the exclusion of the special webisode from the successful web series. This issue calls for a reevaluation of such assumptions in the context of the digital era. The distinction between the hybrid wedding special and the rest of the webisodes is complex, considering that even the "standard" webisodes playfully undermine their relationship with reality, authenticity, and documentation.

To unpack this issue, I began by presenting a major process in 21st century screen comedy, which is the decline of the classic sitcom and the ascendance of comedy verité. These neo-mockumentaries rely on experienced and sophisticated viewers with high literacy in visual texts. Therefore, it was suggested that comedy verité is television for millennial viewers. Generation Y, as shown in the previous chapter, are also the key players in the foundation of Israeli online content. Therefore, the fresh TV genre naturally and easily crossed over to the web. In addition, there have been more practical reasons that make this new style ideal for independent digital creators. The pseudo-documentary minimizes the gap between the affordable and the professional production standard. However, at the same time, the incorporation of simple, domestic, and

mundane elements of filmmaking can dim and dispel the videos' "aura"⁵²³. For example, home movies and candid camera movies have largely inferior cinematic status.

The television series *The Office* is considered as the seminal text for comedy verité. The groundbreaking series has been purchased and localized by many countries, including an official Israeli adaptation. Nevertheless, in Israel, *Messiah* (in both its web and television versions) is no less a prominent example of the genre. Therefore, I conduct a transnational comparative analysis between them. Among the conclusions, it proves that despite being a pioneering Israeli made-for-web series, *Messiah* largely follows the familiar TV format. Aside from the mockumentary aesthetic and storytelling method, a more specific resemblance is in the leading characters, their dynamic, and their storylines, which suits the core components of *The Office's* format. However, the aspects in which *Messiah's* creators did temper and change the formula highlight the unique characteristics of the local web content.

The comparative discussion raises issues regarding forms of personal/ collective viewing experience, and consumption of comedy. It was suggested that although web series are often consumed individually, on a personal screen, the digital platforms create virtual substitutes, or new forms of communal experiences. For example, through the accompanying comments section.

The comparison also points out the satirical facets. *The Office* tackles big social issues, like class relations in the British version, or tensions between the sectors of a fragmented society in the Israeli version. *Messiah*, in contrast, remains in the realm of the personal, with the same kind of detached, self-centered, universal, and escapist approach that characterizes the digital creations of Gen-Y, and their sense of humor.

The comparative discussion is broadened by adding *The Office's* web series to the equation. The American spin-off had to struggle in order to establish its status as equal to the televised version, even among the show's fan base. Interestingly, when *Messiah* made its transition in the opposite direction, from web to TV, the fans' discourse and the reviews in traditional media did not treat the web series as somehow lesser. Nevertheless, it appears that TV had smoothed *Messiah's* rough edges. This elaborate analysis of *Messiah* in comparison to *The Office* established the web series' reliance on TV formulas and prepared the ground for an analysis of the wedding special, which signals an original innovative trajectory.

⁵²³ In the sense of Walter Benjamin's use of the term (Benjamin 2008).

The conventions of comedy *verité*, and its pretend sense of unmediated "truth", nourish cringe comedy. This sub-genre of humor became more central over the past two decades. Interestingly, it serves as a tangent point between comedy *verité* and the web (as the internet has been a fruitful ground for embarrassment and awkwardness derived laughs). It was shown how *Messiah* takes this style to a whole new level, in what can be defined as meta-cringe-comedy.

