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Israeli Film Culture through Its Paratexts: A New Cinema History

Dan Chyutin and Yael Mazor

In the introduction to his co-edited anthology *Looking Past the Screen* (2007), Eric Smoodin asks us to imagine an alternative mode of film historiography to the one most present in global cinema studies. Scholarship, he argues, "has at least since the mid-1950s been dominated by the study of the film itself, often organized around genre, nation, or authorship."[1] This foregrounding of "representation" as a category encompassing "the images and narratives that make up the text," has in turn led to the sidelining of interest in other categories meaningful to the formation of cinema history: those of industry, including the mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition; of regulation, both external and internal to the film business; and of reception, which speaks to the makeup of actual audiences, where/how they consumed films, and what recollections they have from the experience.[2] Not only that, but in the process of looking away from these categories, film historiography also paid little attention to the types of data that may inform our knowledge of industry, regulation, and reception: primary sources other than the films themselves, which "will most typically be on paper (and on microfilm and the Internet) as the material evidence left, for instance, by fans, censors, critics, and government officials."[3] Abandoning these materials—and more broadly, the archive that holds them—has resulted in a self-imposed myopia whose effects on our historical understanding of cinematic phenomena have been highly detrimental. It is with acute awareness of this cost that Smoodin calls for exploring a possible "film scholarship without films,"[4] which may complement as well as correct the discipline's prevalent norms.

Smoodin's call served to both reflect upon and further galvanize "an emerging international trend" within film studies, often referred to as "new cinema history."[5] Originating from such seminal American-centered scholarly literature as David Bordwell, Kirstin Thompson, and Janet Stiger's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* and Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* (both 1985),[6] this trend has grown to be considerably influential over the last two decades, yielding significant lines of inquiry and case studies from around

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the world. At the heart of new cinema history stands the twofold expansion warranted by a "film scholarship without films." On the one hand, there is an expansion of interest from film texts to the broader context of film cultures, understood as "social practices, materially rooted and related to larger networks of exchange and flow."[7] For new cinema historians, this meant not only exploring at greater length than ever before the "global conditions of production, of technical innovation and craft and of the multiple and interconnected organizational cultures that characterize the film production industry," but also and especially "the historical operations of distribution and exhibition businesses worldwide, and of ways in which these interconnected networks of global corporate interests, local franchises and other small businesses have together managed the flow of cinema product around the world's theatres and non-theatrical venues."[8] The latter emphasis on how spectators encountered films—in the words of James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper—has prompted an important counter-argument to the "theoretical models of spectatorship, which assumed that cinema audiences responded monolithically to films," by "seek[ing] out evidence of actual audience responses and locat[ing] these within the context of the audience's time, place and identity."[9] In so doing, according to Richard Maltby, new cinema history has indicated that our notion of "audience experience" should not be restricted "to what happens in the moments in which audiences are primarily focused on the screen, or are thinking afterwards about the film and its possible meanings"; rather, it should be made to speak its "shap[ing] by the continuities of life in the family, the workplace, the neighborhood and community,"[10] as a history of "moviegoing" more than of simply "movie-watching."[11]

On the other hand, the second expansion motivating new cinema history extends from film text to film-related paratexts—that is, to those materials that exist "around the main text which is the movie."[12] Theorizing paratextual analysis in literary settings, Gérard Genette influentially spoke on the significance of "a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations," as well as accompanying interviews and correspondences, which "surround" the work of literature and "ensure [its] presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays at least) of a book."[13] For Genette, these paratexts serve as a "threshold" or "vestibule" between the text's inside and outside from which the "world at large" can look upon this text as "a book"; and as vantage points, they hold an "illocutionary force" that shapes the public perception of a text through various additional "messages."[14] While adhering to this insight, new cinema history has offered a more extensive engagement with paratextuality than included in Genette's literary model, with a variety of both verbal and nonverbal materials taken under consideration as thresholds to the multifaceted meaningfulness, not only of the film text but of film culture writ large. Such materials can be those widely available to the general audience as part of film culture's normal operation (which is the main focus of Genette's paratextual theory), or those that are more

