Copyright

By

Sharon Shahaf

2009
The Dissertation Committee for Sharon Shahaf certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

PRIME TIME POSTZIONISM - NEGOTIATING ISRAELINESS
THROUGH GLOBAL TELEVISION FORMATS

COMMITTEE:

_____________________________
Shanti Kumar, Supervisor

_____________________________
Joseph D. Straubhaar

_____________________________
Karin G. Wilkins

_____________________________
Michael Kackman

_____________________________
Madhavi Mallapragada

_____________________________
Tasha G. Oren
PRIME TIME POSTZIONISM - NEGOTIATING ISRAELINESS THROUGH GLOBAL TELEVISION FORMATS

by

Sharon Shahaf, B.A.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2009
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the love of my life and “war-time consigliere”, Gil Shahaf, and to our little miracle-baby, Ella, who participated in utero and as a newborn in the writing efforts. Without your love and support none of this would have been possible.
Acknowledgments

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support and help of a great many people - family, friends and colleagues. I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those people who made it possible.

My deepest gratitude is to my advisor, Dr. Shanti Kumar. I feel immensely fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with such an outstanding scholar, whose wisdom, brilliance, and knowledge are surpassed only by his profound humanity. To say that Shanti has been an invaluable source of guidance, inspiration, and support through some of the most intense and exciting years of my life would be an understatement. As an excellent, rigorous, and insightful academic advisor he constantly challenged me to take my research to the next level, making me dig deeper and expose the depth of my own argumentation. Perhaps even more importantly, he was always there for me, showing a deep understanding of the predicament and hardship of graduate work and life. Unlike many others, Shanti has proven time and again that his feminist sensibilities are far more than theoretical. As I struggled with balancing career and life during the writing of this dissertation through the pregnancy and birth of my daughter, Ella, Shanti’s unwavering support was all that kept me from losing hope. For this, my family and I owe him a great deal.

I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my committee members, Joe Straubhaar, Karin Wilkins, Michael Kackman, Tasha Oren, and Madhavi Mallapragada for their great help in the conceptualization and development of this project, as well as for...
their support and understanding, and their willingness to accommodate my hectic life circumstances. This academic “dream team” not only led and support me through the process of researching and writing this dissertation, but also helped me grow as a colleague and fellow academic. For that I owe them a great debt of gratitude.

More specifically I, would like to thank Professor Joe Straubhaar for many interesting conversations about media and television globalization, as well as for providing invaluable advice and support as I was taking my first steps as junior faculty. I wish to thank Dr. Michael Kackman for his invaluable contribution not only in shaping this project, but also for helping me find my disciplinary home in Television Studies and for providing me with mind-blowing insight into my work. I would like to thank Karin Wilkins for her rigorous attention to methodological and theoretical issues, and for her ongoing intellectual and emotional support. I wish to thank Dr. Madhavi Mallapragada for her wisdom and kindness and for sharing invaluable thought-provoking insights that challenge me to critically rethink my work and how it relates to a project of de-westernizing media studies. Last but not least, my deep gratitude goes to Dr. Tasha Oren, whose work on Israeli television inspired this project in great many ways. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge Tasha’s contribution to my development as a scholar by generously sharing her experience and expertise. I deeply cherish the professional and personal relationship that was developed through our cooperation on this and other projects.

Beyond my committee members, many other colleagues in The University of Texas at Austin, as well as a wider net of television scholars I have formed through
attendance in conferences like SCMS and Consol-ing-Passion, have contributed a great deal to my development as a media scholar. In the department of Radio-Television & Film at UT Austin, I would like to thank Professor Mary Celeste Kearney, Professor Janet Staiger, Professor Charles Ramirez-Berg, Professor Sharon Strover, and Professor Jennifer Fuller. By taking their classes, working under their supervision, and through many intellectually stimulating conversations with them, I became the scholar I am today. I couldn’t have asked for a more inspiring academic community within which to complete my graduate work.

I wish to also take this opportunity to thank the RTF department staff for all their help throughout my graduate years. A special thanks goes out to the RTF graduate student coordinator, Ms. Stephanie Crouch, for all her help with the administrative side of finalizing a dissertation. It would be impossible to do out-of-state without her willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty.

Additionally, at UT I would love to thank the many peers whose friendship and brilliance I value deeply - Erin Lee, Carolyn Cunningham, Marnie Binfield, Kevin John Bozelka, Matt Payne, Assem Nasr, Qian Hua, Wei Ching Wang, Fabio Ferreira, Avi Santo, Chris Lucas, Kyle Barnett, Tariq Elseewi, Kimberly Owczarski, Ali Fuat Sengul, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Debbie Carney, and Seonjoo Cho. Last, but not least, I want to give special thanks from the bottom of my heart to my dear friend Kristen Warner. Her friendship, love, and support played crucial part in my accomplishments (and in making sure my hair stays up to par).
Other colleagues who contributed greatly to my thinking about television globalization and especially about global television formats are the many brilliant and amazing scholars I have had the pleasure to work with in putting together several conference panels, and through the work on the co-edited collection (with Tasha Oren) *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television across Borders* (forthcoming, from Routledge Press, 2010). I wish to thank all the contributors to this project. Special thanks go out to Chiara Ferrari, Vinicius Navarro, Jerome Bourdon, Bish Sen, Tim Havens, Erica Bochanti, and Dana Heller.

In Tel Aviv University my deepest gratitude goes out to Professor Dafna Lemish whose mentorship and support throughout my B.A.; M.A.; and PhD years played a crucial role in my accomplishments. Dafna’s picture should appear under “feminist role model” in the academia dictionary. I can only hope to follow her example.

I’d also like to thank my editor for this dissertation Ms. Marian Clarke, whose watchful eye and fantastic sense for the English language was invaluable in taming my “Hebrish” prose.

A big thank you goes out to Dr. Leonor Diaz whose invaluable support helped me maintain my center and positivity through some of the more trying events of my life.

I wish to also thank my colleagues in Georgia State University, and especially the chair of the Communication Department Professor David Cheshier, for all their help and support throughout the turbulent last year and a half, and for their patience and willingness to invite me to make GSU my academic home.
This study was supported by the Israeli Second Authority for Radio and Television’s Zvulun Hammer Memorial Award.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the unwavering support and love of my family. I thank my parents Shlomit and Rafi Shahaf, for their faith and support in me throughout the years, my beloved sisters and best friends, Tal and Anat Shahaf - no one could have hopped for a better support system than the two of you. Having to live an ocean away from you all has been and still is the greatest challenge in my life. Special thanks goes out to my beloved in-laws, Medi and Shalom Shahaf, without whose love and support, I doubt this dissertation would have ever seen the light of day. Also in Israel, my heart goes out to my family of friends – Ido Dror, Keren Azulay-Apelbausm, Noa Kuzi, Mina Rosenshine, Rami Polatchek, Naama Harel, and many others.

Last but not least, words cannot begin to express the love and the gratitude I feel for my partner, my best friend, and the love of my life, Gil Shahaf. I can only hope to repay you for the sacrifices you have made for this dissertation to be completed. For the thousands of walks-n’-talks in Tel Aviv and Far West, for selflessly devoting your time and energy to helping me out, for always having my back, and for agreeing to love and (most of the time) put up with me throughout these intense years, I am forever in your debt. This dissertation is dedicated to you and to the new love of our lives, little baby Ella.
Prime Time Postzionism - Negotiating Israeliness through Global Television

Formats looks at the Israeli reality competition show – Kohav Nolad (“A Star is Born”) as a key text to help explore the ways in which Israeli broadcasters in the contemporary commercial television environment, adapt globally dominant televisual forms as models for the production of extremely popular local series. This program, widely perceived as epitomizing contemporary Israeli national identity, is simultaneously also debated as the product of globalization, and as marker of a post-national/post-Zionist era. In these discussions, perceptions of the proper Israeli national culture and identity are juxtaposed with assumptions about the nature and perceived influence of the shift from public state monopoly in television broadcast to a
globalized commercial multichannel broadcast environment. Combining production ethnography with analysis of industry, texts, and public reception discourses, this project explores the significance of global format adaptations for marginal and belated broadcast systems like Israeli television.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................................1

1.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................1

   1.1.1 “Program of the Decade”: *Kohav Nolad*, Global Formats and the Postzionist Dynamics of Israeli Commercial Broadcast........1

   1.1.2 The Project ..................................................................................................................5

1.2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework .................................................................7

   1.2.1 Globalization, Homogenization, and Difference ......................................................7

   1.2.2 What is the "Post" in "Postzionism"? .................................................................10

   1.2.3 Israeli TV, national identity, and globalization .................................................15

   1.2.4 What's in a (Global Television) Format? ..........................................................18

   1.2.5 A Television Studies Integrated Approach .........................................................20

   1.2.6 Outline for a Theory of Global TV Formats .......................................................24

1.3 Methodology .....................................................................................................................29

   1.3.1 Introduction ..............................................................................................................29

   1.3.2 Production Study .....................................................................................................30

   1.3.3 Textual Analysis .......................................................................................................35

   1.3.4 Public/ Audience Discourses .................................................................................36

1.4 Chapter Summary .............................................................................................................38

Chapter 2: The Commercial Shift In Israeli Broadcast: History and Public Anxieties .............................................................................................................42

2.1 The Multichannel Revolution and the Postzionist Shift in 1990s Israel 42

2.2 The Second Broadcasting Authority Law .................................................................45

2.3 Public Debates and Anxieties Surrounding the Shift to Commercial Broadcast .................................................................48

   2.3.1 The Old-School Zionist/Statist critique: "There Goes the Nation…" 48

   2.3.2 The Liberal Critique: "Channel 2: The Bonfire of (Imported) Vanities .................53

   2.3.3 The Radical Critique: "Channel 2: The New Statism" .................................53
2.4 Transcending the Binaries: A Postzionist Global-Television Studies Approach

Chapter 3: Lo Nafsik Lashir and the Pre-History of Kohav Nolad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 LNL in the Context of Early 2000s Israel</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Format TV and Banal Nationalism</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 LNL's Production Story</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Nostalgia, Popular Music, and National Culture in Israel</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 LNL: The Format</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 LNL: Rekindling the Commercial Tribal Bonfire</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 4: Kohav Nolad is Born: Reality Comes to the Holy Land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 From LNL to KN: Cautiously Playing with Reality</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Not Copycat Television After All</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Season One: &quot;The Age of Innocence&quot; and/or Creating a &quot;Ratings Monster&quot;</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 (Re)Formatting Israeliness</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 &quot;Have Mercy&quot; Judging the Judges</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Press Backfire</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 5: Who is an Israeli Idol? Kohav Nolad and the Negotiation of Contested Israeli Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 &quot;The Israeli Experience:&quot; What KN is Really &quot;About?&quot;</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The Quest for Israeliness: The Auditions as Documentary Journey</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 &quot;Liveness:&quot; Addressing &quot;the Situation&quot; as an Israelizing Factor</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Season Four: &quot;The Gift that Keeps on Giving&quot;</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 KN Goes to War: Commercialism vs. Nationalism</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 The Mizrahi Cinderella Syndrome</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.8 Be Careful What You Wish For: the Israeli Rock 'N' Roll Bad Boy as PZ Scapegoat .................................................................170

Chapter 6: Conclusion........................................................................................................177

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................187

Vita.....................................................................................................................................199
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 “Program of the Decade”: Kohav Nolad, Global Formats and the Postzionist Dynamics of Israeli Commercial Broadcast

In November 2003, approximately ten years after Channel 2, the first commercial Israeli television channel, started its broadcasting, the Israeli “Golden Screen” award for program of the decade, was awarded to the reality singing competition Kohav Nolad (hereafter KN).¹ This raised much controversy and criticism as the program, in this particular format, had completed only one, albeit extremely successful and hype-generating season at the time (Zohar, 2003). While acknowledging a year-old show as the outstanding representative for a decade of broadcast did seem a bit odd, in hindsight this selection might have revealed little more than the Israeli new commercial television audience’s short memory as some critics lamented in response to the award show broadcast (Shaked, November 16, 2003).

In the years that have passed since, KN proved to be one of the more significant vehicles through which Channel 2 found its voice as it was coming into its own in the new millennium. As critic Gilad Reich puts it, “across its …seasons Kohav Nolad was able to crack the Israeli genome” (Reich, 2008, May 25). Interestingly, the show managed to crack the Israeli “genome” by successfully introducing and naturalizing in

---

¹ The “Golden Screen” annual award ceremony is organized by the television magazine Pnay Plu in acknowledgment of the achievements of the Israeli television industry.
the country for the first time, the global reality television format frenzy – one of the more
dominant phenomena shaping mediascapes around the world in the early 2000s.

The importance of globally popular reality formats was accelerating at the time as
local broadcasters found them helpful in generating major local “media events.” This
feature helped local channels remain competitive in the new commercial multichannel
environment (Holmes & Jermyn 2004a). Consequently, formats like Idol, Survivor, and
Millionaire, often referred to as “must-see-television,” are popular amongst new
commercial broadcasters around the world as they allow them to draw mass national
audiences in a growingly fragmented media market (Ibid). In a similar way, Channel 2
utilized the popularity of KN and the media fanfare surrounding it to secure its position
of dominance in the Israeli television market. As television critic Shay Golden put it on
the eve of the show’s third season’s grand finale in August 2005:

(Kohav Nolad) is a national event… the flagship program of “the Israeli dream”...
The constitutive ritual of new Israeliness …The most important TV show of the
current Israeli millennia, and probably in the history of Channel 2
(Golden, 2005, p.3).

The success and centrality of a show that symbolizes for many the rise of a
hollow, consumerist, “rating culture” became particularly controversial, as the early
2000s were a time of great national upheaval in Israel. That period was a time of painful
disillusionment as hopes for a new Middle East were shattering in the bloody aftermath
of Prime-Minister Rabin’s assassination and the demise of the Oslo piece accord. The
optimism of the 1990s was replaced with national gloom and depression with the outburst
of the Second Palestinian Uprising (Intifadat El-Akza). The show’s success and cultural centrality which positioned it at the heart of Israeli public sphere at a time of such national distress raised much debate and controversy.

KN’s reliance on a “foreign” global format, the fact that it created an entertainment centered media event that swayed the masses and focused national attention in times of dire national circumstances, and at the same time, its overt nationalistic address, all contributed to the clamor and debate surrounding it. KN thus quickly became the focus of a much larger controversy regarding the cultural and social “effects” of the shift from a public-service broadcast monopoly to commercial broadcast. This shift in turn, was perceived as reflective of the more general ideological and structural shifts transforming the country in what has been known since the mid 1990s as “the postzionist era”.

Typified by critical multiculturalists, post-nationalist, and postcolonial counter discourses, which, combined with all-encompassing structural and ideological changes brought about by the advent of globalization and post-modernization, this cultural trend resulted in the gradual dismantling of the hegemonic Zionist national meta-narrative and the unified national identity that it constructs (Shohat, 1989; Pappe, 1997; Hever et al, 2002; Almog, 2004;; Kimmerling, 2004; Oren, 2004, Shalom-Shitrit, 2004; Shenhav, 2003; Ram, 2005; Shapir and Peled, 2005; and many more).

As Yediot Aharonot journalist Maya Becker (2005, September 2) put it:

*Kohav Nolad* …redefined in the sharpest way the power relations between the mass media, television, and the audience…. to the degree that the number of
words written about it exceeded even the number of S.M.S votes it got. In other words - it was able to capture the spirit of the times.

For different critics KN came to symbolize the very nature of commercial broadcast and the issues surrounding its relationship with the national/public sphere, itself in flux in an age of rapid social and cultural shifts. Across the board, critics seemed to attack the show as representative of the entertainment centered “rating-culture” taking over the Israeli public sphere and a replacement of the more serious public debate orientation of the government run monopoly broadcast – thus contributing to the loss of broadcast as arena for “authentic” Israeli cultural and national expression. However, while some perceived it as a product of cultural imperialism symbolizing the obliteration of “distinctive” Israeli cultural production and the demise of Israeli broadcast as a shared national space, others lamented its overly nationalistic address as sign of commercial television’s compliance with older, hegemonic, Zionist Statism.

Looking at the production and public reception processes surrounding KN, this dissertation argues that the show demonstrates the multidimensional nature of the cultural hegemonic process taking place through Channel 2. By exploring in great detail the show’s production history and its public reception, I wish to demonstrate that, despite its reliance on elements of globally popular entertainment formulas, KN is hardly a copy-cut product of cultural imperialism threatening to obliterate the distinctiveness of the local culture. Additionally, I wish to argue that despite the show’s overt nationalistic address, it is not merely reproducing an old school, Zionist, hegemonic ideology either.
Rather, this dissertation aims to explore the way this show, which emerged in a very specific intersection in Israeli history, through a specific set of industrial and cultural constraints, powerfully relates and gives voice to a distinctive postzionist contemporary Israeli cultural experience. In other words, by looking at KN, its production process, and the debate it generates, this study aims to map out the more general dynamics and contradictory cultural logics of postzionist Israeli culture as they are shaped and reflected by commercial broadcast.