Messiah's wedding special is a complicated text that challenges definitions. It playfully diffuses and mixes comedy *verité*, candid camera, and documentary, and has several different levels of relation to (genuine or mock) truth. I analyzed the special in relation to the cutting-edge TV series *The Royle Family*. While the British series was almost instantly highly acclaimed, *Messiah's* wedding special did not receive any praise or special attention. But *Messiah's* special webisode perfects and naturalizes everything that made *The Royle Family* so great. The British show's innovative approach is closer to common forms of online content than television, where even after all these years its style stands out as one of a kind. This points out a substantial paradox. Some filmmakers wish to utilize the cinematic medium's realistic abilities to the fullest (whether to genuinely document reality or, like in mockumentary, to create an impression of reality to affect their viewers), yet at the same time, lack of mediation or agency undermines the artistic validity of the cinematic piece. The closer the creators of comedy *verité* get to accurately capturing unmediated reality, the more authentic and relatable their art becomes, but beyond a certain point, the further the filmmakers move toward an unmediated reality, the less compelling their work becomes. The notion of creativity dissipates, and viewers are left with only the actuality. The awareness of this paradox, and its effect on the common creative approach, I argue, is what caused the exclusion of the wedding special from the web series' corpus. This point reveals the ontological crisis of comedy *verité*, and the limitations of independent content creation in general.

The third chapter is a case study of a viral web star. By scrutinizing the (mock) persona of Israeli rapper-comedian Dudu Faruk (whose real name is Ori Comay), it sheds light on fresh forms of stardom that make use of the web as an artistic platform. The meteoric rise and abrupt end of his career unveil some of the challenges of convergence culture. The shift from one platform to another is not necessarily natural, fluent, and easy. In fact, it can be disastrous.

In cyberspace, Faruk's videoclips easily skipped over presumed hurdles (that according to critics made them allegedly unsuitable for mainstream), such as

amateurish production values, offensive behavior, dirty language, and ethnic humor. Faruk did not hesitate to utilize a defiant attitude and engage in risky provocations, and the web's inherent ironic and ambivalent nature enabled him to avoid stepping on mines and to gather a large following. However, once Faruk's success became too big, and the virtual space of the Israeli online content scene could no longer accommodate it, he was forced to cross over beyond it. His attempt to converge with traditional media in the real world, where the lack (or suspension) of skepticism does not apply, led to his downfall. Things culminated in his live interview on a popular television talk show which gave a death blow to his career. The confrontation between him and the hosts shattered Faruk's image and dispersed the ambivalence and illusion of the post-post-modernist web.

The concept of stardom, and specifically movie stars, has transformed through the years, from the days of classic Hollywood and the studio system, until this age of social networks and verified accounts. The gap between the stars and their fans narrowed. VIPs became more accessible, moving towards authenticity and normalcy (though at the same time, there has been an erosion in the connection between the terms "authenticity" and "truth").

Faruk's fake persona borrows elements from the imported trope of the American gangsta rapper and spoofs it. However, even "straight" Israeli rappers have questionable authenticity to begin with, due to the transnational mixture of the local version of the musical genre. A survey of early Israeli hip hop pointed out some of the formative components of localized rap. These components can also be found in Faruk's contemporary trap music videos. For example, the first experiments in rap by Israelis were made with a tongue-in-cheek approach along with heavy doses of humor and parody. Another connection that predates Dudu Faruk is the somewhat surprising yet popular mixture between hip hop and Middle Eastern music. Additionally, a shared feature among early local rappers and the local trappers (of Faruk's era) is the technological aspect, used not only for creation, but also for alternative channels of distribution, consumption, and discussion.

Such similarities indicate that the 'trap revolution' of the 2010s can be seen as merely an intensified second wave of a phenomenon that began around a decade earlier (still within the Gen-Y period), before the age of social networks. However, this does

not mean that the trap artists did not bring anything new to the table. For example, early rappers had to justify themselves and earn validation and legitimacy. Trappers began from a different starting point, after the validation had already been achieved, and acted accordingly. Another difference is that while mainstream Israeli rap songs picked an attitude that is positive, conformist, and nationalist, the creators of online music videos moved on to an almost detached hedonism.

Dudu Faruk distinguished himself, as a star, from common Israeli trap/rap and picked an approach that suits the globalized virtual world better than mainstream national radio. He defied norms in aspects such as public persona, performance style, video aesthetic, themes, lyrics, and satire. His breakthrough is mostly credited to his innovative adoption of trap culture, Meme Rap, and digital filmmaking. Comay serves as producer/ "showrunner" of a diegesis that had been established through a series of web videos, which all share a continuous intertextual connection.

