

Television Drama in Israel

Identities in Post-TV Culture

Itay Harlap



B L O O M S B U R Y



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Preface

I felt I was on the edge of a slippery slope. Managing to control myself. Everything within me cried out. “Colonizers!” it cried. “Lies!” it cried. Khirbet Khizeh is not ours. The Spandau [a German machine gun] never conferred any right. “Oh! Oh!” The voice cried within me.

S. Yizhar, “The Story of Khirbet Khizeh,” [1949] 2008

Amir [Kais Nashif] You don’t think it’s a little fucked up, that we conceived a child while lying in the ruins of a village that was massacred [during the Nakba]? It’s like if you were to conceive while visiting Auschwitz.

Shaul Nawi [Menashe Noy] Are you kidding me? We—all of our children—were conceived in Auschwitz.

Amir What? Iraqi ones too?

Shaul Nawi Iraqis too. Auschwitz, Dachau, Birkenau, all of it.

—*Parashat HaShavua*, season 3, HOT3, 2009



Figure 0.1 Mother holding a baby in her arms (*Khirbet Khizeh*).



Figure 0.2 Palestinians peering through the cracks in the side of a truck (*Khirbet Khizeh*).

Three decades separate the publication of “The Story of Khirbet Khizeh,” a short story by S. Yizhar (1949) describing the expulsion of Palestinian villagers by Israeli soldiers (what is known as the “Nakba” in Arabic, literally: “Catastrophe”), and the television adaptation of the story, *Khirbet Khizeh*, directed by Ram Loevy and broadcast on Israel Television,¹ Israel’s public television channel, in 1978. Three decades more separate this program and the airing of *Parashat HaShavua* (Weekly Torah Portion, 2006–2009: Rani Blair and Anat Assouline, HOT3) on the Israeli cable channel HOT3. All three texts—though created in differing time periods and media—have at least one element in common: in all three, the protagonists draw a parallel between the expulsion and murder of Jews during the Holocaust, and the expulsion and massacre of Palestinians in 1948. Thus, in the mind of the protagonist of “The Story of Khirbet Khizeh,” the expelled Palestinians become Jewish refugees, the Israeli soldiers become Nazi soldiers armed with Spandaus, and the trucks carrying the Palestinians become train cars. This analogy is maintained in the television adaptation of *Khirbet Khizeh*, which depicts the expulsion of the Palestinians using visual imagery reminiscent—certainly for Israeli viewers—of images of the Holocaust: a mother holding a baby in her arms (Figure 0.1), Palestinians peering through the cracks in the side of a truck (Figure 0.2), and so on. Lastly, the protagonists of *Parashat*

HaShavua compare the remains of an abandoned Palestinian village with the remains of Auschwitz and other concentration camps.

Despite these points of similarity, two significant differences among the texts must be taken into account. The first is to do with the medium of presentation. The differences between the written medium of literature and the audio-visual media of film and television have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (Chatman 1980), and will not be elaborated upon here. Suffice it to say that a work of literature differs vastly from a work of film or television, due to each medium's defining characteristics and its language of representation. Additionally, television in particular is considered a highly influential medium, due to both the visual nature of its messages and its widespread "infiltration" of the domestic space.

More important, however—particularly in the context of this book's exploration of the medium of television—is the fact that, though both *Khirbet Khizeh* and *Parashat HaShavua* are works of television, they were each aired and viewed on a very different kind of television. This does not refer simply to the device on which each was viewed, as television screens have grown larger over the past few decades, and have higher qualities of image and sound; rather, it refers to a broad and comprehensive array of transformations in practices of regulation, production, distribution, and reception of television texts. These transformations have led contemporary Israeli television to inhabit a cultural space far removed from that of the 1970s, so much so that it might in fact be considered another medium altogether—no longer Israeli *television* but rather Israeli *post-television*, as it shall be referred to in this book.