1.1.2 The Project

This dissertation analyzes Israeli television, culture, and society through an examination of the processes by which local producers adapt, “borrow,” and incorporate popular global television forms, formats, or formulas or a combination of such formal elements (“engines”)

and create their own original, indigenous show. My analysis centers on KN, the flagship program of dominant Channel 2 franchiser, Keshet produced by the private production company, Teddy.

KN is a key example of the way Israeli commercial broadcasters adapt a globally dominant televiusal form and produce an extremely popular local series, widely perceived as shaping and reflecting Israeli national culture and identity of its time. As I

2 While the global formats literature still lacks a systematic definition of the concept of “engines” they are generally understood as innovative (or not so innovative) structural elements or mechanisms that form the unique allure of different television’s format. Keane and Moran (2008) for example define “television format’s engines” as innovations that have “added value to the television’s bottom line in a time when conventional finished productions genres are losing audience support” (ibid, p. 156). Their discussion is pretty straightforward – they name and describe the main new mechanisms that (mostly reality and game show) format have introduced – the big money prizes, exotic locations, voting off of contestants, contestants exploit game theory to eliminate opponents, etc. they describe the Idol style engine as “audience votes transform(ing) would be pop stars into celebrities” (ibid).
will demonstrate, producers, broadcasters, critics, audiences, regulators, and politicians
debate the program as “Israeli par-excellence,” but also as the creation of globalization
and potential source for “cultural contamination.” Drawing on a television studies
integrated approach— combining industrial analysis, public discourse and textual
analysis— this study explores the central role played by television in shaping and
reflecting the cultural, social, and economical shifts that transformed the country in what
became known as “the postzionist era” in Israel (Silberstein, 2002; Kimmerling, 2004;
Ram, 2005).

By focusing on KN and foregrounding the question of global television format
adaptation I am obviously not attempting to offer a comprehensive history of the shift to
commercial broadcast in Israeli television. This yet remains to be written. And yet, by
looking at the history of this key show the chosen approach is designed to allow me, in
the absence of such work, to add a historical dimension to my exploration and tackle in
wide strokes (yet through highly contextualized research) the significance of the all-
inclusive shifts that transformed Israeli television in the wake of the global
“communication revolution” of the 1990s.

KN was thus chosen not only for its dominance and centrality in shaping and
reflecting mainstream debates and perceptions of “Israeliness,” but also for representing
the dominant Israeli televisual mode of production of its time. Thus, the contextualized
study of KN will help outline to a certain extent the contemporary Israeli commercial
television system and the constraints and motivations that inform and govern its
production and reception contexts. By looking at the culture of production and at the discursive field surrounding this show and its public reception and the way different ideological issues get articulated through it the study uses it to map out the shifts and trends shaping Israeli national culture.

Hence, I am using KN here as a focal point through which I can explore three main research questions: In what ways is new, commercial Israeli television implicated in the production of “Israeliness”? Secondly, in what ways is this process mitigated by negotiations of “imported” “global,” transnational, or allegedly “foreign” cultural influences, practices and forms, and what are the “influences” of these negotiations for the cultural process of national identity production through a globalized medium of television? Finally, what kind of Israeli identity is portrayed and negotiated by this powerful hegemonic text?

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.2.1 Globalization, Homogenization, and Difference

One of the most important implications of the global flow of television formats is the question of global power relations, or more specifically, Western global economical and cultural domination. At the center of the debate lies the concern regarding homogenization or “McDonaldization” of the world led by an increasingly integrated global corporate system thoroughly dominated by Western, and especially, U.S. media firms (Barber, 1995; Herman and McChesney, 2003). In that regard, global television formats are viewed as vehicles for cultural homogenization creating a world of copycat
television where everywhere you go there is “more of the same” (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004). This approach prevails both in popular discourse in countries with public, non-commercial, national broadcast traditions, and in the writing of political economist and Marxist scholars working from a cultural-imperialism approach.

At the same time, many scholars view formats as representing the opposite trend of “resilience” or persistence of local or national cultural identities, tastes, and practices (Waisbord, 2004; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 2002). In that regard, the discussion revolves around format adaptation as allowing local producers to adjust and adapt the imported formulas to better fit their audience’s cultural tastes, sensibilities, and expectations (Waisbord, 2004, Keane et al, 2007). This approach is more in accord with cultural studies’ active audience notions and theories of glocalization.

Similar contradictions are addressed by Stuart Hall (1997) who argues that “global” and “local” are the two faces of the same movement from one epoch of global integration dominated by the nation state and European colonialism to a new, post-national American dominated trend of globalization. This trend is connected, according to Hall, to a new, highly contradictory space of dominant global mass culture. Although this global mass culture’s representational field remains centered in the west, it is not attempting to produce mini-versions of Americaness but rather wants to recognize and absorb the local differences it encounters within a larger over-arching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world. Thus, globalization cannot proceed without learning to live with and working through difference (Ibid.).
Ang and Stratton, (1996) who develop a critical, transnationalist perspective in cultural studies, explain these contradictions in relation to an emerging postmodernity. According to them, while the Western-centric project of modernity entertained a fantasy of a globalized, universal, modernized world, it was unable to eradicate actual, irreducible cultural differences. Instead, the forced appropriation of Western modernity in the peripheries has resulted in the emergence of multiple, indigenized modernity. Nevertheless, the process still produced the current global system. In this world, there is no longer any truly “different” culture – untouched by “Western” culture in its broadest sense (ibid, 23). Accordingly, in our contemporary postmodern world, no one can truly stay “outside” the world system— we are all always-already inside it.

Within this complex, globalized world-system, the ideology and practice of nation state was granted universal recognition and validity as the authorized marker of the particular. However, the nation state is one of the most ubiquitous exports of European modernity (Ibid, 26). Ergo, critically engaging with the question of globalization vs. localization demands that we problematize the concept of the nation state and its strategic reliance on constructing a unified national identity.

These are the complexities I aim to account for by taking on a postzionist framework for my analysis. While postzionism is a highly contested, charged, and sometimes contradictory term in contemporary Israeli public discourse, it is commonly used to designate both the swift structural changes triggered by the advent of economic and cultural globalization into the country and the critical counter-hegemonic discourse that emerged in Israeli academia and public in response. In what follows, I will outline
the main issues and debates in this turbulent discursive field and examine their relevance for the study of Israeli television.

1.2.2 What is the “Post” in “Postzionism”?

Any attempt to extract a unified definition for postzionism from the multiple academic and popular discourses constructing the debate proves difficult due to the ambiguity surrounding it. One core definition of postzionism positions it as a postmodern counter discourse. Accordingly, postzionist discourses attack the Zionist hegemonic ‘regime of truth’ from different perspectives as they seek to dismantle the national metanarrative, which normalizes dominant Zionist representations of Israeli social reality (Silberstein, 2002). This helps account for both the epistemological elusiveness and the ideological high stakes involved in the postzionist debates, as these are typical for discussions of such counter-discourses.

Another helpful core definition views postzionism as a periodical label typified by all-inclusive cultural, economic, and technological shifts that transformed Israel in the age of late-capitalist globalization (Ram, 2005). These transformations include shifts from centralized, state controlled economy to increasingly privatized free-market system; from a national-Socialist working-class hegemony to middle-class consumer culture dominance; from collectivism and nation-building to hedonist individualism; and from national particularism to globalization (Ram, 2005, Almog, 2004; Kimmerling, 2001).

Following debates about the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism, I started thinking about this problematic along the lines of the question –
Is the post in postzionism Postmodern? Postcolonial? Postnational? PostFordist? My tentative answer is ‘all of the above’ and – ‘depending who you ask.’ This helps explain postzionism’s supple, contradictory nature as a social and cultural phenomenon and the ambivalence of the discursive framework that constructs it. In what follows, I describe the major postzionist trends as well as the academic and public discourses that inform this cultural phenomenon and suggest a somewhat different approach for using the term. My approach deals with the apparent contradiction in the existing definitions of the term by looking at postzionism as the cultural logics of contemporary—globalized, postmodernized, multicultural—Israeli society.

The introduction of the postcolonial paradigm into Israeli academia was a major contribution to the body of work that constitutes postzionist discourse. Questions of gender, ethnicity, class, and race intersect as these critiques exposed the interconnectedness of cultural and economic factors in creating and sustaining the Zionist hegemony (Hever et al 18). According to postcolonial Israeli critiques, the Jewish national movement of Zionism cannot be understand outside the context of the 19th century Europe where it emerged (Boyarin, 1997). Zionism was triggered and shaped by the cultural, social, and intellectual climate created by European Enlightenment. European scientific racism, anti-Semitic discourses, and dominant ideologies and practices of European colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and socialism - all played part in triggering and shaping the history of the Zionist movement.

For example, Boyarin (1997) views Zionism as a Jewish assimilationist’s response to dominant European discourse which inscribed traditional European Jewish
masculinity and femininity as flawed identities. Accordingly, Jewish “Enlighteners” like Herzl subscribed to these hegemonic European discourses seeking to replace the “pathologically effeminate” Jewish man with a new, heteronormative, “muscular Jew.” Nationalism and colonialism were embraced as a means to that end (Ibid, 277).

Others have emphasized the ambivalent colonialist relationship between the Eurocentric Zionist pioneers and the local Arab subject (Yosef, 2004; Hever et al, 2002, Shenhav, 2004). As Ella Shohat’s work demonstrates, this hierarchy was further complicated when the young state faced waves of immigration from Arab and Muslim countries. The Eurocentric nature of the Zionist national identity was revealed as the veteran Ashkenazi elite struggled to eliminate the cultural differences of the Mizrahi (literally meaning “oriental”) Jews (Shohat, 1989).

Another important discussion centers on postzionism as the by-product of economic, cultural, and technological processes of globalization, the advent of capitalism, and embourgeoisement (Ram, 2005). Ben Porat (1999) argues that while the bourgeoisie contribution to the Zionist nation building efforts were always crucial in economic terms, these classes remained culturally subordinate to the Labor movement Socialist elites prior to the 1990s. During the 1990s however, the bourgeoisie finally got to step up and take the reigns of cultural hegemony in Israel. Labor party Socialist-Zionist values of pioneering, austerity, altruism, collectivism, and sacrifice were replaced with values of personal ambition, individualism, capitalist consumption, competition, profit seeking, and free enterprise (Ben Porat, ibid; Ram, 2005).
Ram (2005) addresses another interrelated component of postzionism that is emphasized by social and political scientists who view it mostly as a political/ideological issue surrounding the debate between Jewish vs. democratic nature of Israel. According to this approach, the postzionists are those who hold on to a vision of Israel as a multicultural, pluralist state in the American sense— a democratic state for all its citizens. This vision conflicts with the Zionist vision of a Jewish state, which uses national symbols, institutions, and values to reinforce Zionist discourse (Silberstein, 2002, Nimni, 2003, Ram, 2005).

The postzionist according to both these approaches are the members of the new urban, Israeli middle class, who are embracing consumerism, “Americanization,” high-tech economy, civil democratic agenda, and a dovish attitude towards the Palestinians. Pitted against them are “the Neo-Zionists” who reject the democratic liberal values offered by globalization in favor of a retreat to ancient Jewish laws and a messianic approach to the holy value of the Promised Land.

However, I argue that this simplistic division does not hold, as it seems to ignore Zionism’s own hybrid, contradictory, and dynamic nature. While the majority of the Israeli middle class supports economic liberalization and identifies with some sort of a democratic/civil agenda, most of them are also profoundly attached, through a nationalistic rather than religious ideology, to the hegemonic relationship of Zionism to a Jewish identity. The social groups described here as “postzionist elite” actually view themselves as Zionist, and indeed subscribe in many ways to hegemonic Zionist
ideologies and values. These somewhat conflicting tendencies continue to be resolved for this group within the famous Zionist ambiguity on that matter (Ram, 2005).

For this mainstream Israeli group, a liberal ideology regarding civil rights and a “cosmopolitan” engagement with economic and cultural global processes coincides and is compatible with the core Zionist vision - the creation of a Jewish state where the Jewish people can become members of a “normal” nation state – “a nation like all other nations” as the Zionist slogan of the late 19th century goes.

Thus, although the Israeli urban middle-class plays an important part in the Israeli transformation toward economic and cultural “liberalization,” privatization, and globalization, this group as a whole does not define itself as postzionist. Rather, they are engaged in constant cultural, ideological, and political battles, negotiating and redefining the Zionist ideology for a postmodern globalized age. In the public discussions about Israeli identity, this group rejects both the Jewish “Jihad” version of the extreme religious right and the radical postnational (or postzionist) critiques from the left - and positions itself as the “natural” successors of the hegemonic, veteran, secular Enlightened, (mostly Ashkenazi) elite that founded the state of Israel.

Postzionism in this context should be viewed as a periodic label, designating the era characterized by these cultural contradictions. The ideological and cultural struggles to redefine the “true” or most appropriate Zionist ideology that best serves the needs of contemporary Israel are an inherent part of what this dissertation defines as the postzionist cultural dynamics.
Geographically, politically, ideologically, symbolically, and culturally, Israel occupies a particularly interesting and unique location in the matrix of east/west relations producing a particularly rich, ambivalent and complex (post)colonial relationship immersed in the tensions between globalization and localization characterizing the advance of late capitalism and postmodernity. Postzionist critical debates drawing on postcolonial, postmodern, postnational, global, and poststructural approaches helps explore this particular position and the way it has been negotiated and utilized by the Jewish national movement – Zionism. One of the continuities that cut across these all-encompassing transformations and can be demonstrated through study of Israeli television is the Israeli obsession with the question of “Israeliness” as a particular and unique cultural identity.

1.2.3 Israeli TV, national identity, and globalization

Regev and Seroussi (2004) point to the Israeli hegemonic assumption according to which Israel, at as a national cultural community, should have a culture of its own. That is, it should have “a set of cultural practices and artworks that, as an exclusive body of contents and meanings, expresses the uniqueness and specificity of Israeliness” (Regev and Seroussi, 2004:2). Quite naturally, Israeli television was fundamentally implicated in the hegemonic discourse on “Israeliness.” Its role as representing, molding, and constituting Israeli identity or a sanctioned version of Israeliness was openly and widely discussed by politicians, regulators, critics, religious leaders, and audience members for decades before the medium was even adapted (Oren, 2004).
The threat of unwanted ‘foreign’ cultural influences typifies the discourse around Israeli television from day one. Thus, when the idea of television was first introduced to Ben-Gurion in the late 1950s it was rejected. For Ben-Gurion, television in its dominant American form represented the threat of hollow, capitalist, individualistic, consumerist culture, incompatible for the goals and socialist ideals of self-sacrifice and austerity governing the national revival of the people of the book (Katz, 1996; Liebes, 2000; Oren, 2004).

On the other (perceived as binary) pole of the debate was another type of cultural threat—represented by the surrounding Arab culture. This threat became ever more prominent with the mass immigration of Jews from Arab and Muslim counties into the young state (Liebes, 2000; Oren, 2004). The perceived Mizrahi “difference” was the target of a massive set of oppressive, melting-pot policies designed to ‘de-Arabize’ and ‘culturally uplift’ the new immigrants (Oren, 2004; Kimmerling, 2004; Shohat, 1989; Shenhav, 2004; Hever et al, 2002).

Television was thus finally adapted as an educational tool to help advance national cultural integration (Oren, 2004). It was shaped and modeled on a European, public service, state monopoly model and put to work for the official Zionist hegemonic ideology of Statism (Mamlakhtiyut).

Statism, and by inference Statist broadcast, is invested in representing and producing a unified Israeli identity and culture for the people of Israel. Statism, a dogma conceived of by Israel’s first prime-minister David Ben-Gurion, is an instrument of ethnocentric particularity, as it regards the state as both a political entity and as a social
and cultural integrating agent (Schejter, forthcoming, p. 39). The basic elements of this dogma is that Israel belongs to all the Jewish people; that it is the embodiment of the 2000 years of Jewish longing to form again an independent political entity in the land of Israel; that Israel is a “modern” western style state according to the Ashkenazi version of Western culture, and Jews who do not belong this cultural tradition will have to be socialized and modernized through melting-pot mechanisms. The state itself, its symbols, its laws, its army, and its institutions are regarded as the focus of the society’s core value system, serving as basis for a “civil religion” that preserve and reproduce the Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony (Kimmerling, 2004, p. 150-151; Schejter, forthcoming).