obscure and therefore more privy to historians, at least until refashioned for widespread consumption in the form of historiographical scholarship. Daniel Biltereyst and Lies van de Vijver single out several datasets favored by new cinema history: records of "oral history […] film popularity figures and film programming schedules"; "fan letters and diaries, photographs, showing audiences as well as film trade statistics and all other materials concerning cinema attendance and audience behavior"; and "movie magazines […] as sources for examining issues like the discursive construction of stars and fans," in addition to other central film culture concerns. Yet these do not exhaust the "wide, eclectic array of sources and traces"[15] that are of use to scholarship, for as Chapman, Glancy, and Harper explain, "the new film historian is comparable to an archaeologist who unearths new sources and materials, especially those which have been previously disregarded or overlooked."[16]

While concurrent with the rise of these research trajectories, Israeli film scholarship has remained largely unaffected by their far-reaching implications. As early as 2001, Moshe Zimmerman lamented the tendency of Israeli cinema scholars to "analyze the content, narrative, ideological and aesthetic aspects of finished films," while showing an "almost total disregard" of "the conditions of technology, funding, production, distribution and mediation [of] filmmaking in Israel," as well as their material traces.[17] A few worthwhile exceptions notwithstanding,[18] over the past two decades not much has changed, despite digitization processes that make archival sources on Israeli film culture much more accessible.[19] In terms of its engagement with history, academic literature on Israeli cinema has appeared by and large content with following the popular "symptomatic approach," which Maltby glosses as centered on "examin[ing] the 'unconscious' of a filmic text to reveal the biases, tastes or secret fears of the cultural moment in which it was produced."[20] While certainly valuable, symptomatic analysis tends to prioritize textual interpretation over rigorous historicizing, and leaves the historiographical heavy lifting to referenced historical studies. Accordingly, per Maltby, the resulting investigations are also prone to "favor films that respond to their quest for allegorical or symptomatic meaning, and risk ascribing to individual films a representational significance that may be disproportionate to their capacity for historical agency."[21] Taking this approach, in turn, meant that Israeli film studies' historical paradigms gradually became more reductive and rigid; consequently, meaningful challenges found little room to thrive within the field's disciplinary borders.[22]

In our desire to pose such a challenge, during the summer of 2022 we organized a special two-day symposium titled "A Film Scholarship without Films? Reimagining the History of Israeli Cinema Culture through the Archive." This event—generously supported by Tel Aviv University's Steve Tisch School of Film and Television and the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST)—brought together for the first time many of the scholars involved in paratextual analysis of Israeli film history to present on their research. It also charted future directions for the discipline by

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inviting archivists to present their Israeli-film-related collections, as well as scholars working on non-Israeli film cultures (Eric Hoyt, Christian Olesen, and Sarah-Mai Dang), who discussed their applications of cutting-edge, digital-humanities-based methodologies to archival research. The present volume grew out of these efforts, and aims to build on their resulting conclusions. In this vein, it offers both extended versions of papers presented in our symposium and essays that were not part of the event, yet whose objectives coincide with ours.

Opening our volume is Yael Mazor's article on the vicissitudes and challenges of addressing a history of Israeli cinema as a history of Israeli film culture. With the current state of film archiving in Israel, particularly regarding non-filmic elements and paratextual materials, the notion of a film archive as museum is presented through prominent examples of established film archives. To this end, understanding the various facets of film history enabled by shifting the focus from the film as artifact to historical artifacts surrounding films can serve in evaluating the role such materials play in a local film culture. Accordingly, Mazor argues, a potential history of Israeli film culture is one that strives to incorporate the work of film archives in the establishment of a local "film heritage experience."