The second important distinction between "The Story of Khirbet Khizeh," *Khirbet Khizeh*, and *Parashat HaShavua* has to do with the historical period, in the larger Israeli context, in which each was created and received, and with the collective self-image that characterized each period. Thus, as "The Story of Khirbet Khizeh" was written during a time of collective conviction—within Israel and throughout the West—in the validity and righteousness of the Zionist project and in the binary "good" vs. "evil" narrative it established (particularly after the Holocaust), the story was not perceived as a threat to the stability of the Israeli nation, subversive though it was in casting the Israeli as the perpetrator (Shapira 2000).

Conversely, when *Khirbet Khizeh* aired in the late 1970s (on the only Israeli television channel at the time), Israel, by now a formidable military and economic power, was over a decade into the Occupation, its public perception as a David

battling a Goliath steadily deteriorating. And so for a significant portion of the Israeli public, and for several political figures as well, the program was seen as serving Zionism's opponents and foes—hence the numerous attempts to cancel its initial broadcast, and subsequently to bury it, out of sight, deep in Israeli Television's archives. *Parashat HaShavua*, in contrast, aired at a time when critical attitudes, broadly known as post-Zionism, were gaining increased prominence in Israeli cultural discourse in general, and on Israeli television, or post-television, in particular.

Addressing these transformations in Israeli society and in Israeli television, *Television Drama in Israel: Identities in Post-TV Culture* offers both textual readings and discursive analyses of contemporary Israeli television dramas, while adopting a case-study approach. The premise of the book is that the convergence of social trends in Israeli society (primarily the rise of various challenges, against the hegemony of Zionist-Jewish-masculine-Ashkenazi ideologies) and of major transformations in the medium of television in Israel (comparable to similar global transformations that have been termed “post-television”) has led to the creation of television dramas characterized by controversial themes and complex narratives, which present identities in ways never before seen on Israeli media.

One of the presuppositions of this book is that Israeli television is deeply rooted within Israeli society, culture, and history. Of the central and complex dimensions of Israeli reality, the traumatic dimension (which is intimately connected to questions of identity) has massively infiltrated Israeli television during the first decades of the twenty-first century, and will be situated at the core of this study. While themes of trauma and victimhood have accompanied Israeli society from its very beginning, they have acquired a more salient position in Israeli culture over the past decades—in the context of both collective and personal trauma; of both the trauma of the victim and the trauma of the perpetrator. Consequently, these themes have also begun to populate many and highly diverse television texts, of both factual and fictional genres; of both what is called “quality television” (such as dramatic series or documentary productions) and genres perceived as pure entertainment (primarily reality television).²

Out of the broad and eclectic range of television genres and texts, this research focuses on the genre of television drama, a genre is perceived in public discourse, and above all by mainstream television criticism, as the most highbrow genre and the one that reflects Israeli society in the most profound and courageous ways. The drama series to be discussed here are all examples of what is known in

the conventional—and, as I will show, complex—terminology of television studies as “quality television” (Thompson 1997) or “serious drama” (Caughie 2000: 2). Yet the modifiers “quality” and “serious” should be viewed not as stemming naturally from the texts, but rather as discourse dependent. In fact, an important aspect of this research will be to challenge some of the basic presuppositions of television criticism with respect to the “quality” and “seriousness” of various television texts.

Of the broad range of television dramas produced in Israel in recent years, this book centers on five television drama series, gathered here under the title “Israeli post-television”: *BeTipul* (In Treatment, 2004–2007, Hagai Levi, HOT3); *Parashat HaShavua*; *Nevelot* (Bastards, 2010, Dror Sabo and Dafna Levin, HOT3); *Ima VeAbbaz* (Mom and Dads, 2012, Avner Bernheimer and Tmira Yardeni, HOT3); and *Zaguri Imperia* (Zaguri Empire, 2014–, Maor Zaguri, HOT3).