Statism as a ruling ideology played a central role in determining the shape and goals of the state monopoly broadcast system. Therefore, unlike the European model on which it was based, Israeli broadcast was not labeled “public” but rather “Statist (Mamlakhhti) broadcasting service” (Schejter, forthcoming). The IBA (Israeli Broadcast Authority) television service was thus designed by law to fulfill a Statist cultural mission (Oren, 2004; Schejter, forthcoming). As such, it was obliged by law to promote Zionist core values, reflect the life of the state, its creation, and struggle, to propagate good citizenship, to strengthen the connection with Jewish heritage and its values, expand and promote the aims of Statist education as described in the Mamlakhti education law, and promote Jewish and Israeli creativity.

However, “times they are a changing” and in its short five decades, Israeli society has undergone some tremendous changes. Beginning as a slow gradual phenomenon over the 1970s and 1980s, Israel joined the age of globalization represented by the
development of a world-wide system of economics, cultural, and political interdependence (Moran, 1998: 2). This process accelerated rapidly over the next two decades and played an important role in triggering multiple shifts in Israeli social, economic, and cultural structures. Although central to the understanding of these processes, television’s role in propelling and reflecting these shifts remains severely under-examined. This study aims to fill this gap by offering a television studies analysis of Israeli television through the prism of global television format adaptation.

1.2.4 What’s in a (Global Television) Format?3

The imprint of foreign television forms on the televised production of a cultural identity, which is purely and distinctly Israeli, remains a primary tension articulated via the Israeli public debate on KN. Similar concerns and ambivalences shape contemporary discussions of television and media globalization studies. The topic of global television formats emerges as one of the most prominent focal points in these debates (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2005; Keane et al, 2007; Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming). A staple of contemporary schedules everywhere, global television formats are popular programming formulae – like Idol, Survivor and Millionaire – that get adapted, franchised, mimicked, or stolen, and produced in multiple national locations (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2005; Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming).

---

3 This section is partially based on the co-written editor’s introduction of Oren, T. G. and Shahaf, S. (Forthcoming) “Editors introduction” In Global Television Formats: Understanding Television across Borders. New York and London: Routledge
These transnational televisual forms seem to embody one of the main paradoxes challenging contemporary scholars of globalization – the ongoing tension between Western dominated standardization, or ‘McDonaldization’ on the one hand, and the persistence of and even increase in particular national, regional, ethnic, religious, racial, and other ‘local’ forms of identifications, on the other hand (Barber, 1995; Ram, 2005). Produced locally and based on an imported or appropriated global, most often (but not always) Western TV formula, global formats seem to inspire a fresh consideration of the cultural power relation involved in media globalization (Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming).

Prior to the 1990’s, the ‘cultural imperialism’ debates focused on “flows” of ‘canned’ or finalized programs “from the west to the rest” (Herman and MecChesney, 2003; Straubhaar, 2007). Critiques of this thesis centered on the “resilience” and popularity of locally produced media products, the global circulations of non-Western texts or genres, and the agency and activity of local audiences whose reception of the texts vary based on multiple socio-historical subject positions (Straubhaar, 2007; Moran, 1998).

The emergence of global formats presents new challenges to the cultural imperialism model as it represents the complexities inherent in the tension between “localizing”/“globalizing” homogenization/difference trends typifying the processes of globalization (Hall, 1991; Moran, 1998, Kellner, 2002). Global audiences’ responses to these televisual texts are an interesting site of investigation as well, as formatted programs serve as a cultural site where tensions between local, regional, national, and global identities are articulated in fascinating ways (Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming).

19
However, the global adaptation of popular (mostly Western) television forms, “programming ideas,” or genres is not new in itself. As Oren and Shahaf point out, television systems have always engaged in textual exchanges in the forms of influences, explicit business arrangements and informal exchange and circulation (Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming). In fact, formal borrowing has an established history in Israeli television as well as other “belated” television industries (Shahaf, 2007; Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming; Kumar, 2005; Ferrari, forthcoming; Straubhaar, forthcoming, Bourdon, forthcoming). This emerging body of research reveals that formal borrowing is part and parcel of television production in “belated” television systems developed after the two dominant U.K and U.S systems were already established.

Thus, national broadcasters around the world were creatively borrowing forms and programming ideas and using them to structure their own original shows even before the global commercial revolution of the 1980s and 1990s changed global media landscapes (Shahaf, 2007, Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming). This historical context highlights the fact that this type of borrowing does not necessarily preclude television’s national function and does not “interfere” with its ability to function as an arena for local and national cultural production, even in commercial settings.

Working from a critical postcolonial/postzionist and poststructuralist perspective this study seeks to transcend such binaries as “global” vs. “national” and “economy” vs. “culture,” when structuring the literature on global media and global television formal flows. The assumption that in the adaptation process a “pure” national culture is negotiated through a foreign form is countered. Instead, the hybrid, ambivalent dynamics
constituting national culture itself, as well as the fundamental role of television in processes of globalization are explored. Thus, this study explores television as a cultural site representing the inherent contradictions of the postmodern global condition.

1.2.5 A Television Studies Integrated Approach

Television Studies is the relatively recent, aspirationally disciplinary name given to the academic study of television (Brunsdon, 1998). Despite its U.S/U.K-centric biases, this emerging discipline has much to offer theoretically and methodologically for the study of ‘other,’ marginal, or belated national broadcast systems like Israel. On the flip side of the argument, the study of global format adaptation and the production of national culture in Israeli televisions can offer much in way of de-westernizing the discipline’s theoretical framework and its research agenda.

Television studies is a highly interdisciplinary field drawing on the paradigm of cultural studies, as well as the social sciences and the humanities paradigms. As a result of this productive friction, one of the main theoretical and methodological models that has developed in television studies is the “integrated approach” (D’Acci, 1994). This approach maintains that the medium of television is constituted through various elements or “spheres” – social, cultural, national and international contexts, institutional and production practices, texts, policies, critics, and audiences— all of which need to be accounted for, if we are to understand the way the medium operates in society (D’Acci, 1994; Mittell, 2005). In television studies literature, these different spheres fall roughly into three categories of study – production, text, and audiences.
Despite rejecting a simplistic linear model of media meaning-making “messages” or “effects,” television studies views media culture as an extremely influential component in contemporary society. As Douglas Kellner (1995) put it, the products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge out very identities, our sense of selfhood, and our sense of gender, ethnicity, class, race and sexuality. Media stories provide symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which, we insert ourselves into that culture (ibid, 5).

Nevertheless, Kellner acknowledges, “all texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of their readers. However, the possibility of differentiated and even resistant readings should not lead us to ignore the way social and cultural power structures and hierarchy influence the horizons and boundaries of what can be appropriately said and understood in the process of mediated representation, production, and reception.

A framework that helps tackle the issues of power and representation is Michele Foucault’s discourse theory, which deals with the relationship between language, knowledge, and power (Foucault, 1980). According to Hall (1997b), discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic. A cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices provides ways of talking about, understanding, and behaving in relation to particular social activities or institutional sites in society. Stuart Halls’ articulation theory provides a poststructuralist discursive approach that is extremely helpful in examining the ways that multiple discourses converge around the different spheres constituting the medium of television. Articulation theory examines the
way different ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere or get linked together within a discourse, and the way these discourses relate to socially-historically positioned subjects (Hall in Grossberg, 1996). Articulation theory can be extremely helpful as a method for integrated television analysis, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of the way different discursive formations cut across production, textual representation, and audience responses.

Within television genre theory, a similar discursive approach is relevant for my study of global televisual forms. In the early days of television studies, genre was approached as a textual phenomenon (Newcomb, 2005). However, this approach was soon deplored as inadequate for the study of television, so much so that scholars were casting doubt on the very relevancy of the concept for the study of television (Fiske, 1987, Allen, 1987, Feuer, 1987). To account for the ‘meta-textual’ or contextual elements, a more holistic approach to television genre developed (Mittell, 2004). Mittell examines how genre categories operate through the range of spheres that constitute television as a medium. According to this theory, rather then emerging from texts, genres work to categorize texts and link them into clusters of cultural assumptions. Thus, genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and consumption of texts within cultural contexts (Ibid).

One of the clear advantages of the discursive approach is the way it utilizes genre as a framework to explore the way television texts, narratives, and poetics are articulated or connected within a wider social discursive field, with “external” or “trans-textual” elements. This approach enables a combined consideration of discourses generated from
multiple interlocutors across the discursive field—producers, broadcasters, cultural critics, politicians, regulators, activists, parents, citizens, consumers, and audience members. Consequently, this approach allows TV scholars to connect the discussion of television forms to considerably wider discursive formations prevailing in the culture and society under consideration.

While Mittell focuses solely on American examples, my project aspires to demonstrate how the discursive analysis of television forms from a globalized outlook may complement this theory by using it to account for the complex dynamics created by the process of globalization. Drawing on a more internationally diversified context, a focus on global television formats has much to offer in opening up and de-westernize the discipline of television studies.

1.2.6 Outline for a Theory of Global TV Formats

The question of television formats received very little (to no) attention within television genre theory. In fact, I was unable to find within the established television studies literature on genre a definition for this concept (Mittell’s book doesn’t have the concept indexed). This is peculiar in light of the growing popularity of formatted programming (Navarro, 2006; Moran 1998, Moran & Malbon, 2005; Waisbord, 2004). So far, the meager literature on global television formats emerges from the social science oriented “international communication” paradigm, which is obviously more interested in questions of media globalization. This body of literature draws attention to the importance of formats and their global flows for the discussion of global trends within
television industries and their cultural significance in different international locations (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004; Moran et al, 2006; Keane et al, 2007).

Moran, (and later Moran and Malbon) was the first to offer a somewhat systematic exploration of the concept and its implication for television’s poetics. In this respect, Moran and Malbon first trace back the different dictionary definitions of the term – format as arrangement, presentation, and design in publishing, printing, and computing industries. Additionally, they describe the meaning the term acquired in broadcasting and more specifically in television, where it had been closely linked to the principle of serial program production. In this context, they define formats as generative and organizational categories. From this point of view, a TV format is that set of invariable elements in a serial program out of which the variable elements of individual episodes are produced. A format can be used as the basis of a new program, the program showing itself as a series of episodes, the episodes being sufficiently similar to seem like installments of the same program, and sufficiently distinct to appear like different episodes (2005: 20).

This literature, however, is often written from a very industrial oriented perspective, which tends to foreground the official format trade as the definitive core of the format flow phenomenon (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004; Keane and Moran, 2008). Moran, who is openly invested in restricting the usage of format concept to the “domain of international television program trade,” ultimately defines formats through the process of licensing or franchising, whereby the owner of the format contracts with another party to allow it legal access to the format for the purpose of producing an adaptation.
This leads to a reductive account of the cultural processes involved in the global flow of television forms, formulas, formats, or “engines.” The industrial perspective taken by these pioneering format scholars yields very context specific, partial, and industry-oriented conceptualizations of a highly nuanced, multivalent, and fluid process through which television forms flow through borders.

In that regard, the concept of “adaptation” and “local production” is also problematic as it mostly assumes that format flows represent uncreative risk-minimizing, mechanical “cloning” or copycatting of tried and true hit formulas by local producers who slavishly imitate formats created in privileged Western “media hubs.” Formats are perceived in this discourse as descending on “local” television scenes from above – like Athena leaping out of Zeus’ forehead, fully grown and armored. A good example for such approach is the work of Silvio Waisbord, who defines formats as “programming ideas that are adapted and produced domestically” (2004: 359). Theoretically, this definition leaves much to be desired, namely— what are formats before they get “domestically” adapted? What does the adaptation process entail?

Perhaps the most well known example of such an approach is Albert Moran’s “pie principle” for the understanding of the flows of format production (Moran 1998). According to this metaphor, the formats formula itself is the “pie’s crust” made of a pre-established “generic structural container” in which different local producers insert a changing “filling” of varying, local, cultural content (Heller, forthcoming). In a similar manner, Waisbord (2004), again foregrounding the perspective of the transnational companies involved in the legal process of “formatting” as part of the official format
trade business, actually argues that “formats are culturally specific but nationally neutral,” and they are less prone to have specific references to the local and national, precisely because they are designed to travel well” (ibid, p. 368).

This approach is somewhat limited as it portrays the travel of format as the mechanical implantation of a preconstituted stable formula in a very top-down manner. However, I would argue that within the wide range of processes involved in the global flow of television form, such mechanical “adaptations” may just as well be the exception to the rule. As a growing body of research suggests, even in the most seemingly top-down process of adaptation, producers in different locations actualize adapted, franchised, or “borrowed” formulas in extremely creative ways making them fit the tastes and cultural sensibilities of the local culture (Kumar, 2005; Shahaf 2007; Navarro, forthcoming; Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming).

This emerging new literature moves away from the top-down models implied by Moran’s “pie principle” by avoiding the binary separation of format as established or “stable” formula or “crusts,” “baked” wholly in some privileged media hub, mostly in the Western hemisphere to be later taken as a whole by “local” producers and “filled” by different cultural flavored content or “fillings.” Rather, as my study of KN will also argue and demonstrate studying the flow of format through a focus on practices of “local” production processes from the perspective of local producers, critics, and audiences, leads to a move away from those top-down model of format adaptation and “travel” and brings forth a more process-oriented approach. In this conceptualization, the process of formatting itself emerges as an arena for cultural negotiations where globally popular
elements or, “engines” as Keane and Moran (2008) call them, are articulated (i.e. linked) in multiple ways within the matrix of local cultural production.

A good example of such an approach is Vinicius Navarro’s work which suggests an analogy between format adaptation and the notion of performance (ibid, p. 4). As Navarro puts it, the concept of performance brings into focus the related notions of action, interaction, and transaction, all of which can help characterize the format adaptation. Furthermore, while we may say that all performances derive from a “template” it is the actualization of that model that distinguishes each individual performance. By analogy, he argues, format adaptations, too, actualize an existing model and situate it in new contexts and, even though the adaptation may derive from an “original” template, its cultural significance cannot be confined to this derivative status.

Accordingly, the performance or execution of borrowed global formula in varied, local contexts, breathes new life into hybrid forms of local cultural production. Navarro’s emphasis on the concept of performance helps move the discussion from the narrow industrial focus on the adaptability of the formula to the flexible process of adaptation itself. This approach “challenges the assumption that formatted programs are merely derivative renditions of a stable formula” (ibid, p. 5 of manuscript). The notion of format production as performance allows us to look at the very process of local production as an active process of formatting, articulating different formal elements together within the matrix of “local” cultural context, which is shaped by specific industrial, national, and cultural constraints.
Thus, an adequate theory of format adaptation must transcend the narrow top-down global industrial perspective and apply a more cultural-discursive approach, which addresses the complex processes of the local program’s production as well as its public reception. Just like genres in Mittell’s analysis global format, formula, and formal elements receive their significance through a complex and multivalent process that is influential for producers’ and audience (as well as broadcasters, regulators, politicians, journalist, critiques, activists etc.) understanding of the show and its cultural significance.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

1.3.1 Introduction

Predicated on an integrated television studies approach, my project combines consideration of production with textual and audience discourse analysis. My study draws on ethnographic interviews with Channel 2 executives and professionals, archival materials documenting production processes, audience and critics’ public discourses in both print and on-line press, and observations on the set of the contemporary show. Throughout these different endeavors, my analysis will focus on the way discourses reflecting different ideologies, tensions, and anxieties regarding the construction of an Israeli national identity are articulated through discussion of KN, its format, and its representations of “Israeliness.”

I intend to explore KN in relation to its representation of Israeliness, examine closely its production process to determine how different institutional constraints helped
shape this representation, conduct close textual analysis to evaluate these representations
drawing on a range of critical theories, and finally, explore available public and audience
discourse pertaining to these issues. All of this will allow me to explore the main
discursive formation through which Israeli’s make sense of, take pleasure from, or reject
the show and its version of Israeliness.

I aim to examine how KN offers a construction or representation of “Israeliness”
that is informed by its contemporary cultural and social context. This exploration will
focus on the perceived role and influence of an “imported” worldwide popular televisual
formula in shaping that construction or representation. I intend to survey to what extent
this formula figure in producers, critics, and audience’s discourses regarding the
program’s representation of that national identity.

In the next sections, I will outline the research protocol I followed for collecting
and analyzing this data. Although some of the methods are identical for all three aspects,
I will divide my discussion into the study of production processes, the analysis of text,
and public/audience discourses. This will allow me to discuss the different challenges
presented by each category. While the three aspects are separated for the sake of clarity
here, it is crucial to point out that each aspect will serve as relevant backdrop for the
investigation of the others.

1.3.2 Production Study

Interviews

The main method applied for collecting evidence on production processes was the
ethnographic interview. The interviews conducted for the study were mostly done in the
summer of 2006 and 2007 (detailed list below). The interviews were conducted in Hebrew and recorded with a digital audio recorder. I then transcribed them myself and translated selected quotes to English, again by myself. The type of questions I asked developed as I went along and I will shortly describe this process below.