Focusing on issues of reception, Boaz Hagin's article carefully maps out the burgeoning filmic discourse during the state's first decades so as to challenge the commonplace claim that Israel did not exhibit any interest in film theory before the 1970s. This discourse, according to Hagin, demonstrates how the Israeli film culture from its start could be considered for its transnational mode of operation, allowing scholars to reexamine their own paradigms regarding the historical influences that have been considered in writing on Israeli cinema. Complementing Hagin's account, Dan Chyutin further challenges accepted understandings of Israeli film history through his close reading of Israel's prominent postwar fan magazines, *Kolnoa* and *Olam HaKolnoa*. Focusing on the publications' "letters to the editor" section, Chyutin finds traces of an emerging film culture that resisted the demands set forth by an official discourse of Zionist high nationalism, favoring instead the "foreign" influences of an extravagant Hollywood star culture.

Concerns of distribution and exhibition stand at the center of the subsequent three essays, all of which deal with cases that have challenged the boundaries of the Israeli cultural-political norm. The archival research in Sigal Yona's contribution targets 1950s distribution records for films in three languages considered "taboo" during Israel's nascence: Arabic, German, and Yiddish. Her analysis surfaces significant correlations between the exhibition patterns of these films and the extra-filmic discourse surrounding them. As a result, Yona shows how Israeli film culture's linguistic landscape was regulated from within and without during a crucial period in the state's evolution. Focusing on more palpable means of control, both Iddo Better Pocker's and Adam Shinar's articles engage with the institutions of film censorship through interrogation of the oeuvre and archive of celebrated filmmaker Ram Loevy. Shinar discusses Israel's official censorship body, the

Film and Theater Review Board, focusing on its deliberations over Loevy's controversial short film, *I am Ahmad* (1966). Through careful analysis of the Board's protocols, he shows how the film's polemical depiction of Palestinian reality forced this institution to confront an inherent conflict between its assumed role in nation-building, on the one hand, and its commitment to the democratic value of free speech on the other. In his contribution, Better Pocker addresses the reactions to another of Loevy's controversial creations—the made-for-television filmic adaptation of *Khirbet Khizeh* (1978). A rich paratextual tapestry of production records, petitions, opinion pieces, official transcripts, and personal correspondence serves the writer to flesh out the contemporaneous "audio-visual anxiety" around this film's challenge to Israeli Zionism's self-image, which nearly resulted in its being banned from broadcast.

The volume's concluding articles operate in an area that traditionally held greater interest to Israeli film historiography—auteur-centered production histories—yet expand its purview to include filmmakers who have yet to receive their due scholarly attention. Though touching on the controversies surrounding its fraught reception and attempted censorship, Naomi Rolef and Johannes Praetorius-Rhein's article on *Blazing Sand* (1960) deals primarily with the film's production. This focus permits the writers to shed light on the innovative figure of director Raphael Nussbaum, who wished his project to bridge the profound chasm between Israeli and German cultures in the Holocaust's aftermath. For her part, through the exploration of previously unexamined files in the IDF Archives and oral histories from the Israeli Cinema Testimonial Database, Rachel S. Harris offers an examination of the IDF Film Unit, from its formation during the war in 1948, to its eventual closure during 1954. Showing the formative role this institution played on a generation of filmmakers she presents a new understanding of the formation of the Israeli film industry and the legacy of this key civil-military partnership.

We firmly believe that though not comprehensive, this eclectic mix of articles is nevertheless sufficiently evocative to incite new thoughts on how Israeli film history could and should be revitalized. We are deeply indebted to all who believed in the need for such revitalization and contributed to the process of bringing our special volume to fruition. First and foremost, heartfelt thanks must be conveyed to all the volume's authors, as well as others who participated in the original "Film Scholarship without Films" symposium. Moreover, we wish to acknowledge the IAMHIST officers who sponsored this latter event: Drs. Llewella Chapman, Melanie Bell, and Cindy Miller. Our profound gratitude goes to the staff and faculty members of Tel Aviv University's Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, and especially Professors Yaron Bloch and Raz Yosef, who generously offered to host our symposium and supported its proceedings throughout. Special mention should be given as well to Professor Eran Neumann, Dean of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Arts, who gave his blessing to our endeavors, and furthered them indirectly by securing Ram Loevy's personal collection as part

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of TAU's newly-formed archive—the Israel Arts Center. Finally, we want to single out the crucial role played by our most ardent advocate, Professor Rachel S. Harris, who as editor in chief of JOJI, initiated this special volume and helped shape it into the final form now offered for your consideration.