Nevertheless, a critical and skeptical examination of common statements regarding Faruk's revolutionary achievements reveals that the hype might be exaggerated. Especially claims that supposedly traditional media would not try to pick up on the trend, and that there is no longer a place for the derogatory "ars" trope in contemporary Israeli entertainment. Hence, this study suggests rephrasing and refining the common claim that the web allows unique possibilities that are not available in other media. It is not the ethnic comedy per se that is breaking a taboo, but *how* ethnic satire is performed and expressed. In Faruk's case, it was made with intentional defiance of good taste and the politically correct. This approach served the building of his mock persona, for as long as it thrived within cyberspace.

Faruk's ethnic comedy is reflexive, he unveils gaps that are not to be discussed, while maximizing shock value. In addition, his hyper-machoistic persona is a comic contrast to millennial Israeli hip hop stars, who embody the generations' "snowflake" attributes. However, a comparative analysis between Ori Comay's Dudu Faruk and Sacha Baron Cohen's Ali G (another outrageous and ethnically charged mock persona) clarifies how the medium affects the explosive content, and its reception. It also shows what skills Comay lacks, and how far away he has been from the brilliance of the successful British comedian.

The discussion culminated in a close reading of Faruk's live interview on the talk show *Ofira and Berko*. The memorable television interview, arguably one of the

most notable (soft news) interviews in recent years, is a star-persona's equivalent of a train wreck. The interviewers, who cultivated distinct public personas of their own, beat him at his own game. They confronted Faruk, cleared the smoke screen, peeled off his mask, and used their TV cameras to reveal the truth that the web concealed.

Aftermath of the discussion of Faruk's career presents the consequences of his crash, how web stardom changed, and how more recent Israeli viral stars, like Nunu, adapt and adopt new tactics in order to fit in cultural convergence.

The juxtaposition of the case studies next to each other provides a wider context and charges them with additional value. Mainly, the discussion of cross-over and its failures, which is one of the focal points of this dissertation: both medium-wise, between web to TV; or ethnically, with performativity that ends in a homogenized identity; or temporarily, with the collapse of the chronological order of time. Moreover, there are interesting connections between the chapters which are worth further attention. For example, the use of mundane aesthetic and realistic impression by both Messiah and Dudu Faruk, each case by its own methods and for its own purposes. Or a comparison between Faruk and the Zabari brothers' characters, which all correspond with flammable stereotypes for an irreverent comedic effect, but with different results.

The abovementioned case studies shed an academic spotlight on the pioneering works of a distinct new generation of Israeli artists. The analysis was intended to supply a significant contribution to the understanding of Israeli web culture, and processes of local cultural convergence which had yet to be properly examined. It was only in 2018 that the Israeli Academy of Film and Television added a category for best web series to its annual Television Awards ceremony (which was held in March 2019)⁵²⁴. This is an important step for the acceptance of online content by the cultural establishment. The regulations that the academy set specifically state that the initial destined platform for the series must be a digital platform, and that a web series made for advertising and/or promotion and/or sales will not be able to compete⁵²⁵. Yet some of the other regulations indicate that it might still not be ready for independent content creation and could be, as in the case presented in chapter two, still be bound to old thinking patterns from other media. For example, the regulations state that a web series must have at least four

⁵²⁴ (Bin Nun 2019).

⁵²⁵ (The Israeli Academy of Film and Television 2022).

episodes, and the length of each episode should be at least seven minutes. The academy also demands that the creator/s be at least 18 years old.

Another big step was the launch of the Israeli public broadcast service Kan. The new public corporation was established in 2015 for the sake of replacing the IBA (Israeli Broadcasting Authority), which was dysfunctional and irrelevant⁵²⁶. Kan officially began operating in May 2017. Its declared agenda includes treating the new digital section as an equivalent to the veteran television and radio sections, and a "digital in first place" distribution approach. Arguably, its earliest success, even before the official beginning of broadcasts, was the popularity of its tailored-for-social-media content⁵²⁷. This was later followed by regularly funding and producing original web series, such as *דוקוטיים* (2016-), *תמיר רץ לכנסת* (2017), *סוף הדרך* (2020), and *פגום* (2021), which call for a thorough analysis in another opportunity.