One of the first challenges presented by production studies is the question of accessibility. Luckily several factors help me obtain high accessibility to the necessary individuals and organizations. First, Israel is a very small country and the television industry is comparatively undersized. Thus, the snowball technique is extremely useful, as once you “get your foot in the door” people help you talk to their colleagues. My past career in the Israeli press was also helpful, especially my position as assistant to the editor of “Galeria” at Ha’aretz-Daily. The connections I made in the television and cultural industry during my time in this influential position proved priceless.

My snowball sample technique to gain accessibility to producers began in the summer of 2006 as I was spending time in Israel and beginning to gather data for this research. My first step was to contact my past colleagues at Ha’aretz and tap into their network. Surprisingly, after a couple of telephones I was able to obtain Tzvika Hadar’s cell phone number from one of them, and even more astonishingly, it took one phone conversation with Hadar to schedule an interview with him. I met with him on June 26, 2006, at his home in a north Tel Aviv neighborhood for a conversation that lasted about two hours.

By establishing this connection with Hadar, I got my foot in the door and was able, the following summer, to access many more of the people involved in the
production. When I returned to Israel I contacted Hadar again, and he helped connect me to the folks at *Teddy Productions* by providing telephone numbers for some key players like chief editor/director Yoav Tzafir and Executive Producer Tmira Yardeni. Also when these busy people heard that Hadar had already interviewed their willingness to cooperate increased.

Another helpful connection that I used to gain access was *Keshet* PR manager Maya Karvat, whom I also got to know during my work at Ha’aretz. I contacted Karvet in November 2006 via email asking for her help in gaining access to the KN production and Keshet in general. Karvat answered me shortly after and we scheduled an appointment that January as I spent a short time during winter break in Israel. In that meeting I explained the nature of my research and asked for help during the summer of 2007. Luckily, Karvat was extremely cooperative and promised to help me gain access.

When I arrived in Israel in May 2007, I reconnected with Karvat, who asked that I compose a short letter for the KN production manager explaining my research goals and needs. After Teddy had received that letter, I was contacted by production manager Inbal Marom, who invited me to spend two days on the set of KN’s season 6 on June 15th and 16th of 2007. Once I gained access to the set, it was relatively easy for me to approach the different professionals involved in the production and set separate interviews with them. Thus, I spent considerable time in the summer of 2007 conducting interviews with key figures in the production, such as Chief editor Yoav Tzafir who I met at the *Teddy* offices in June 21, 2007; Executive producer Tmira Yardeni who met with me in June 28 in the same location; camera director Amir Ukrainitz who talked with me on the set in the
Hertzelia studios on June 16, 2007; VTR director Itai Segev (also on the set, June 15, 2007). I also met with Gal Uchovski one of the show’s judges and scheduled an interview with him in a Tel Aviv coffee shop on June 22, 2007.

Spending time on the set allowed also for less official background conversation with many back and front stage personal - contestants, floor manager, production assistants, stylists, hair and make up people, sound technicians, control room professionals and more.

The in depth interviews were conducted in a manner following Spradley’s discussion of the ethnographic interview (1979). My technique was to conduct an informal interview, starting with open-ended questions like “tell me your professional biography”, “how did you get to work in the television industry”, “how did you get to work on the show” and “what was the work process like?” gradually introducing more specific questions. This technique allows the interviewee to establish their own narrative and vocabulary in discussing their experience, which in most cases leads to some of the most exciting discoveries.

The more specific questions I introduced pertained to the issue of the program’s format, its production practices, and its representation of Israeliness or Israeli culture and identity. For example I asked question like: “how did the show developed from its earliest stages?”, “How has the show format changed and evolved over the years?” following up with “What made you decide to make such and such changes”, etc. Issues of national ideologies as well as the representation of diverse social subject position – gender, ethnicity, religion, race, class, region, etc., were emphasized. For example I asked
interviewees to elaborate on the show’s national address with such questions as “critics often point out that KN is extremely nationalistic – what do you think about that?” I also asked specifically about the show’s broadcast during the Lebanon war and during other security events, again pointing out the press response to these broadcasts and asking what the interviewee opinion about those were. Similarly I asked producers to respond to allegations about the show representation of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality by pointing out specific controversies like the “Mizrahi Cinderella” or season four’s winner Jacko Isenberg’s “draft dodging” (as will be specified in chapter 5)

**Observations**

During the summer of 2007 I conducted a participatory observation study on the set of *Kohav Nolad*’s fifth season. I spent a full weekend on the set observing the production “in action” – from the early morning rehearsal through lunch breaks, full runs and live broadcast. I observed the studio itself, the back stage area, the dressing rooms, the dining and coffee areas, as well as the control, sound, and editing rooms. The purpose of the observation was to understand the daily practices and overall organizational culture involved in this production. I was particularly interested in the way the production team constructs the “reality” portrayed on the show. What kind of decisions do they make that influence this portrayal? How much are they aware or consciously discuss these issues, what goes into the construction (casting, directing, writing, editing, styling, dressing, makeup, couching, privileging contestants, etc).
Throughout I was interested in observing how the producers reflect on, implement, and improvise based on the adapted *Idol* format. To what extent are they consciously modeling their work on other productions of the global format most particularly the dominant *American Idol*? This helped me explore the issues of “cultural homogenization” vs. local culture “resilience” in subsequent chapters.

**IRB**

Before I started fieldwork in the summer of 2007 I contacted the IRB office at the University of Texas at Austin with the appropriate paperwork describing my research design. Shortly after I was informed via letter from IRB Dr. Jody Jensen the IRB Chair (dated 7 June, 2004), that upon reviewing my study the IRB determined that it is not human research as defined in the common rule (45 CFR 46) or FDA regulations (21 CFR 50 & 56). Thus, the letter stated that this study falls outside the jurisdiction of the IRB and I am free to begin the study without IRB approval. The protocol number allocated to the research at the IRB was # 2007-05-0090.

**Archival Research**

I was lucky enough to get access from *Keshet Broadcasts* to audio-visual materials documenting the production of the show from its first season on (episodes). These materials provided audio-visual evidence, which helped me review the show’s production processes and the evolution of the show’s format. The Keshet PR office also let me photocopy their entire KN press files, which contained virtually every printed press story ever published regarding the show. Finally, I spent considerable time during the summer of 2006 and 2007 at the Beit Ariela Library in Tel Aviv and the Hebrew
University library in Jerusalem, gathering newspaper and magazine articles, television reviews, and interviews with producers pertaining to KN. Using the Google-alert, I received weekly emails with every online source mentioning the show. These materials provided me with producer’s published discourses on the production process, which complimented the personal interviews I have conducted.

1.3.3 Textual Analysis

In this part of the research I intend to conduct a close textual reading of several key episodes across the different seasons of the KN show. This analysis will take into account both aesthetic and ideological issues, as it will account for the show’s representation of Israeli national identity as constructed both by hegemonic discourse and the show’s adapted global formats, genre, or formulas.

My main theoretical framework for this analysis will be a postzionist/postcolonial, feminist analysis. This will give me an opportunity to provide detailed historical contextualization for the cultural and social processes, practices, and discourses influencing the construction of Israeli identities on the show. Particular attention will be given to ideologies relating to ethnicity and class and their relation and articulation within hegemonic and counter hegemonic Zionist/postzionist discourse.

The analysis will also draw on television studies literature on the contemporary hybrid genre known as “unscripted” or “reality-television” (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Murray and Ouelette, 2004; Simon, 2005; Bourdon, 2008). This generic analysis will help assess the show in relation to the adapted global form it is based on.
1.3.4 Public/Audience Discourses

This aspect focuses on the abundance of public discourses about KN available in the press and online. While my methods study does not include a “traditional” audience reception study, I find that contemporary press coverage of *Kohav Nolad* offers an abundance of audience members’ public discourses in the form of readers’ online talkbacks. Israeli internet “talk-back culture” is currently receiving growing public and academic attention (Hecht, 2007). Israelis are particularly fond of talk-back forums (called “talk-backim” in the original Hebrew). These mechanisms in news and other content websites allow surfers to respond to the content published on a particular webpage at the bottom of that item. Due to the popularity of talk-back forums and the steep competition between online and traditional newspapers in Israel, the online additions of Israel’s three top newspaper as well as most other online Israeli publications now provide a talk-back forum to practically every news item (Haner, 2006). While the persistence of the digital divide in Israel and other mitigating factors pertaining to the obscure identity of talk-back posters obviously disqualifies these forums as sources for controlled, random, or representative “audience” samples, they nonetheless offer a much more diversified pool of public discourses regarding multiple issues. The talk-back responders are commonly referred to as talkbackists (“talkbackistim”) in Israeli media and academic writing, and I will refer to them as such.

The talkback posts are extremely useful, as I am not looking to conduct a generalizable reception study in the traditional, social science sense of it. Instead, I am interested in mapping out the discursive field constructed around KN. The contemporary
explosion in mediated public forums and the resulting proliferation of digital postings of discourses by “regular” people in public forums is part of the process I am interested in mapping out. The possibilities embedded in the new media environment, in terms of the plurality of voices heard in the discussion of contemporary television, is a feature of the technological, economic, social, and cultural processes I am trying to outline in this project.

1.4 Chapter Summary

The next four chapters will present a contextualized research of KN, looking at its production practices and public discourse surrounding its reception both in the context of local national events and the context of the global wave of reality format flows. Chapter 2 begins this contextualization by providing a historical overview of the shift from Statist monopoly to commercial multichannel broadcast in 1990s Israel. The chapter describes the overall ideological, economic, and cultural shifts that led to the Israeli commercial/multichannel communication revolution; looks at the specific legislation policy that created Channel 2 as privatized national channel; and discusses the cultural anxieties surrounding this shift, the channel’s broadcast, and their alleged cultural and social “effects.”

Engaging three main positions shaping the debate about the shift from public to commercial broadcast – the conservative Statist Zionist approach; the “pluralist” liberal approach; and the “post-national” radical approach -. Chapter 2 provides the context
necessary for me to use my study of KN as a way to map out the more general dynamics and contradictory cultural logics of postzionist Israeli culture. Critiquing all three approaches as reductive, **chapter 2** stresses the importance of a contextualized study of production and reception processes to demonstrate how, despite its commercial orientation, Channel 2 continues to offer a shared national space for the Israeli viewers as it responds, in significant and profound ways, albeit via entertainment programs, to the ongoing national events shaping the Israeli experience.

To begin such a contextualized study, **chapter 3** explores the pre-history of KN by looking at the production history of its “mother show,” the patriotic game show *Lo Nafzik Lashir* (“We Won’t Stop Singing”). Focusing on the industrial biography of the production team, as well as on press coverage and public debates of the show, **chapter 3** lays the foundations for understanding KN’s cultural significance in the particular context of Israeli television’s industry. Despite the producers’ appropriation of ideas and elements of “foreign” shows, I will show that the result of their creative efforts is neither a bland copycat product of globalized cultural imperialism, as conservative Zionist and liberal “pluralist” critics would have it, nor is it pure and simple nationalistic mechanism of Statist propaganda, as radical post-national critics would no doubt perceive it. Rather, the show’s rearticulation of some fundamentally Zionist traditions represented by the Hebrew song (*Zemer iivr*) and the practice of collective singing (*shira be tzibur*) within a new, commercialized, cultural field - created an updated, escapist, commercial, nostalgic celebration of the “good-old state of Israel” identity which serves as a quintessential example for the postzionist cultural dynamics typifying Channel 2.
Looking at the historical context for the production of the KN mother show LNL, this chapter will explore the particular local context that shaped the evolution of KN’s production, text, and public reception as well as the nature of the shared or collective national experience Channel 2 offers the Israeli viewers in its central entertainment content.

Finally, Chapter 4 and 5 deal with KN, its production history, and the discursive battle waged around it in contemporary Israel. Taking on some of the established narratives about the significance of the global flow of reality television, chapter 4 looks at the transformation of the LNL game show into LNL-KN, the surprise instant mega-hit show, which presented for the first time in Israel, several globally popular reality format elements or “engine,” managing to “crack” the key for mega success in the new multichannel commercial Israeli television market. The chapter describes the history of the show’s gradual development, mapping out the evolution of its particular poetics while continuing to look at the type of shared national experience its unique format offers for the Israeli national audience.

Drawing on producers’ interviews, press coverage, and debates of the show, this chapter demonstrates that KN, despite its commercial orientation, is not the result of mindless format “cloning,” rather it is an exciting and vibrant instance of local cultural production. The formatting of the show is revealed to be an ongoing and extremely dynamic creative process, a far cry from the image of mechanical cloning, mimicry, and/or reproduction suggested by scholars who foreground official format trade as the core of the format flow phenomenon.
Positioning the Israeli public discussion of KN in the context of a global conversation about the “effects” of reality television formats, **chapter 5** will explore producers,’ critics,’ and (via online talk-back forums) audience members’ public discourses addressing the significance of the show and will demonstrate that unlike in the U.K Pop Idol and its famous U.S sister show American Idol, KN is not “about” “exposure of pop’s dark underbelly” or of “the internal workings” of the music industry and “its manufacture of celebrity and stardom” (Holmes, 2004, p. 148), but rather about the exploration of the internal working of contemporary postzionist Israeliness as shaped and reflected by broadcast, in the dominant Channel 2.

This chapter continues to look at the nature of the shared national space constructed for the Israeli viewing public by KN and its new reality format. Ultimately, this chapter would argue that the show became a national sensation not because its format’s drama of individualized competition and audience’s selection “abandons” the local and the national, but rather because it addresses more directly and in a more suspenseful way than LNL the question at the core of the “Israeliness” debate and allows expression of the multiplicity within this identity, previously perceived as homogenous.

Finally, **Chapter Six** will conclude the analysis by exploring the theoretical implications of my study for both Israeli television and global television studies.
Chapter 2: The Commercial Shift In Israeli Broadcast – History and Public Anxieties

2.1 The Multichannel Global Revolution and the Postzionist Shift in 1990s Israel

Since the mid 1980s global media industries have undergone radical and swift changes as around the world national television systems continuously transformed from public state ran models into market oriented communication ones, dominated by trends of media “deregulation,” privatization, multichannelism and commercialization. This transformation can be understood within the larger context of global political-economic shifts; the incentives encouraging different governments to adapt policies of free market; new technological developments; and the public’s desire to receive the variety of new channels that these enabled (Katz, 1999; Jin, 2007, Herman, and McChesney, 1999, Schiller, 1999, Straubhaar, 2007).

This globally influential trend reached Israel belatedly in the 1990s resulting in a breakdown of the Statist public monopoly in broadcast (Katz, 1996; Liebes, 2000; 2007; Schejter, forthcoming). The foundations for the Israeli communication revolution were set in motion 20 years earlier, with the political offset of the late 1970s and the rise to power in 1977 of the right wing Likkud party whose commitment to a free market ideology translated to creating more choice in broadcasting (Schejter, forthcoming). Particularly important in that regard was the appointment of the Kubarski committee in 1978 that recommended the establishment of a second, commercial television channel in Israel, to be financed by advertising revenues.
However, the drafting of legislation promoting a market-based model in communication was slow and problematic (Doron, 1998). For one, once in office, the first two Likkud governments were inhibited by the prospects of loosing control of the flow of information that was guaranteed by a single channel under government control (Ibid; Caspi and Limor, 1999; Schejter, forthcoming). The road was opened once again only with the establishment of a grand coalition Likkud-Labor government in 1985. This was in large part due to the initiative of the minister of communication, Professor Amnon Rubinstein, a member of Shinuy, a small liberal party, who was promised the task of constituting commercial broadcast in return for his party’s political support for the Likkud-Labor government (Ibid, Caspi and Limor, 1999).

The process was still delayed for years as it had been continuously hampered by partisan politics as well as pressure from private lobbyists – especially newspaper owners – who feared that their advertising revenues would be diverted to television (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Doron, 1998). Finally, in the early 1990s, Israel broadcast shifted to a multichannel commercial system, grounded in competition and a free market. A second, commercial channel, as well as a regional cable system, commercial radio and satellite channels were all introduced over a relatively short period of time (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Katz, 1996; Katz, 1999; Liebes, 2003; Schejter, forthcoming). As Katz critically puts it, “this was channel multiplication with a vengeance” (1996, 30).

As described in detail in chapter one of this dissertation these shifts in broadcast were taking place on the backdrop of the more general structural and ideological transformation of the country in what has been known as the postzionist era. The last
decade of the 20th century marked a wholesale transformation in Israeli society from a Statist, state-centralized, government-public led social economic environment to a classed, market, private-business led one (Ram, 2000). In the everyday life of Israelis, the socio-economic structural transformation was expressed by the crumbling of the collectivist nationalist or Socialist-Zionist world, with its institutions and beliefs (Ram, 2000).