By focusing on only five dramas, I believe I will be able not only to offer a deep and thorough reading of each, but also demonstrate a number of ways of analyzing a television text, thereby contributing to the textual research of Israeli television, a field which is quite lacking. Moreover, all five series have occupied a central cultural position (as attested to by the awards, critical acclaim, and widespread public attention that they have garnered); and they all feature distinct narrative structures, each of them unmistakably televisual, while at the same time offering divergent strategies for coping with trauma on the one hand, and with their respective positions as post-television texts on the other. Finally—and most importantly, some might argue—my personal preferences have greatly influenced my choice of case studies: texts that attracted my attention as a viewer later became the focus of my research, though my opinions of them may have changed over the course of my writing.

The purpose of this study is threefold. Firstly, it explores the historical and cultural contexts that have enabled the emergence of the series to be discussed here. Secondly, it presents the textual strategies these dramas employ to address central cultural processes in Israeli society (primarily those having to do with questions of old and new Israeli identities). Thirdly, it asks what distinguishes these dramas (both as television texts and as post-television texts) from other cultural products in Israeli society dealing with similar themes.

The first, introductory chapter offers a historiography of the genre of drama on Israeli television. Combining research on the media in Israel with research on global television, it will trace the unique evolution of Israeli television on

the one hand, and how this evolution parallels global shifts on the other. This chapter identifies the regulatory, technological, and cultural reasons for the transformations that Israeli drama has undergone; examines the shifts in viewing patterns; and above all describes the textual characteristics of Israeli television drama in each period.

The series *BeTipul* garnered international acclaim when its format was sold first to HBO, and later on to 17 other networks worldwide. However, Chapters 2 and 3 emphasize its local, national meanings, and examine how *BeTipul* touched on themes and conflicts unique to Israeli culture. Chapter 2—focusing on the character of IDF combat pilot Yadin Yerushalmi—examines how contemporary Israeli society constructs and deconstructs the character of the Israeli male soldier. Through an analysis of Yadin's character, this chapter also examines how Israeli society handles its complex position as both victim and perpetrator.

Chapter 3 studies the reception of *BeTipul* by Israeli hegemonic discourse and the reasons it was frequently defined in Israel as a work of art, or as “quality television.” In order to study the series' status as “quality television,” this chapter argues that it is necessary to look beyond the characteristics of the text and to study its context, including various intertexts, and above all paratexts and metatexts such as promos, opening credits, reviews, articles and interviews. In addition, various connections between the series and certain aspects of Israeli society render it “quality television.” The chapter thus looks not only at some of *BeTipul's* central elements, but also at Israeli society, in which the series was made and where it was met with such success.

Chapter 4 centers on *Nevelot*, a miniseries about two elderly men, who in their youth had fought in a Jewish Zionist underground movement in Mandatory Palestine, and who, in the present day, embark on an all-out killing spree across Tel Aviv, exclusively targeting the young. While *Nevelot* does not explicitly address television per se, key scenes and paratexts do convey that it is by no means “regular television,” and that watching it constitutes a viewing experience that differs altogether from “regular television viewing,” a practice often associated with passivity, femininity, aging, and victimhood. Employing terms from Zionist, gender, aging, and other fields of cultural discourse, I argue that *Nevelot* offers a fascinating commentary on contemporary Israeli society and on the television content it produces.

Chapter 5 compares two texts—the feature film *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and the television series *Parashat HaShavua*, both of which deal with the traumatic effects of the 1982 First Lebanon War. *Parashat HaShavua's*

preoccupation with that war is enacted through the character of Shaul Nawi, who is plagued by nightmares, hallucinations, and memories from that war. Similarly, *Waltz with Bashir*'s protagonist suffers from post-traumatic memories of an event from the war. However, in this chapter, I argue that *Parashat HaShavua*'s narrative structure as a television series enables the representation of the post-traumatic experience to be more complex than does the narrative structure of most feature films.