Notes

1. Eric Smoodin, "Introduction: The History of Film History," in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, ed. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Ibid., 5.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby et al. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 3.
6. James Chapman et al., "Introduction," in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, ed. James Chapman et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 5–6.
7. Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: SAGE, 2002), 56.
8. Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 9.
9. Chapman et al., "Introduction," 7.
10. Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 9.
11. See, for example Kathryn H. Fuller-Seely and George Potamianos, "Researching and Writing the History of Local Moviegoing," in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seely (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)., 3–19.
12. Daniel Biltereyst and Lies Van de Vijver, "Introduction: Movie Magazines, Digitization and New Cinema History," in *Mapping Movie Magazines: Digitization, Periodicals and Cinema History*, ed. Daniel Biltereyst and Lies Van de Vijver (New York: Springer, 2020), 2.
13. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1987]), 1.
14. Ibid., 10.
15. Biltereyst and Van de Vijver, "Introduction," 3.
16. Chapman et al., "Introduction," 7.
17. Moshe Zimmerman, *Simanei Kolnoa: Toldot HaKolnoa HaIsraeli Bein Hashanim 1896–1948* [Signs of Movies: History of Israeli Cinema in the Years 1896–1948] (Tel Aviv: Dyonun-Tel Aviv University Press, 2001), 18.
18. See, for example, Zimmerman, *Simanei Kolnoa*; David Shalit, *Makrinim Koach: Batei HaKolnoa, HaSratim Ve-HaIsraelim* [*Projecting Power: The Cinema Houses, the Movies, and the Israelis*] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2006); David Shalit, *Two Shot: Kesher HaKolnoa Ha-Amerikai-Israeli 1948-1978* [*Two Shot: The Israeli-American Film Connection, 1948–1978*] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2024); Boaz Hagin, "Margot Klausner and the Pioneering of Israeli Cinema," *Screen*, 59 no. 2 (Summer 2018): 158–172; Dan Chyutin, "'I Have a Great Passion for Americans': *The Juggler* and the Question of National Cinema," in *Casting a Giant Shadow: The Transnational Shaping of Israeli Cinema*, ed. Rachel S. Harris and Dan Chyutin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 39–61.
19. Importantly, there is still much to be done in facilitating access to relevant sources. At present, there is no central archive for paratextual materials on Israeli film culture, which means that they are dispersed among many archives, often as a minor emphasis within a largely non-film-related collection. At the same time, the Israel Film Archive, which is the primary archival institution dedicated to Israeli cinema, has in turn devoted the lion's share of its efforts to the worthwhile task of preserving and digitizing filmic texts at the expense of sustaining and cultivating its collection of paratextual "paper" materials. While this approach is in tune with the existing priorities of Israeli film scholarship, it does little to challenge them and suggest alternatives.
20. Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 6.

21. Ibid., 7.
22. If anything, challenges of this nature to the field's historical paradigms arrived more substantially and freely from outside disciplinary borders, in the work of several film-minded historians dealing with pre-state British Mandate Palestine and early statehood Israel. See, for example, Anat Helman, *Dgania Pinat Hollywood: Tarbut Tzricha Ve-Pnai BeReshit HaMadina* [*Consumer Culture and Leisure in the Young State of Israel*] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Institute, 2020); Giora Goodman, "'Operation Exodus': Israeli Government Involvement in the Production of Otto Preminger's Film *Exodus* (1960)," *The Journal of Israeli History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 209–229; Ariel L. Feldstein, *Halutz, Avodah, Matzlema: HaKolnoa HaEretzisraeli Ve-HaRa'aion HaTzioni 1917-1939* [*Pioneer, Toil, Camera: Cinema in Service of the Zionist Ideology, 1917–1939*] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).