This shift was also accompanied by a breakdown of the totalizing, hegemonic, Ashkenazi-centric, Zionist, meta-narrative of a unified national identity (Almog, 2004; Hever et al 2002; Kimmerling, 2004). Israel transformed into a multicultural society, forced to acknowledge the diverse mosaic of sometimes hostile subcultures composing it (Hever et al, 2002; Kimmerling, 2004). Together with the continuously growing political polarization between right and left in Israel in regards to the Palestinian issue, the old-school hegemonic “unified” Zionist identity was fragmenting under the pressure of new social, economical and ideological circumstances. These ongoing ideological rifts contributed to the sense of the 1990s as an era national disintegration (Kimmerling, 2004; Liebes, 2000, 2003; Ram, 2005; Silberstein, 2002).

The commercial revolution in Israeli broadcast plays a central role in this continuous process of structural and ideological postzionist transformation. The changes reshaping Israeli media environment in the 1990s are thus frequently discussed as important engines – not merely reflecting but actively shaping, facilitating, and propelling the overall process of social and cultural postzionist transformation. The concerns raised by the overall transformation to postzionist culture thus were powerfully
articulated in cultural and academic debates surrounding the shift to commercial broadcast.

2.2 THE SECOND BROADCASTING AUTHORITY LAW

As stated in the introduction, public Statist broadcast in Israel was closely linked to the Zionist state apparatus. State officials perceived television as a legitimate national educational tool for implementing the goals of a melting-pot style project of Western-centric cultural integration, aiming to create and impose a “unified” Israeli identify (Liebes, 2003; Oren, 2004;). The Second Broadcasting Authority Law, which regulates the construction and work of the second Israeli channel represents a wholesale change in Israel’s media outlook and is grounded on a radically different understanding of the relationship between the state and its citizens (Doron, 1998, Schejter, forthcoming).

Unlike the Statist (Mamlahkhty) IBA television which was seen as a mouthpiece for the state or a mobilized medium in the service of government; television was now viewed as a proper industry and a cultural medium in the service of human creativity and art. Also, as Schejter puts it - the “siege mentality” that influenced policy in the broadcast monopoly days had given way to a more cosmopolitan approach by the 1990s, more open to the world and to foreign influences, reflecting the change in Israeli society during this period (ibid, 113-114).

Nevertheless, the new channel, utilizing one of merely four available Israeli terrestrial broadcast frequencies is still considered a public asset and thus legislators tried shaping it in a way that would best serve the Israeli public interest (Doron, 1998). Consequently, the private companies charting and operating the channel for profit are
expected to deliver certain social and cultural benefits to Israeli society as a whole, as
defined by the Second Broadcast Authority Law, and subsequent policies determined by
the Second Authority Council (ibid, 112-113)

Despite the alleged new “openness” to the world at large, the legislation and
policy involved in creating Channel 2 clearly reflects concerns about potential harmful
influences of “cultural imperialism.” Fearing potential saturation of local culture by
“foreign” media content would lead to the obliteration of the distinctiveness of Israeli life
and local cultural experience, legislators created a system of protective measures for the
second channel, ensuring it works to represent and give expression to local Israeli culture
(Katz, 1999, Schejter, forthcoming). Like their counterparts in European nations, Israeli
legislators imposed a quota system designed to secure a minimum share of local Israeli
production on the new channel stipulating that at least one third of total television
broadcast on it is to be locally produced (Schejter, forthcoming 116).

Interestingly, the specific vision legislators and policy makers have outlined for the
way the channel should represent the local culture reflects an important shift in official
policy. Article 6(b)(3) of the 1992 Second Broadcast authority Regulations (Television
Programs Broadcast by Franchise Holder) stipulates that the Channel 2:

Will give expression in its broadcasts to the varied cultural texture of Israel, to the
interests of all the citizens of Israel in all the areas of the country and all the
patterns of settlement, to the variety of lifestyles, standards of living, education,
occupation, culture and religious beliefs of the citizens of Israel. (1992, English
translation from Schejter, forthcoming, 119).
These policies shed light on the changing perception of television’s national role in a multicultural society where broadcast is no longer perceived as a tool for the creation of a “melting pot” style cultural integration but rather as an arena for the expression of the local society’s cultural multiplicity. Instead of envisioning television as a tool for centralized cultural “cultivation”, allowing a certain cultural elite to “elevate” the people’s tastes by offering “access to the cultural goods” like the patronizing public monopoly did (Liebes, 2000) – the emphasis is on a multicultural, plural, much more all-inclusive representation that will reflect the multiplicity of the Israeli society. This is an inherently postzionist vision – representing a willingness to open up for renegotiation the definitions of appropriate Israeliness or, in other words, of what constitutes “being Israeli” on television. This is a remarkable shift – and many see that as the big promise of channel 2 (Weinman, 1999).

However, not everybody is as excited about this new vision, and thus, from the moment Channel 2 started operating alongside a host of new cable and satellite channels, its broadcasts raised much controversy, concern, and critique. Critics - whether supportive or opposed to the conceptual shifts involved in the transition to a multichannel commercial broadcast – have been debating the nature of the new commercially dominated broadcast environment, its contents, the reception culture that developed around it, and its “effects” on and significance for Israeli national culture and identity.

*Kohav Nolad*, emerging and taking shape at the conclusion of Channel 2’s first decade - became an intense focal point in these debates. The different critical discourses shaping the discussion on *Kohav Nolad* are informed by three main approaches that
shaped the more general debate surrounding the shift to a multichannel broadcast environment and the social and cultural impact of Channel 2. The following section will outline these three approaches – the Statist or traditional national Zionist approach, a liberal “pluralist” approach and a radical “post-nationalist” approach. These approaches ultimately shape the discursive field surrounding *Kohav Nolad* which I will explore in following chapters.

2.3 Public Debates and Anxieties Surrounding the Shift to Commercial Broadcast

2.3.1 The Old-School Zionist/Statist critique: “There Goes the Nation…”

One particularly powerfully articulated opposition to the shift from public monopoly to commercial multichannelism in Israeli broadcast was launched by two key figures in the old-guard of Israeli (and international) academia- Professor Elihu Katz, one of the most influential communication scholars of the 20th century and the founding manager of the Israeli Broadcast Authority Television back in the day, and his long time student and colleague - Professor Tamar Liebes. Both scholars subscribe to the old-school hegemonic ideology of the Statist Zionist establishment that shaped Israeli public broadcast as part of the Zionist state apparatus. As such, their laments about the shift to multichannel commercial broadcast are particularly revealing, as they expose the way issues regarding broadcast are connected with the wider anxieties amongst the veteran Zionist cultural elite – threatened by a sense of loss of hegemonic power to shape society’s institutions according to its own value system and ideologies.
For Katz and Liebes, the shift from a uni-channel public monopoly broadcast to a multichannel commercial environment represents the end of Israeli television as a medium for national “integration,” creating a shared national space and serving as tool for melting-pot style Zionist nation-building (Katz, 1996; Liebes, 2000, 2003). Applying a technological determinism framework, Katz (1996) argues this shift is a direct result of changes in media technologies. According to this analysis, technologies of multichannelism encourages two competing tendencies - segmentation of the media audiences to atomized individuals, aimlessly roaming the multiple channels “as they would a video store;” and globalization, which he defines as the shared, even simultaneous transnational consumption of television products of the American entertainment variety, and/or live global media events such as the Olympics (ibid, 26).

Neither of these two tendencies meets the requirements of the nation state which therefore “must collapse in the face of this radical segmentation, on the one hand, and globalization, on the other” (ibid). According to Katz, the loss of television as a shared, integrative national space is particularly harmful for the national system of “participatory democracy” which relies on a central civic space, allowing citizens to gather together, set the political and social agenda, and collectively contemplate matters of state that demand attention (Katz, 1996, 23).

While, for Katz and Liebes, Israeli public monopoly broadcast worked perfectly in securing exactly such an idealized national space, the shift to multichannelism creates dispersed spaces that lose sight of the center and provide escapist alternatives. Up against the claims of legislators and policy makers responsible for creating this shift, Katz argues
that rather than providing democratic pluralism, this process leads to the center’s collapse (ibid). This argument is illustrated for both Katz and Liebes by the fate of televised news in Israel in light of the shift in the structure of broadcast.

For 25 years the prime-time evening newscast of the Israeli public monopoly channel, being “the only show in town,” acquired a status of collective civic ritual. With 70 percent of Israelis tuning in regularly, viewing was perceived as obligatory in the sense that it was a precondition for participation in conversations the next day (Katz, 1996, 29; Liebes, 2000, 315). However – with the introduction of a second, competing news broadcast on Channel 2, viewership of both broadcasts declined considerably (Katz, 1996, 30).

This is presented as evidence for television’s transformation from a medium that involves Israelis in a shared political and social agenda to the provider of mindless entertainments, which works to dismantle the national identification of the viewing audience and neutralize political debate (Liebes, 2000, 2003). The shift in broadcast thus marks the failure of the Zionist project of broadcast, which was designed, as Liebes puts it - to “assist (and give voice to) the development of ‘authentic’ local culture”, and “give cohesion” to the new Israeli nation, while “confronting two types of threat: that of the internal multiplicity of cultural enclaves, and that of the Americanized global culture” (Liebes, 2003, 18). While Liebes concedes that television cannot be the cause of these cultural dynamics, she still argues the shift in broadcast plays a crucial contributing role in them (ibid, 2000, 318).
Liebes notes that the transformation in Israeli broadcast is inherently connected to two central social trends that were leading Israeli society away from collectivism in two opposite directions during the 1990s (ibid, 35). One is the move within “secular mainstream Israelis” towards individualism and the other is the move of religious and immigrant sub-cultures to separatism – amounting, in some cases to attempts to actively undermine and ultimately substitute the hegemonic culture. Liebes claims that the shift to multichannelism thus reinforces the entrenchment of separatist cultures in their own enclaves, around their own media, while “ordinary Israelis” or in other words the hegemonic “mainstream” secular, mostly Ashkenazi, Western-centric, middle-class group Liebes identifies with are “condemned” to zapping among “indistinguishable transnational channels or turning their television sets off altogether” (2000, 306). Shared culture of the kind that might compete with global commercial culture – now could be found only within religious and, or cultural/ethnic enclaves (ibid, 2003, 5).

This bleak dystopic vision of the shift in Israeli broadcast is extremely reductive. For one, it bluntly ignores or dismisses the extensive public criticism of monopoly broadcast that led to the change in the first place. As Katz himself allows, the idea that Israeli monopoly in broadcast should be replaced with a commercial system offering more diversity was generally accepted as “common sense” and thus had become hegemonic in Israeli society well before the change took place (Katz, 1996, 30). Moreover, Katz and Liebes’s celebration of the “good-old-days” of public broadcast reflect their complete disregards for any counter hegemonic claims against the Zionist

---

4 My emphasis S.S.
state apparatus and its monopoly on broadcast made by more progressive – whether liberal or radical – critics. Thus, they underplay contemporary critiques attacking the oppressive dimensions of official Zionist policies of melting pot “national integration.”

Especially striking is Liebes’s refusal to perceive the legitimacy of competing, counter-hegemonic claims by marginalized sectors of the Israeli society – traditionally oppressed and silenced by the Western-centric Zionist melting-pot policies. She cannot perceive their critiques as a legitimate call for redistribution of the cultural and material assets of the Israeli polity. Instead, she presents these varied critiques as one monolithic threat for the democratic nature of the country. As she argues:

Whereas in pluralist societies the various cultures accept the universalistic principles according to which the society operates, these cultures seek … self determination for their own brand of religious particularism or wish to replace Israel’s Western-style democratic norms with their own (Liebes, 2000, 308).

However – the main weakness of Katz’s and Liebes’s argument is that it fails to recognize one of the fundamental and most definitive facts of post-public-service monopoly broadcast in Israel. Liebes and Katz are so invested their dystopic vision of social and national disintegration caused by the postzionist shift, in general, and the shift to multichannel broadcast, in particular, that they fail to grasp, or chose to ignore, the degree to which Israeli broadcast, despite its commercialization and the growing influence of global trends it negotiates, remains a profoundly national affair in the post public monopoly era. As many critics point out, instead of segmenting in response to the shift to commercial multichannel broadcast, the Israeli audience reassembled around a
new dominant player – commercial Channel 2 (Weinman, 1999, Alper, 2002; Yuran, 2001, Almog 2004). As the next two sections demonstrate – the issue of Channel 2’s national centralism is at the heart of both the liberal and the radical critiques of the commercial shift in Israeli broadcast.

2.3.2 The Liberal Critique: “Channel 2: The Bonfire of (Imported) Vanities”

As Weinman (1999) and Alper (2002) point out, despite the availability of multiple channels in the new broadcast environment the Israeli audience in the post-monopoly television era refused to fragment and instead converged around the local channels, and especially Channel 2 (ibid; ibid). Consequently, they argue that the national tribal bonfire wasn’t dismantled, as predicted by Katz and Liebes, but rather simply migrated to Channel 2 (Weinman, 1999, 99). In these critiques, conservative Statist complaints about the demise of television as a shared national space are replaced by more liberal complaints concerning the commercial channel “taking over” and functioning as a new, commercial but nonetheless centralized, “monopoly” (Weinman, 1999; Alper, 2002).

This discourse nevertheless shares some of the Katz/Liebes type critique as it also criticizes the new commercial environment for its reliance and “cheap cultural imports” of globalized entertainment. So, while both Weinman and Alper (2002) claims Channel 2’s dominance symbolizes the victory of the tribal bonfire over multichannelism - Weinman also warns that it is a “bonfire of vanities” offering very little serious content and a great deal of globalized escapism and entertainment. However, while the conservative and liberals seem to agree that elements of globalized popular culture are
responsible for some of the harmful results of the shift in broadcast they present a profoundly different perception of the relationship between commercialism and global entertainment elements and the way broadcast functions as a shared national arena. Thus, they begin pointing out the more hybrid dynamics involved in the rearticulation of national broadcast in a commercialized globalized age.

Not sharing Kat’s and Liebes’s glorification of the old monopoly system, Weinman (1999) is worried that the dominance of Channel 2 and its “bonfire of vanities” stifles the very diversity and pluralism that multichannelism was suppose to create. Instead of providing space for new expression of a more diverse, “authentic” local cultural experience, Channel 2’s bonfire of vanities promotes “cultural imperialism” or “Americanization” which threatens to obliterate the distinctiveness of local Israeli experience (ibid). This is aggravated further by the fact that the new tribal bonfire includes not only the commercial channel but also its vulnerable environment, namely the desperately competing public channel that rapidly started imitating it. Thus, Weinman argues, instead of a healthy competition between alternatives intended by the legislators the different Israeli channels, all governed by the commercial logics of the quest for “rating”, now offer a homogenous blend of “rating proof” entertainment genres.

While for Weinman, Channel 2’s dominance preclude a ”collapse of the center” as Katz and Liebes threatened, its “bonfire of vanities” nevertheless transformed the nature of the Israeli televised “ritual of cultural integration” (my emphasis). In his account this ritual is now composed of a mix of primetime genres such as news, game-
shows, talk-shows, movies, and imported series which together, as he expressively put it produces the “sticky, sugary brew of the forming new Israeli culture” (ibid, 101).

As a result of Channel 2’s “surrender to the outside invasion and the charms of an imported bonfire of vanities,” Weinman argues that Israeli youth now live in a global-virtual culture, whose language and signs are those of the rating culture (ibid, 102). The values promoted are the glorification of money, economical success, social glamour, and the desire to live and succeed abroad. Commercial broadcast also cultivates sexism and a cynical and alienated attitude towards the political process, the administration and all branches of government (ibid).

Weinman does not distinguish in his analysis of this new “homogeneous mix” between “canned” or finalized programs, imported directly from abroad, and locally produced shows predicated on “successful formats adapted from overseas” (ibid, 99). For him, both types of televisual texts have a similar effect in the fueling the “bonfire of vanities.” He describes the local television industry responsible for the productions of such shows as a “junk industry” catering to fulfill the public’s “insatiable hunger for entertainment.” This industry that “flourished overnight around Channel 2” is composed of “cheap, fast, production companies devoid of any cultural pretense” (ibid, 100).

While for Weinman commercial multichannel broadcast holds the potential to serve larger social and cultural goals, Channel 2’s franchisers who are concerned only with their commercial bottom line do nothing but provide mindless entertainment and immediate gratification for the lowest possible denominator. However, he argues, those given access to derive profit from the public asset of broadcast should be made to serve
society, advance “appropriate” national and cultural values, diversify and develop public
debate, improve the quality of local cultural production and raise society’s cultural level
(ibid, 103). Unfortunately, instead of fulfilling the promise of true diversity in local
Israeli broadcast Channel 2’s “bonfire of vanities” creates a hollow and corrupted
national space, shaped by crass vulgar commercialism and harmful cultural imperialism
which poses a risk of obliterating the distinctiveness of the local Israeli experience.