While online content takes an increasingly larger place in culture, independent creators still struggle with the "glass ceiling". They still have not found a proper business model that would enable them to manage a sustainable career. Many of the promising young stars that were discussed here were viral hits only a few years ago, yet today the web is no longer their main creative arena, or they ceased to create online content entirely⁵²⁸. This crucial problem is not unique to Israel: "Most companies and independent artists producing material solely for the Web lose money because unless an Internet show lands a television or film deal, it is almost entirely dependent on selling advertising to make money. Advertisers, who are not spending much on the Web anyway, have not been rushing to sponsor sites whose audiences are small and whose subject matter may not always be palatable"⁵²⁹.

However, there are reasons for careful optimism about a day when this glass ceiling will break. The cinema and television industries are regenerating, old norms collapse, and cultural convergence accelerates. I began my PhD studies, and work on this dissertation, in Cambridge in October 2019. When I chose to change my focus from aspects of screen studies that take place within cinemas to aspects that take part online

⁵²⁶ (Boker 2014).

⁵²⁷ (Kitain 2017).

⁵²⁸ For example, (Pachman 2020); (Shechnik, Hoze Hamilyonim Shel Udi Kagan (Udi Kagan's Millions Worth Contract) 2016).

⁵²⁹ (Harmon 2000). See also (Bennett and Strange 2015); (Jenkins, Ford and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* 2013).

and on personal screens, I could not predict how much this decision would prove itself to be valuable and relevant. Shortly after my first term ended, the world encountered the threat of Covid-19, which completely changed our lives. The historical event had far-reaching consequences, many of them probably more crucial than those regarding the entertainment industry, but these are the ones that are relevant to our discussion. The prolonged periods of lockdown forced cinemas to shut down for extended periods. The studios and distributors did not wait for their return and shook the film industry with a series of unprecedented decisions. A notable example was when Disney opted for a digital-first release of *Mulan* (Niki Caro, 2020), "shocking cinema owners". *The Guardian* reported that "Disney's decision to bypass cinemas and offer its latest big budget film *Mulan* directly to streaming subscribers for \$29.99 could signal the beginning of the end for the traditional movie-going experience – and forever change the long-established business model underpinning the Hollywood blockbuster"⁵³⁰. In an article called "How 2020 Changed Hollywood, and the Movies, Forever", published in *Variety*, the writers explained that the movie theater operators' bargaining power had drastically diminished. The competition from streaming services, which offer their subscribers an almost infinite selection of available content, weakened the movie theater's leverage over the studios in the argument over the extent of the theatrical window. When theaters were forced to shut down for long periods over the Covid-19 pandemic, they were taken out of the game. Upon their return, they did not manage to restore their previous status and quickly learned that the business had been fundamentally altered. The filmmakers did not remain loyal and easily moved on to cooperate with the new powerful players. In 2020, Netflix "boasted new movies from the likes of David Fincher ('Mank'), Spike Lee ('Da Five Bloods'), George Clooney ('The Midnight Sky'), and Aaron Sorkin ('The Trial of the Chicago 7')", while "Apple, Amazon, and Hulu countered with new films from auteurs and A-listers such as Sofia Coppola ('On the Rocks'), Sacha Baron Cohen ('Borat Subsequent Moviefilm'), and Lee Daniels"⁵³¹.

Similar processes have been bubbling up in the Israeli industry as well. An executive in Kan recently bragged that "we have shattered the equation of the [alleged] need to supply prime time viewers addictive substances. We are changing the television

⁵³⁰ (Sweney 2020).