In 2014, the daily television melodrama *Zaguri Empire* took Israel by storm, and Chapter 6 examines both the text itself and the cultural environment in which it was received so enthusiastically. The series focuses on a family of Moroccan descent residing in Beer Sheva, a southern Israeli city. The focus on a Moroccan family, or what is called in Israel a "Mizrahi³ family," isn't in itself new, as Israeli cinema and television have been exploring issues of ethnic identity for over 50 years now. However, *Zaguri* fascinatingly manages to weave together both popular themes and humor, which have enabled it to be embraced by a broad cross-section of Israeli viewers, while at the same time allowing space for difficult, nearly taboo thoughts and opinions to be articulated. In other words, *Zaguri* has maximized the polysemic potential inherent in the television melodrama, and, while heavily influenced by the new ethnic discourse in Israel (a distinctly post-colonial discourse), it has managed to be both popular and critical at the same time. This chapter will examine how *Zaguri Empire* has accomplished this, while reflecting—and at the same time also participating in—major transformations that Israeli culture as a whole, and Israeli television in particular, have undergone over the past few decades.

Over the past decade, representations of LGBTs, both real and fictional, have become increasingly visible on Israeli television, in various channels and genres (though gay men are undoubtedly much more visible than members of any other sexual minority). In recent years, however, the representation of gays on Israeli television has undergone an interesting shift, whereby many television texts feature gay fathers. These texts, mostly news items and documentaries, usually depict gay parenthood as a positive phenomenon, and sometimes even as more successful than heteronormative parenthood. In Chapter 7, I set forth the various strategies via which gay fatherhood is recast as positive on Israeli television, and present the potential personal and ideological costs of this positive (and normative) representation. I then focus on one of the most interesting case studies of the past few years, the television drama series *Ima VeAbbaz* (Mom and Dads), whose protagonists are two gay men who have a

child with a straight woman. I argue that the series manages to deviate from the usual representation of the gay father, thereby offering an interesting ideological alternative to the conventional and conservative (though accepting) representation.

Half a Century of Israeli Identities through Television

In his book on the emergence of television in Israel, Zvi Gil notes that even though the title promises a *History of Israeli Television*, he provides a silhouette rather than a full portrait. Indeed, Gil's book hardly addresses "the most important elements in television—what is seen on the screen, the content"—which "deserves separate, in-depth, critical treatment" (Gil 1986: 2). While Gil wrote his book in the mid-1980s, his plea for a historical study on the programs themselves has yet to be answered. Thus, despite extensive writing on the history of communications in Israel, including the evolution of Israeli television, with emphasis on regulation and institutionalization (Caspi and Limor 1992; Schejter 1996; Liebes 1999; Tokatly 2000; Oren 2004), and despite the scant academic literature on specific programs, there is still no detailed historiography on programs broadcast on Israeli television. Given the importance of the television medium in Israeli culture, this state of affairs calls for correction.

This chapter cannot fill this void nor can this book, for that matter. Rather, my aim is to provide another "side" of the story of Israeli television: the stories of texts, especially from the genre of drama. There are several key reasons behind this choice. Firstly, drama is perceived as a genre that addresses "serious" issues, and often exhibits attributes such as experimentalism and controversy (Feuer et al. 1987; Thompson 1997: 15; Creeber 2005: 12). Secondly, drama, due to its proximity to "high art" such as theater and cinema, is perceived as the genre that most profoundly reflects social processes in the society to which it is broadcast and in which it is produced, and thus it plays a role in shaping its viewers' cultural identities (Paterson 1995: 62). Thirdly, as a result of its aforementioned two features, drama has become a genre central to many television channels or, as Yeud Levanon referred to it, "the upper crust of every lineup of any channel that respects itself" (1979: 3). However, although the historiography presented here focuses on the story of the televised Israeli drama, it can serve as the basis for a broad historiography of Israeli television's institutions, viewers, technological developments, and, of course, its texts.