However - similarly to Katz and Liebes, Weinman’s approach to the relationship
between commercial and globalized entertainment element and national goals in
broadcast is too simplistic. While he does acknowledge that Channel 2’s broadcast and its
consumption create a shred national experience for Israelis the value he assigned to the
contents and characteristics of that experience is extremely reductive. The problem lies in
his homogeneous perception of the content of “rating culture” and the cultural and
national significance of “entertainment”.

First of all – Weinman shares Katz’s and Liebes’s wholesale rejection of
entertainment television as a relevant arena for the production of local national culture.
For him, Channel 2 fails its mission to diversify Israeli broadcast mostly because of its
entertainment centered nature, which replaces the Statist “tribal bonfire” with a
commercial “bonfire of vanities.” Commercially motivated broadcast seeking to entertain
and not to inform cannot function, in this account, appropriately in a national capacity.
Nevertheless, Weinman’s own argument seems to suggest the exact opposite as he
describes the Israeli public’s consumption of Channel 2 as a new “ritual of cultural
integration” tuned in for by a mass national audience on primetime nightly.
Furthermore – Weinman’s account is reductive in its approach to the effect of “globalization” or the introduction of globally popular elements within the local context of commercial broadcast. To begin with, his analysis makes no distinctions between wholesale imports of finalized or “canned” hit shows from the U.S and other foreign locals and between local Israeli productions, which draw on adaptations of globally popular format. As I will shortly demonstrate, this is particularly inadequate given the wide range within the practice of adaptation - from the loosest reliance on “high concepts” or genres, to more specific if unlicensed “borrowing” from available program formats, through straightforward, licensed or unlicensed “copy-cutting” or “cloning” – in itself never “purely” detached from local context (Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming). He thus unnecessarily reduces what is in fact a very nuanced and complex field of local cultural production.

This analysis seems to suggest the existence of some pre-existing, “pure” and “authentic” Israeli national culture that is “invaded” and polluted by cultural imports of both forms and contents. However, as several critics have noted – to dismiss Channel 2’s programming as merely the “dumbing down” products of cultural imperialism is to lose sight of one of its major ideological influences – the ongoing negotiation and dissemination of Israeli national hegemonic culture. Weinman’s account fails to grasp the way the pleasures of commercial entertainment can serve and fulfill deeply ideological national functions. As my study wishes to argue, despite being influenced by “globalization” entertainment elements do not necessarily contradict local “authenticity”. The fact that Channel 2 broadcasters and producers are working within commercial
constraints doesn’t necessarily mean they eschew serving hegemonic national values and goals. The third critique of Channel two, presented in the next section takes up this argument as its main point.

2.3.3 The Radical Critique: “Channel 2: The New Statism”

The third critique of Channel 2 attacks the commercial channel not for importing a globalized bonfire of vanities, but rather for its overt nationalism and its role in perpetuating traditional hegemonic national ideologies of Statism. Yuran (2001) argues that the commercial channel, like the public monopoly of yesteryear is deeply engaged in reproducing traditional Zionist Statist ideology. This critique, predicated on a neo-Marxist Althusserian approach, argues Channel 2 replaces the public channel as a Zionist ideological state apparatus, operating as a “new and improved” instrument for the maintenance of Statist ideology.

Channel 2, Yuran thus argues, is the quintessential ideological expression of the Israeli state today (ibid, 41). Its introduction to the scene made the Statist monopoly channel obsolete and ridiculous, not because Statism became obsolete – but because the older channel’s *brand* of it has. Channel 2 created an updated version of Statism, more suitable for contemporary times as it is designed to serve both the state and capital simultaneously and as effectively. Thus, privatization only fortified television’s status as a state apparatus (ibid, 158).

Statism that was allegedly vanquished and became ludicrous with the establishment of the commercial channel actually returns in a more blunt version in Channel 2 (ibid, 40). According to Yuran, while the monopoly television’s Statism was
characterized by a ritualistic celebration of the state and its symbols aiming to “show” the state – Channel 2’s new statism is focused on the anxiety triggered by the states “disintegration” in a postzionist age. Its main ritual revolves around the demonstration of this anxiety by producing exaggerated images of the state whose content is the concern about its loss – the breakdown of national values, the deterioration of the youth, the fragmentation of “the people,” and other metaphysical threats on the state and the purity of the nation (ibid, 160).

Thus, while channel 2 is connected in the Katz/Liebes type analysis to the weakening of the centralized state, Yuran argues it also operates in anxious response to that process. As a result, Yuran argues, Channel 2 presents a new, exaggerated, fierce, and exposed emotional phantasmatic version of Statism. Since the concrete relationship between television and the state is weakened, the channel dedicates itself to the state “as it is imagined” or as it exists in the realm of fantasy (ibid, 45).

Consequently Yuran’s analysis allows us to see that the binary opposition between “Statist broadcast” and “what the people want” - or nationalistic ideology and commercial pleasure - is a false one. Yuran acknowledges that televised Statism always had components that Israelis desired and took pleasure in - the pleasure of being a worried or enraged citizen, the pleasure of being “in the know.” In other words, the political pleasure of “being Israeli.”

For Yuran, Channel 2’s “Statist entertainment” provides this pleasure not necessarily in its entertainment shows but rather in its “serious” programming. The pleasure derived from this form of Statist entertainment is a means of reproducing the
state in an era of commercial broadcast, predicated on the commercial incentive to entertain the audience (ibid). Accordingly, despite the acknowledgment that entertainment and pleasure can serve an ideological national function, even Yuran’s analysis still focuses not so much on entertainment shows but rather on the way this plays out in “serious” programming. However, in the examples he analyzes he does address both news and entertainment shows interchangeably.

To conclude – Yuran’s critique focuses on Channel 2 as a Zionist ideological state apparatus, working to perpetuate the Statist ideology through broadcast by rearticulating it in a new commercialized age. Unlike Katz, Liebes, and Weinman, Yuran perceives the interconnectedness and continuity between the old and new broadcast systems and their nationalistic ideological function. In his account, Channel 2 does not simply erode the televisual tribal bonfire’s Statist nationalism, nor does it replace it with a “hollow” Americanized ritual of cultural integration, predicated solely on the empty consumerist values of global late capitalism. Instead Yuran points out the way commercial broadcast in a postzionist age of transformation and change, is deeply invested in the ongoing ideological process of Israeli statehood and Zionist nationalism. By addressing the nationalistic ideological function of commercial broadcast, and the significant ideological role that pleasure and entertainment can play in those, Yuran’s critique points to a more complex relationship between commercialism and nationalism in the new Israeli broadcast environment.

While this analysis points out some of the blind spots in both the conservative and liberal Zionist debates, it is not without its own shortcomings (or shortsightedness). Just
like Katz, Liebes, and Weinman - Yuran’s analysis is also reductive in significant ways. Yuran’s overemphasizes Channel 2’s compliance with Statist ideologies at the expense of acknowledging the profound ways in which it also must break with older hegemonic structurations to achieve and sustain its viability as the new, commercial-national Israeli televisial bonfire. In other words, Channel 2’s Statism is not really the same hegemonic ideology simply fleshed out and exposed for what it has always been (Yuran, 2001, p. 22). In actuality, there are some fundamental differences in the ideological processes informing and creating new “post-Zionist” Israeliness. Channel 2 cleverly negotiates this new and constantly shifting ideological terrain.

Yuran’s analysis, which focuses on Channel 2’s new Statism as anxious hyperbolic response to the disintegration of the centralized state, misses the multidimensional nature of the channel’s response to contemporary Israel’s cultural processes. His critique practically ignores the important role that the trends towards “multiculturalism” and “globalization” play in Channel 2’s broadcast. These two major trends that Liebes mention as shifting Israeliness in general and Israeli broadcast in particular in the postzionist age (Liebes, 2003).

As I will shortly demonstrate using the KN case study, Channel 2’s address of these trends is not marginal to its “Statist” nationalistic functions, but rather absolutely essential to the new shared national experience it offers the Israeli audience.

If Channel 2 had failed to address these new ideological components it wouldn’t have been able to “crack” the postzionist “Israeli genome.” Even more importantly, Channel 2 is not merely anxious or ambivalent regarding these cultural processes, it
actually **celebrates** them – especially through its entertainment programming. In fact, I argue, the celebration of these processes in an affirmative manner is the secret behind Channel 2’s success to position itself as a central, arena where the production of new “Israeliness” get collectively negotiated in a postzionist age of multiple structural and ideological shifts.

### 2.4 TranScendiNg the BiNaries: A Postzionist GloBal-Television Studies Approach

The three critiques outlined above are all reductive in their own way and thus fail to grasp the multidimensional, flexible nature of the hegemonic process taking place in and through Channel 2. The overarching problem shared by these otherwise quite different approaches is an underlying disregard for the way in which Channel 2 broadcasters and producers - working within a specific set of commercial, institutional, legislative, industrial, ideological, cultural, and national constraints – generate a viable cultural arena that gives voice to a new postzionist Israeliness.

For one thing, the approaches outlined above oversimplify the complex relationship between broadcasters, producers, and audiences in a commercial system. They all seem to work within a notion of the audience as an aggregation of passive cultural dupes targeted as the “lowest denominator” by “mindless entertainment” or bombarded with nationalistic propaganda. However, commercial broadcasters have a much more nuanced relationship with its audience (Ang, 1991). As Ang demonstrates, understanding and trying to predict or “crack” the audience’s taste and desires is the commercial broadcaster’s foremost task. Decision-making processes within broadcast
institutions are thus constantly informed by formal and informal knowledge of the mysterious and ever-evasive construct of “the audience,” such considerations influence and determine in many ways the creative process (ibid).

In the case of Israeli commercial broadcasters, producers struggling to capture a mass national audience are required to navigate an extremely complex terrain, informed by deep ideological tensions in a time of all-encompassing cultural and structural shift. Explanations reducing this process to either the “dismantling the Zionist collective by dispersing the center;” satisfying the audiences’ “gluttony for cheap entertainment;” or “hooking” it ideologically through the pleasures of “Statist entertainment” – are all too simplistic and reductive.

Instead, Channel 2 broadcasters and producers, working within a commercially oriented system and seeking to capture as big an audience as possible, find themselves negotiating a cultural space informed by these different ideological trends and their constant interaction. As I will shortly demonstrate by looking at KN, Channel 2 producers constantly respond to and negotiate the ongoing ideological shifts informing the construction of Israeli national identity in a postzionist, multicultural, post-melting pot age. Their work is shaped by a complex and ambivalent relationship with the older hegemonic Statist mode of address, which shapes their critics’ but also their audiences’ expectation alongside more current postzionist cultural trends such as the multicultural approach reflected in The Second Broadcast Authority Law. However, at the same time, Channel 2 broadcasters and producers negotiate their place in a growingly globalizing television industry – also influencing local audiences’ desires and tastes.
As a result of this process, Channel 2 represents, expresses, creates, and celebrates a new, viable, even “authentic” national identity – at least as “authentic” as the older Statist monopoly channel’s version of Israeliness had been. It does so exactly because it struggles and manages to give voice to some of the main tensions informing the ongoing contemporary construction of “Israeliness” in a postzionist era. Commercialism, “Americanization” or globalization, on the one hand, “Statism” on the other hand, and yet, on a third level postzionist multicultural and post-national notions are not “interruptions” corrupting this identity or its broadcasted reflection. Rather, I argue that it is through the ongoing friction between these elements that this identity gets constructed.

This is exactly what I aim to demonstrate by looking at KN in its particular historical context and from the multiple perspectives of producers/broadcasters and critics. By looking at the history of the show from its early development in the particular local and global, industrial and national-historical context this study can demonstrate how Channel 2 – in adapting one of the more popular trends in global television entertainment - is responding in significant and profound ways to the Israeli experience. To do so, the next chapter will trace the early development and “evolution” of KN from its early days in relation to the wider Israeli historical and cultural context, the industrial context of Channel 2, and larger global trends in television industry in the age of the “global formats.”
Chapter 3: Lo Nafsik Lashir and the Pre-History of Kohav Nolad

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The early 2000s was a time of great turmoil and distress in Israel as the country was dealing with the aftermath of PM Yitzhak Rabin’s 1995 assassination, the subsequent demise of the Oslo peace accord, and the eventual outbreak, in September 2001, of a second Palestinian uprising (Intifadat El-Akza) accompanied by massive waves of terror attacks on Israeli civilians by the Hamas organization. These events, which seemed to have sent the nation on an unprecedented downward spiral formed the uneasy terrain commercial broadcast, and more specifically dominant Channel 2, had to negotiate as it was coming to its own, nearing its first decade anniversary. This was also the immediate context for the emergence of Kohav Nolad, the reality talent competition program which many critics agree managed to “crack the Israeli genome” (Reich, 2008), and “best capture the spirit of its times” (Becker, 2005).

Revisiting her arguments about the Israeli shift to commercial broadcast around this time Liebes (2003, p. 189), lamented that in this “post-Oslo” reality the new commercialized, Americanized, globalized entertainment focused medium of Israeli television no longer fulfills the pressing national needs of Israeli viewers, longing for broadcast to provide a shared national space that would help them deal with “the situation.” Instead, “privatized channels, committed first and foremost to profit, not to the public” and “geared mainly to entertainment, not news,” are “still addressing viewers
as individuals,” even as they become “worried members” of a “tribal collective under siege” (ibid, p. 189).

Liebes’ concern is focused on the issue of news coverage and the way the multichannel commercial broadcast environment allegedly fails to provide a shared space for the Israeli collective to discuss current affairs. Consequently for her, anything having to do with entertainment remains inherently outside of the discussion. However, I wish to argue, it is exactly in the arena of entertainment that Channel 2, the new Israeli commercialized televisual “tribal bonfire,” operates to provide Israelis a shared national space and a collective experience that allow them to negotiate and recreate their national identity in a postzionist era of transformations and uncertainty.

Despite operating for profit and rating motives rather than seeking to fulfill any official national agenda, Channel 2 broadcasters seeking to attract the widest possible national audience and gain commercial success must take into account their audiences’ cultural expectation, shaped over thirty years of public monopoly broadcast, to be addressed by television as members of a national collective. This is also the secret behind their ability to generate such hype and achieve such cultural centrality.

Therefore, although Liebes complains that commercial television fails to fulfill the needs of the Israeli viewers for “national integration,” this and the next chapters will demonstrate that “escapist” entertainment shows like KN ultimately work to address

---

5 “the situation” are Israeli “code words” for threats to the nation’s security – wars, terror waves, and other hostile events or tension with the Palestinians or with neighboring Arab nations are grouped under that heading.
them as part of the Israeli national collective. Although, as Yuran (2001) argues, nationalism indeed plays a very significant role in that broadcast, this nationalistic mechanism clearly works differently in Channel 2 in comparison with the more explicit efforts made by public monopoly television.

This chapter begins exploring the particulars of Channel 2’s national address by looking at the “pre-history” of KN as it evolved from a patriotic 2002 game show by the name of Lo Nafsik Lashir (“We Won’t Stop Singing,” LNL hereafter). Looking at the historical context for the production of the KN mother show LNL, this chapter explores the particular local context that shaped the evolution of Kohav Nolad ’s production, text, and public reception as well as the nature of the shared or collective national experience Channel 2 offers the Israeli viewers in its central entertainment content.

Focusing on the industrial biography of the production team, I will demonstrate that they are prominent representatives of the commercial channel as a whole and lay the foundations for understanding this show’s cultural significance in the particular context of Israeli television’s industry. Despite the producers’ appropriation of ideas and elements of “foreign” shows (which is a sign of the time but also a long standing reality of television in belated locales), the result of their creative efforts is neither a bonfire of vanities of the cultural imperialism variety (as Weinman, (1999), would have it), nor is it pure and simple nationalistic mechanism of Statist propaganda, as Yuran (2001) would no doubt perceive it. Rather, the show’s rearticulation of some fundamentally Zionist

---

6 While news is not the focus of the present study it is still worth mentioning that Channel 2 news coverage is also pretty centralizing, especially given that, as many critics pointed out – its coverage and the public
traditions represented by the Hebrew song (Zemer ivry) and the practice of collective singing (shira be tzibur) within a new, commercialized, cultural field represented by Channel 2 style mix of contemporary “globalized” televisual forms of entertainment, glamour, and celebrities – created an updated, escapist, commercial, nostalgic celebration of the “good-old state of Israel” identity which serves as a quintessential example for the postzionist cultural dynamics typifying Channel 2.