⁵³¹ (Rubin and Lang n.d.).

channel's classic ratio – for every viewer [watching] the living room box there are six or eight viewers on digital [platforms]... we do not need the immediate viewing numbers... what is important to us is the accumulated consumption... the digital consumers are a much younger audience, that is not [interested] in television at all. A valuable audience that can accompany us for the next 5, 10 and 15 years"⁵³².

Not only have studios and executives lost their power⁵³³, but the professional filmmakers' status has also been constantly and increasingly devaluating⁵³⁴. Therefore, certain scholars have called for "elevating a work-centred perspective on cultural production"⁵³⁵. To make things worse, in the post-pandemic era professional content creators faced another major threat that has been destabilizing their authority in the form of sophisticated AI tools. The rapidly evolving field of machine learning (ML) and the leap in capabilities of artificial neural networks threaten to make many workers redundant. In the creative industries, it includes, for example, writers, editors, directors, and designers. It should be noted that AI-generated content is not a futuristic vision but something that already exists⁵³⁶. For example, the buzz-generating short film *Sunspring* (Oscar Sharp. USA, 2016)⁵³⁷ is an early attempt at filming a script that was written by a primitive bot. More recent examples are web broadcasts that are written, directed, and animated by AI, like *Nothing, Forever* (Skyler Hartle and Brian Habersberger. USA, 2022) and *TrumporBiden2024* (Bachir Boumaaza. Belgium, 2023). Generative AI tools are available for free and easy to use. Leading tech organizations have been embedding them in popular products that are almost inseparable part from the daily lives of many computer users. Chatbots such as such as OpenAI's Chat GPT, Google's BARD, and Microsoft's Bing, and text-to-image models like OpenAI's DALL-E are already very popular. They give independent content creators powerful new tools that are expected to bring revolutionary changes.

Tectonic shifts have been happening in the world of social media too. This dissertation focuses on a revolution that happened during the 2010s largely thanks to the immense popularity and influence of two major content platforms/social networks, Facebook and YouTube. However, recent surveys showed that Facebook is losing its

⁵³² (Eretz 2022).

⁵³³ (De Peuter et al 2023); (Owczarski 2022); (Ryu and Cho 2022).

⁵³⁴ (Baron 2023); (Fitzgibbon 2022).

⁵³⁵ (De Peuter et al 2023).

⁵³⁶ (Grba 2017).

⁵³⁷ (Cohn 2021).

popularity, especially among young users, and the short video content and social platform TikTok is taking its place⁵³⁸. Traditional media were quick to eulogize these top brands in articles with titles such as, "This is How TikTok Killed the YouTube Stars"⁵³⁹. Industry professionals affirm this as well. In an interview with a publicist who manages the careers of A-list Israeli pop stars, he claimed: "If previously the resources went to YouTube then nowadays [everyone] already knows that YouTube views can be bought and the truer measure is [in the digital music services] Spotify and Apple, but TikTok also enables activities with content creators who know how to promote the song"⁵⁴⁰. His answer suggests a direction that might solve the creators' need to monetize their views, but the cost would be to compromise their artistic integrity.

The rise of TikTok brings about many new and exciting developments in the field of independent content creators. Although in Israel it has not yet produced narrative creations that reached the scale of viral YouTube hits it already launched the careers of a new generation of media stars, such as Talya Bartfeld and Eden Daniel Gabay⁵⁴¹. I am sure that they will be a fruitful ground for future research. Perhaps it is a task for the next generation of Ph.D. students, who begin their studies now, students from Generation Z.

⁵³⁸ (Gilboa 2022); (Rach and Peter 2021).

⁵³⁹ (Nahum Shahal 2022).

⁵⁴⁰ (Nahum Shahal 2022).

⁵⁴¹ (Orbach 2022); (Vachtel, 'Gever Im Peah Vezakan Ze Harbe Yoter Matzhik': Kach Hafach Eden Daniel Gabay Lesensatziat Reshet ('A Man with a Wig and a Beard is Much Funnier': This is How Eden Daniel Gabay Turned into a Web Sensation) 2022).

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⁵⁴² All the internet links, in all chapters, have been accessed and verified in December 2022, before the submission of this dissertation.

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