The attempt to trace the history of Israeli television drama encounters several crucial difficulties (or challenges) that require attention and will affect the nature of this study. The first pertains to any historical narrative that proceeds from event to event or from cause to effect. Indeed, the history of television, too, has been affected by postmodernist practices, which view historical narrative as structuring rather than as representing reality (White 1984). That is, contemporary television research presents a historiography of television that, like the proposed study, assumes its point of view will always be partial, tentative, and author dependent (Hilmes 2003; Wheatley 2007).

The second difficulty stems from the specific issues inherent in writing a history of television: just as television studies span various disciplines (Corner 2003), thus yielding various types of studies, the history of television, too, usually subsumes the histories of television, each of which focuses on a single, main angle. For example, Michele Hilmes (2003), editor of *The Television History Book*, divides the history of television into four discrete categories—"Technologies," "Institutions," "Programming," and "Audiences"—each containing a historical narrative that stresses differing elements of television. In contrast, recent historical research, including this study, offers a more holistic approach that connects and combines television's various dimensions (Jacobs 2006; Fickers 2013).

The third challenge encountered when aiming to provide a historiography of television drama, stems from the discrete nature of each genre category, and of drama in particular. Although television genres have never been closed categories (Feuer 1987), and hybrid genres have become characteristic of television in recent years (Edgerton and Rose 2005), drama, more than other genres, presents quite complex challenges, especially when one attempts to distinguish it from other genres of fiction and define a corpus for this category (Thornham and Purvis 2005). And yet, though genre classifications will always remain tentative, and television genres contain not only textual but also discursive characteristics (Mittell 2004), this study assumes that we can examine drama not only as a genre distinct from other television genres of fiction, but also as a genre that, despite its hybridity and variety, contains within it various sub-genres.

The historiography of Israeli drama on television is presented here as divided into eras. Despite the inherent problems with this choice (Corner 2003: 277), it rests on two key research corpora. The *first* is Israeli research, which tends to link the history of Israeli television to that of other media outlets in Israel. However, Israeli research has not sufficiently considered the latest developments in television globally, nor has it related sufficiently to television's textual aspects. Of

the various historiographical divisions in Israeli research, I have chosen to rely on Arnon Zuckerman's division of Israeli television into four main eras: "The first era is from the establishment of the State [of Israel] until the enactment of the Broadcasting Act in 1965. The second is the era of the Broadcasting Authority's monopoly until the end of the 1980s. In the third era—the 1990s—there was a communication revolution; and the fourth era leads us into the twenty-first century" (1999: 124).

The *second* research corpus that influenced this chapter is the global historiography of television, and focuses on two historiographical divisions that have become canonical in the study of television. The first is a division by John Ellis (2000) into three eras of British television: the "era of scarcity," defined by the dominance of the public channels; the "era of availability," characterized by commercial broadcasting and competition; and the "era of plenty," defined by the penetration of various technologies into television culture. The second division is that defined by Rogers et al. (2002), who divide American television into three stages: TVI, or "The Broadcast Era"; TVII, or "The Cable Era"; and TVIII, or "The Digital Era."

Similar to these divisions, I identify three central periods in the development of Israeli television (as well as an earlier "pre-historic" era): "television Aleph" (A) or the era of single-channel consensus; "television Beit" (B) or the era of the dominance of Channel 2; and "television Gimel" (C), or "Israeli post-television".

Before Television

It is customary to begin the historiography of global television with what is known as the "pre-historic era" or the "experimental era." This period began with the invention of the first technologies that enabled the transmission of images and sounds (circa 1870) and ended with the transformation of television into a mass-media platform at the end of World War II (Jacobs 2006). In Israel, the experimental phase was completely absent (Oren 2004: 6), and the period prior to the first television broadcasts in Israel is not known for addressing technological issues, but rather political and ideological questions—primarily the question of the state's cultural-social identity (Winkler 2006).

Most Scholars who have studied the Israeli period prior to television broadcasts, i.e., "before television," have focused on the political and ideological