3.2 LNL IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY 2000s ISRAEL

The award winning first season of Kohav Nolad in 2003 was the reincarnation or “spin-off” of LNL a patriotic musical game show produced by the private company Teddy Production and broadcasted by the Channel 2 franchise company Keshet Broadcast. Liberally appropriating or “borrowing” elements from several “foreign” or global game show formats, LNL producers concocted a distinctly Israeli program by tapping into the wave of nostalgia for “good-old-Israel” that was sweeping the country in that time of great national strife (Z. Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006).

The early 2000s indeed represent an intersection of intense social, cultural, political, and ideological contradictions for Israeli society. On the one hand, the ideological and cultural post-Zionist shifts that were transforming the country were now gradually getting more established. The new trends of post-modernization, multiculturalism, and cultural and economical globalization that exploded over the 1990s were in the forefront of public consciousness and debate for almost a decade. Processes of commercialization, and privatization as well as a more multicultural approach to

channel coverage are pretty homogenous (Yuran, 2006; Katz, 1996).
Israeli identity, although still widely controversial, were no longer shocking new cultural phenomena. Similarly, Israelis were getting used to the counter-hegemonic discourses challenging the Zionist narrative regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The political events of the early 1990s, mainly the Oslo peace negotiations with previously demonized P.L.O leader Arafat lead by the Rabin-Peres administration, with encouragement from Clinton’s White House, marked a deep structural and ideological shift in the mainstream Israeli consciousness. The prospects of vast territorial compromises in Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and even Jerusalem and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state as part of a long term peace agreement were gaining momentum in mainstream Israeli public debate.

Unfortunately however, these growing postzionist trends were also the cause for a growing political and ideological divide between that Israeli “mainstream” and groups like the religious right and “the camp of the whole land of Israel,” which was extremely alienated by these processes. As Kimmerling (2004), Ram (2005) and others demonstrate, these cultural and ideological divides were creating a growingly polarized Israeli society. These tensions and the polarization they create culminated tragically in the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. This violent political event practically derailed the peace process and thwarted processes of Israel’s “normalization” that were set in motion in the early 1990s. It also threw into sharp relief the extent of the contradictions of the postzionist era in Israel, typified by simultaneous trends of liberalization and a greater opening to the world at large and the opposite trend of
particularization and retreat to the boundaries delineated by fundamental religion and
primordial identity politics (Kimmerling, 2004; Ram, 2005).

By the early 2000s the national high hopes spawned in the mid-1990s era of the
Oslo accord, the peace agreement with Jordan, and the establishment of friendlier
economic and political relations with several Arab nations, were shattering in the bloody
aftermath of Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination. The wave of Hamas suicide attacks on
Israeli citizens that followed the assassination and attacks on the northern border by the
Hezbollah in Lebanon, combined with the rise of the right wing Likud party lead by
Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996, seemed to have brought on the complete demise of the
Oslo accord and its promises of a “normalized,” peaceful Middle East.

The Second Intifada riots that brook out after Ariel Sharon’s notorious visit to the
Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September 2001 were extremely traumatic for a nation
that was basking in the relative prosperity and peacefulness of the 1990s. The events
following Rabin’s assassination stood in sharp contrast to the optimistic vision of a
globalized, free Israeli society, liberated from its cumbersome and shameful legacy of
occupation and oppression, and happily joining the global economy. Instead, to deal with
the increased death toll of terrorist attacks the Israeli Defense Army launched the brutal
and controversial operation “Defensive Shield,” the largest military operation in the West
Bank since the 1967 Six Day War. While the operation was considered successful in
curbing the terror wave and returning relative security to the Israeli street, it left
thousands of Palestinian wounded and hundreds dead, had a relatively steep toll of IDF
casualties, and provoked wide international condemnation of multiple human rights violation, most notoriously a suspected massacre in the city of Jeanine.

In response to these dire national events, Israelis retreated to an atmosphere of paranoia and seclusion typical for a “society under siege” (Liebes, 2003). As Liebes puts it, the people of Israel were harshly awakened at that time from “the American dream” of their country as a globalized, transnational success story and “brought down to earth with a thump” to face the inevitability and harsh realities of the ongoing primordial conflict (ibid, p. 189).

As previously mentioned, one rather central response for this situation was a wave of nostalgia towards the “days of good-old Israel” that washed over the country. A major part of this nostalgic wave was a turn towards and renewed fascination with the Zionist musical culture of the Hebrew song (Zemer Ivri) and its accompanying cultural practice of communal or collective singing known as shirah be-tzibur (literally - public singing) (Morag, 2002; Kaminer, 2002; Tzeler, 2002, Alper, 2002). Shirah-be-tzibur evenings and Hebrew dance parties were organized throughout the country, even in the globalized “secular capitol,” Tel-Aviv (Morag, 2002; Kaminer, 2002). In a Yediot Aharonot story about this phenomenon journalist and cultural critic Amir Kaminer writes:

After it had already been eulogized the Hebrew song (Zemer Ivri) proved it was not ready for burial…(in fact it) has never been better…sophisticated Tel Avivian youth are suddenly singing with shironim (Hebrew song booklets)...instead of jumping around to the sounds of internationally renowned DJ’s visiting from abroad….everybody seem to be jumping on the band wagon … even the Barbie
rock club in Tel Aviv, not exactly well known for its engagement with the “Song of land of Israel” genre, is introducing *shirah be-tzibur* nights led by (leading Israeli rock artists). (2002, July 17, p. 18).

In its first season LNL focused on bringing the public sing-along nostalgic Zionist wave to the television studio. For Kaminer, and many others, the show represents a high point in the nostalgic Zionist wave:

The pinnacle of all this is of course the television show *Lo Nafsik Lashir* …in which contestants compete on their knowledge of Hebrew songs (ibid, 18).

As one of Channel 2’s biggest rating success during the turbulent 2002 season, LNL is a leading example for the way the channel worked to respond to the national situation by tapping into a major contemporary local cultural trend and utilizing it to create a shared national space through a televisial experience which helped Israelis deal with “the situation” – albeit through an entertaining game show, drawing elements from “foreign” popular game show formats.

### 3.3 Format TV and Banal Nationalism

While commercial entertainment television programs which rely on adapted formats, especially those of the game-show variety, serve as a favorite punching bag for scholars and public critics of the “cultural imperialism” school, several new studies point out the way in which these shows can play significant part in fulfilling broadcasts’ “national project” in various locations across the globe. Waisbord (2004) argues that format television shows, even those not ostensibly designed to articulate national
narratives still provide spaces for the representation of national culture and organize experience of the national (ibid; p. 372).

According to him not only “high genres” of narrative television like drama or documentary but also game-shows, variety, or reality shows can offer opportunities for audiences to recognize themselves as members of national communities. However, the question of how the national is expressed and recreated in those lighter entertainment genres has not received sufficient attention. Invoking the concept of banal nationalism Waisbord begins to answer this question by pointing out that television is intertwined with the national in multifaceted ways, which gives it the power to naturalize cultural connections in everyday viewing (ibid).

Waisbord’s main example for banal nationalism is the almost invisible function of broadcast language. As a result of the need to broadcast in “local” languages around the world television regularly keeps nationhood alive by “flagging” spoken language and drawing and sustaining linguistic boundaries. Through this mechanism even commercial programmers that are not explicitly interested in articulating national culture wind up providing a place for the representation of the national (ibid, p. 373).

Chiara Ferrari’s work on Italian television’s adaptation of popular American game shows in the 1950s and 60s demonstrate how non-narrative television can appeal to the national collective memory through invocation not only of language, but also of other cultural specific elements. For example, in the Italian adaptation of the $64,000 question historical events and specific cultural artifacts such as music, film and art, were utilized
as materials for questions, contributing to the show’s ideological function of solidifying a homogenized trans-regional Italian national identity (in Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming).

In a similar way, LNL, an entertaining game show based on a popular global television trend that draws on the cultural heritage of Hebrew music and the accompanying practice of communal singing, in fact invokes Israeli national identity. Looking into the history of the production and the industrial biography of the producers, this chapter demonstrates the way Channel 2’s alleged bonfire of (imported) vanities, in fact, work to rearticulate and update some fundamental Zionist cultural traditions within new commercialized televisual forms offering a new shared national experience that represents the “spirit if the times.”

3.4 LNL’S PRODUCTION STORY

As discussed in chapter 2 of this study, with the introduction of channel 2 a new Israeli television industry emerged seemingly “overnight” (Weinman, 1999). While Weinman dismissed it as “junk-industry,” mainly because the bulk of its products were commercial entertainment content, the emerging field of “industry studies” provides an innovative framework, which allows a more nuanced evaluation of media industrial processes and their cultural significance, even within a commercial framework.

Industry Studies stress the importance of analyzing the products of media industries’ texts within the systems, which shape their production, distribution and reception. These processes take place within a specific economic and political system constituted by relations between the state, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations such as the media (Kellner, 2009).
According to Holt and Perren (2009), this emerging mode of research helps explore the power of the media industries to shape cultural agendas in local, transnational, and/or global processes. Another aspect fleshed out by this framework is the recognition of the relative power and autonomy of individual agents involved in the production process to express divergent ideological and political perspectives, creative visions, and cultural attitudes within larger institutional structures, and thus influence and shape the significance of the text and its reception process (ibid, p. 3).

By looking at the work process and industrial biography of the professional team responsible for the production of LNL and later KN, this study is able to explore in a nuanced way the lived realities through which seemingly abstract processes of “globalization” or “post-modernization” occur locally, “on the ground,” in a very concrete manner as individual agents, in this case the producers of a Channel 2 entertainment programs, negotiate a given set of organizational, ideological, technical, and cultural constraints.

LNL was produced for Channel 2’s dominant franchiser Keshet Broadcast by the private company Teddy Productions, owned and run by veteran Israeli stage producers, married couple Tmira and Dudu Yardeni. The Yardenis went into television in the early days of channel 2. As LNL and KN host/co-producer actor Tzvika Hadar puts it, Teddy was one of the first production companies to recognize that commercial television was “going to be the next thing” (Z. Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006). Before going into television the Yardenis had a long career as producers and artist’s managers in the Israeli music and stage industry. Since establishing Teddy in 1973, the two managed
and produced some of Israel’s top musicians and performing artists. They also produced and imported big entertainment events, rock concerts, kids entertainment shows, and so on and so forth.

In the early 1990s Dudu had to go work in L.A after a series of financial flops brought *Teddy* to the verge of bankruptcy. When he returned to Israel in 1991, he brought with him the idea to produce “Comedy Store” evenings, in which the audience moves around between different rooms and watches several stand-up shows all for the price of a single ticket (Shehnik, 2005, p. 9). Through *The Comedy Store*, the Yardenis discovered some of Israel’s leading stand-up comedians of the time. One of their discoveries was Tzvika Hadar, an acting student who came to Tel Aviv from the southern city of Beer Sheva pursuing a stage career.

The Comedy Store provided *Teddy* with their first big break on commercial television. When Channel 2 was introduced the Yardeni duo pitched the different franchise companies with a show based on the stand-up venture. One of the three companies, *Telad*, picked it up and *The Comedy Store* show started airing on Channel 2 in March 1994. The show brought together for the first time producer Tmira Yardeni and actor/stand-up comedian Tzvika Hadar with director Yoav Tzafir. Tzafir, the son of Israeli television legend Tuvia Tzafir - an actor/comedian who dominated the entertainment programming of monopoly Statist television in the 1980s – was a young director, fresh out of film school in Tel Aviv University at the time.

As Tzafir puts it in an interview for this study, the Teddy team story is the story of Channel 2’s and Israeli commercial television industry’s professionalization:
My generation was the one that graduated from TV and film school exactly at the time when Channel 2 broke out, in 1993. When I (started my MFA) there was still no employment for young directors. Exactly as I was finishing school both cables and Channel 2 exploded. It was a real revolution for the local television industry as up until 1993 there was only Channel 1…The industry was born almost over night. …Israeli television professionalized together with my generation…in Channel 2. (Y. Tzafir, personal communication, June 21, 2007).

As part of their professionalization process, Teddy—like other Israeli production companies—had to learn and master the televisual language with which they had no, or very little previous experience. As in many other cases, in The Comedy Store shows the process of professionalization entailed taking notes from the more established traditions of American and British television. For example, Tzafir explains that at first the Teddy team, inexperienced with the medium of television simply televised the stand-up routines from their stage show, drawing on their pool of stand-up comedians:

I came in on the fifth episode of The Comedy Store and before that it was more like a televised stand-up show. I made it more televisual (introducing the sketch format), and brought in all the Monty Python and SNL style nonsense humor which I always admired…from that group, led of course by Tzvika (Hadar); a connection was made that continues to this day. (ibid)

With Tzafir’s professional touch and the fresh talent of the stand-up comedians, The Comedy Store quickly became one of Channel 2’s earliest locally produced hit shows. It generated very high ratings, developed a cult following, and presented new
idioms and slang expressions into spoken Hebrew. It also made Hadar, the star and charismatic center of the show, a household name. The character played by the actor, Jojo Halastra, a lovable if aggressive “Ars” (literally “pimp” in Arabic, used in Hebrew as slang word for thug), became one of the symbols of new Israeliness in the age of Channel 2 (Yehudai, 2006). Jojo Halastra’s weekly sketch commented playfully on other television shows or commercials on Israeli television, ridiculing them as “nerdy” and offering a more “appropriate” Jojo style remake. Hadar’s creative use of Hebrew slang and his neologisms provided much of the comedy of the show and some of its most notable contribution to Hebrew slang.

As Yehudai puts it in an 2006 profile of Hadar published on NRG.com:

Tzvika’s story is in fact the story of Channel 2. He arrived from below, developed with the simple people and became a powerful and influential cultural hero with a place of honor in every Israeli living room. Hadar is the full package…the host of the state…the quintessential “Eretz Yisraeli” (The land of Israel) and the quintessential “culture for the masses” (ibid)

In subsequent years, the Teddy production team was responsible for some of Channel 2’s (as well as some other local cable stations’) most successful hit shows – game shows, sitcoms, and children’s programs. Most notable in that regard was the Channel 2 hit sitcom Shemesh (“Sunshine”) starring Hadar and directed by Tzafir. With the ending of Shemesh in 2002, the team was approached by Keshet Broadcast who suggested they produce a musical game show. The Teddy team – executive producer Tmira Yardeni, Hadar, and Tzafir together with Keshet’s program manager at the time,
Ran Telem, developed the format for the new show, *Lo Nafsik Lashir*, which became an instant rating success (Hadar in Bar-On, 2004)

In describing the work process of formatting the show both Hadar and Tzafir mention the national atmosphere of the early 2000s and the nostalgic wave as one critical component influencing the creation of the show but also the importance of ideas borrowed from other game shows in the world. Tzafir:

After Shemesh we felt we wanted to do something entertaining, a studio show, very Israeli and we created a game-show called *Lo Nafsik Lashir* There was the second Intifada in the year 2000 and the Israelis returned to this whole thing of nostalgia and the Hebrew song. This was part of it and also I have to say … that it was a trend that belonged to a global trend. It’s not distinctly Israeli. Similar game-shows existed in the world - *not exactly the same*, because we always see something and then we say – lets do *something of our own* in that area. (personal communication, June 21, 2007).

Similarly, Hadar also stresses the combination of particular national circumstances and elements borrowed from international formats in the idea for the show:

Back at the time there was this new wave in the country of nostalgic return to the good old public sing-along…we took a format that was already tried out in a couple of countries…and developed some sort of a game-show…. This shira-be-tzibur wave was “on the table” and we succeeded in turning it into a televiusal

---

7 My emphases S.S
format. it doesn’t always succeed – but we made it happen (T, Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006).

The ingenuity and originality of the show’s format in utilizing the cultural tradition of *shirah be tzibur* was of particular importance for Hadar et al at *Teddy Productions*. The producers, in fact, went out of their way to stress this and point to it as the source of the show’s success in interviews in the press, and for this study. For example, in a piece about the show in the television magazine Pnai Plus, journalist Yaakov Bar-On provoked Hadar by asking him: “Did you and *Keshet* hitch a ride on this existing wave, or did the wave hitch a ride with you guys?” Hadar replied:

You know what? Lets say we did – what does it matter? We brought this genre to television in a brand new form. For me it’s not that complicated to bring a program where people sing songs from a *shironim* (Hebrew song booklet), this is nice, but we have already been there and done that. We wanted to find a different direction. People who understand the medium of television know it is not so simple to find the direction. (in Bar-On, 2003)

The result of these efforts was a very entertaining and original game show, that was able to take the wave of nostalgia for the Zionist traditions represented by the musical language of the Hebrew Song (*Zemer Ivri*), and the accompanying practice of communal singing (*shirah be tzibur*) and rearticulate them within the new, commercialized, cultural form.

Far from a copycat product of cultural imperialism LNL was premised on a nostalgic attachment to some traditional Israeli cultural practices which it rearticulated
within a new, commercialized televisual format. It is through this process of rearticulation, I argue, that this show and Channel 2 as a whole work to create a “shared national space.” The success of the show to accomplish this rearticulation and its popularity made it the center of a larger discussion regarding the nation’s cultural response to “the situation,” the phenomenon of nostalgia for the nation’s past, and the central role music and culture play in that process.

3.5 NOSTALGIA, POPULAR MUSIC, AND NATIONAL CULTURE IN ISRAEL

The term nostalgia, originally discussed in relation to pathological homesickness, was first coined in 1688 by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer using the Greek words nostos (a return home) and algos (denoting a painful condition) (Sprengler, 2009). During the nineteenth century, the rise of “modernity,” and the key social transformation of industrial capitalism shifted the cultural emphasis in western culture from space to time. This also had effects on the way nostalgia was understood.

Once defined simply as a pathological desire to return home, to a specific place, nostalgia was gradually reconceptualized as an emotional longing to return to a former time. This time is also usually imagined as better than present circumstances (ibid, p. 15). As Smith, (2000, p. 512) puts it “the essence of twentieth-century nostalgia …is a mental escape from the present to the past - a past colored by false, unreliable imaginings.” In other words, the past recalled nostalgically is to a large extent invented (ibid.).

According to Smith Beardsley, Ruml was the first to point out in the 1930s the political role nostalgic sentiments play in social institutions, arguing that they in fact form the foundation of patriotism and nationalism (ibid, p. 520). In this national and cultural
context, many critics have pointed out that nostalgia often surfaces in response to uncertainty, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with the present (Sprengler, 2009, p. 31; Marcus, 2004). Thus nostalgia has special significance in periods of national crisis and transformation.

According to Sprengler (2009), nostalgia often represents a desire to renounce social and cultural shifts typifying the present in the name of returning to the supposed (or invented) stability of the past. This is one of the reasons nostalgia is often criticized as politically or ideologically conservative. Marcus (2004) which discusses nostalgia in relation to American television and culture points out the way in which it can be used to validate past selves by the invocation of popular styles and the distinctive shared experience that create identity formations. This nostalgic sense of identity can hold particular appeal for its transcendence of social divisions that have become recognized in the intervening years, among a group now riven with fragmentation and conflict (p. 18).

The nostalgic wave of the early 2000s in Israel can be thus understood as representing the Israeli public’s desire to transcend the difficulties, conflicts, and contradictions created by a political and ideological crises in a growingly polarizing society, under attack from the outside and losing its sense of national and cultural consensus and self-validation in a postzionist age of doubts and confusion.

In that sense, the invocation of the musical culture of the Hebrew song and communal singing is particularly significant as this tradition serves as a shortcut for an imagined, older, homogeneous Israeli identity, supposedly unproblematized by current postzionist cultural shifts. Following Marcus’ framework, one can argue that this popular
style and the distinctive shared experience it invokes are particularly helpful in glossing over the growing polarization of Israeli society along the lines of political and cultural divides.

Historically, the musical tradition of the Hebrew song and communal singing played a significant role in the early Zionist efforts to construct a homogenized Israeli national identity through culture. Since the early days of Zionist settlement, great efforts were invested in the creation of a distinct local musical language and a collective consciousness experiencing that language as an indigenous, Hebrew-native style. The Israeli parallel to “native” “folk” music is the music culture known as shirei Eretz Yisrael (“the songs of the land of Israel” SLI hereafter). Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) connotes a geographical area where the Jewish people have developed since antiquity. In modern geopolitical terms, it denotes the territory of Zionist settlement during the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate of Palestine). Eretz Yisrael is thus a concept with strong national, emotional and at the same time nostalgic overtones (Regev and Seroussi, 2004, p. 52).

This musical culture exists mostly as an oral tradition - Israelis know its main body of songs very well, although they don’t necessarily own records of this music. Their typical pattern of consumption is in public gathering devoted to shirah be tzibur where everybody sings together, with no real division between “audience” and “performers” (ibid, p. 276). The public communal context of their performance is one of the most distinctive features of SLI and a crucial factor in determining the evolving content of the SLI canon (ibid, p. 63). The socio-cultural uses and functions of SLI make it into a form
of secular Israeli prayer, a recollection in song of the mainstream Israeli collective memory. This makes this repertory a unique musical phenomenon in Israel (ibid, p. 55).

Designed to celebrate the renewed Jewish national experience and the ideals of the Zionist settlement in Eretz Yisrael, SLI emphasizes specific topics. Lyrics valorize and deal adoringly with the scenery of the land, seasons of the year, agricultural life and political events, mostly wars (ibid, p. 276). Another major literary aspect of SLI is the common use of the first person plural “we” in the narration of many of the songs. This reflected the concern of the Hebrew folk song with the Jewish community of Eretz Yisrael as a collective rather than the individual (ibid, p. 57).

SLI repertory includes songs in diverse styles accumulated through a complex process of selection over a hundred years of Zionist history. The first songs belonging to this category were created in the formative period of Israeli society (approximately 1920-1960), known as the Yishuv (literally “colonization” or “colony”) period as an integral part of the characteristic ideological themes of Israeli nationalism. The vast majority of songs in this period have strong Russian influences because of their composer’s origin. Despite this, they were institutionalized as the distinct markers of “Israeliness” (ibid, p. 58).

Between the mid 1960s and the 1980s SLI already became the subject of nostalgia. One major development shaping the perception of SLI as “old” repertory according to Regev and Seroussi was the rise of Israeli rock (ibid, p. 60). Despite this threat and that posed by the development of middle-of-the-road Israeli pop, the SLI repertoire continued developing in those years mainly through new songs from national
music festivals. In the contemporary period (post 1980s) SLI continues to develop via appropriation of pop and rock ballads that comply with musical and textual demands of the genre (ibid).

Many Israelis perceive this musical culture as an indigenous, authentic and unique musical language. The songs, with the *shira be tzibur* pattern and the folk dances that were created for some, have been institutionalized as the quintessential Israeli national music culture (Regev, 1996, p. 276).

According to Regev and Seroussi (ibid), the relationship of SLI to nostalgia provoked by national crisis was firmly established in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war of October 1973. After the war there was a wave of recording of old SLI songs and composition of new ones. The Yom Kippur war is considered by many a national trauma because of the perceived undermining of Israel’s military might. The return to SLI in the years following the war may be interpreted as a reflection of the yearning for earlier periods of national strength and as way of recuperating from the trauma (ibid, p. 67-68).

The nostalgic return to SLI was also a response to the growing dismantling and criticism of the “good-old” culturally homogeneous Israeli identity in light of growing trends of globalization and claims by marginalized groups for acknowledgment of the cultural multiplicity within the category of Israeliness. According to Regev, (1996) and Regev and Seroussi (2004), in the field of Israeli music this was manifested in the 1970s by the rise of globalized Israeli rock on the one hand and of Muzika Mizrahit (literally “oriental music”), reflecting the culture of Jewish immigrant communities from Arab, Muslim and other non-European countries, on the other hand.
As Regev describes in his 1996 article on Mizrahi and Rock music in Israel, the ever-evolving genre of SLI and these two major alternative musical languages that developed in the country have a very interesting and ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, while many Israeli rock musicians define themselves through rebellion against SLI, several cultural mechanisms have been working to modify Israeli rock’s cosmopolitanism and in effect, incorporate it into the national culture. For one, many of the first rock musicians who achieve some significance in Israeli culture were the graduates of dominant socialization tracks like the *lehakot tzvayiot* (IDF military music ensemble) that planted in them the habitus of typical-traditional Israeliness, including the dispositions of SLI (ibid, 279). Consequently the mechanisms establishing the canon of the genre – such as *shirah be tzibur* gatherings, tend to appropriate into SLI prominent Israeli rock songs (albeit selectively).

On the other hand, many Mizrahi musicians struggle with the opposite tendency – to exclude their music, perceived as “ethnic” and thus different, from the “general” field of Israeli music. The reliance of musicians in this genre on Arabic, Middle Eastern and/or Mediterranean sources, the scarcity of original music, the style of singing, and the view that the performers and the audience were typically lower class, all contributed to this exclusion (ibid, 277). Mizrahi music thus existed outside the usual repertory of *Zemer ivri* despite demands to de-ethnicize and give it an aura of Hebrew native music without additional national adjectives and for total inclusion in the Israeli national culture (ibid, p. 277). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Mizrahi activists and musicians waged a major cultural battle around the exclusion of this music as the Ashkenazi establishment refused...
to include songs of the Mizrahi genre in the playlist of public Statist radio and television. The battle for the inclusion of Mizrahi music played a key role in the Mizrahi protest movement of those and following decades.

Thus, as Regev and Seroussi demonstrate, the two cultural positions staked by cosmopolitan rock and Arab influenced Mizrahi music were challenging the mainstream hegemonic definition of Israeliness since the 1970s. In light of this, the invigoration of SLI in that decade can be perceived as an attempt to fortify its status as “authentic” historical and quintessential Israeli music (ibid, 68). Thus, as I have argued before, shira be tzibur of Hebrew songs serves as a shortcut for an imagined older homogeneous Israeli identity, supposedly unproblematized by current postzionist cultural shifts.

This context begins to shed light on the deep implication of the early 2000s turn towards SLI, and the potential ideological contradictions involved. On the one hand, similarly to the post Yom Kippur trend – the nostalgic turn to shirah be tzibur reflects a growing sense of national crisis and the need to nostalgically embrace an idealized national past and the imagined homogenized national identity it represents. SLI and the cultural connotations it invokes were used to reconnect to the imagined collectivity and togetherness of the past, in order to gloss over the very real cultural fragmentation of the present. Struggling as they were with the seclusion and trauma of a “society under siege” Israelis in the early 2000s were looking for ways to reconnect with some sort of “consensual”, shared national identity – even if it was never “there.”

As prominent Israeli sociologist Oz Almog puts it in an interview about the nostalgic trend in Yediot Aharonot (Morag, 2002, p. NA):
Communal singing became the mass ceremony of Israelis looking for the togetherness and the comradeship of the past...If capitalism marginalized the community then communal singing symbolizes a return to the community. It is a controlled community experience. We don’t want to become a Kibbutz...We still want our privacy and our independence but also the moments of togetherness.

However, as I have shown above, by the early 2000s in the postzionist era, Hebrew music also openly serves as a cultural arena where conflicting claims by different cultural groups with competing interpretations of “Israeliness” get negotiated. Thus, the ability of the musical tradition of shirah betzibur to symbolize togetherness and collectivity in contemporary commercial television depends on a subtle act of renegotiation allowing for those conflicting claims to co-exist somehow.

LNL (and subsequently KN) is particularly interesting for its careful negotiation of the loaded cultural field surrounding Israeli music and its reinvention of the traditional practice of shirah be tzibur along more inclusive and eclectic lines. By looking at this show and the debates surrounding it one can learn a whole lot about the sophisticated means by which Channel 2 negotiates and renegotiates a consensual new construction of Israeliness by rearticulating these cultural elements within a new commercialized cultural field.

3.6 LNL: THE FORMAT

Lo Nafšik Lashir was named after a popular SLI song recorded in 1975 by Yehoram Gaon (words, Haim Hefer, Music, Dubi Zelser). The hit song that quickly
became a must in every shirah be tzibur event, describes a series of possible national crises and prescribes collective singing as a remedy for each and every one of them:

If it'll be bad, and the taxes will go up
and in Moscow, the gates will be locked
and even sugar, will rise in price
we won't, we won't stop singing…

If gasoline, from Tel Aviv to Ramat Gan
is going to cost, like a weekend in Japan
and the U.N will say retreat and give territories back
we won't, we won't stop singing…

This famous song, with its strong connotations to the nationalistic tradition of shirah be tzibur sets the tone for LNL’s blatant nationalism. However, as Hadar keeps pointing out, the show’s charm and the secret for its success is not derived from its hackneyed repetition of this Zionist cultural practice but rather, from the ability of its producers to reinvent this national tradition in an innovative form, appropriate for its time and place – commercial television in the globalized postzionist age.

As he puts it in an interview for Yedioth Aharonot:

The words shirah be tzibur are problematic for me, because they raise the association of an accordionist… what we do is take this trend, but with a contemporary band and new musical arrangements…its not classical shirah be tzibur, we are not doing a show around the bonfire nor do we do a karaoke type
show…that’s archaic. Here it is both a game show, a competition, and there’s the singing…

Therefore the show’s production drew on fundamental elements of the *shirah be tzibur* tradition and cleverly rearticulate them within a game show format with more contemporary elements of commercial entertainment. The show’s combination of these nationalistic elements alongside its emphasis on fun, glamour, prizes and the participation of celebrities, created an updated, escapist, commercial, nostalgic celebration of the “good-old state of Israel” identity. This unique combination represents for me the quintessential example for commercial television’s postzionist cultural dynamic.

The game show pitched two “regular” people – a man and a woman – in a competition testing their knowledge of Hebrew songs. As Ha’aretz television critic Rutah Kupfer sarcastically puts it: “the reward for all this patriotism is a vacation in Thailand”. Each contestant was assigned two celebrities of the same gender to help them along, creating a “boys vs. girls” conflict. As Kupfer (2002, p. D7) describes this:

Just like in the youth movement and as appropriate for *shira be tzibur* the participants are divided to boys vs. girls…the “girls” stand next to a pink table and the “boys” next to a blue one, and the cheering audience in the background.

The main game in the show was “who knows the song?” Each threesome (participant and his/her two celebrity helpers) gets a random word like “why” or “sky”, and must find as many Hebrew songs that contain it. Whenever the group finds a new song, everybody in the studio joins it in loud collective singing, accompanied by the show’s band. Success in this assignment rewards the group with some points and with
several notes from a song it is required to identify. If it doesn’t succeed the turn goes to the other group, more notes and more points are added, and so on and so forth until the song is recognized. One time in each show, when the song gets recognized, the original performer of the song comes on stage and performs it.

In an additional game, very similar to the “Don’t Forget the Lyrics” U.S format participants were required to repeat in full the words of a certain song – every participant completes a word on his or her turn. The first one to get a word wrong is disqualified. In yet another game, participants were ask to find songs according to subjects – Israeli cities, animals, fruits, etc. The audience also gets a chance to complete a song – which, of course, results in more enthusiastic collective singing.

Interestingly, a special portion of the show titled “the trilled section” was dedicated to a Mizrahi version of the “who knows the song” game. In that section contestants were asked to recognize a Mizrahi song with the typical vocal embellishments. This begins to demonstrate the way LNL delineates, articulates, and rearticulates existing cultural boundaries. In an interview with a journalist, Amira Morag Hadar was asked whether or not Mizrahi songs will be included in the show and replied, “of course, these are Israeli songs. Unlike others, I don’t see a difference, there may be a genre that is a little bit more Mediterranean” (Morag, 2002a, para 14).

Indeed, the show seem to “go out of its way” to include Mizrahi music. In so doing, it also works to include Mizrahi songs within the practice of shirah be tzibur, as the songs recognized are celebrated and sung collectively by the studio audience. As previously mentioned here, the very act of performing a certain song in a shirah be tzibur
manner is crucial in determining inclusion into the ever evolving repertoire of the SLI genre, which is defined more by its social function and practice, than by any predetermined musical or thematic trait.

To that effect, one can argue that LNL opens up the category of SLI in a radical way by including the previously marginalized Mizrahi songs within the practice of collective singing, which is not the original practice of consumption associated with this music. Nevertheless, by ghettoizing Mizrahi music and marking it specifically as different and separate from other Hebrew songs to be recognized in the “general” game “who knows the song?” the show seems to still conform to existing ethno-centric hierarchies within the identity of Israeliness – despite Hadar’s claims for musical “color-blindness.”

Having said that, LNL’s format seem to reflect a certain ambivalence on this matter, as other mechanisms in the show still work to undermine the Mizrahi ghettoization. The most prominent inclusion mechanism is the “democratic” nature of song selection across all the games that draw on participants’ musical vocabulary. By letting contestants musical vocabularies dictate the selection of Hebrew songs to be sung by the studio audience the show opens up the canon of shirah be tzibur in a radical way as it gives “ordinary” folks power and agency to select and include, on national television, any songs of their choice. These choices most naturally reflect the diverse subject positions of the anonymous contestants arriving at the show. And indeed on many occasions folks on the show select Mizrahi song outside the “specialized” division
dedicated to them – for example in the games dedicated to finding songs containing certain words, or other categories.

In that regard, LNL represents commercial television’s “natural” propensity towards a wider popular inclusion, one of Channel 2’s most renowned “promises” – that, as I have previously shown, was also anchored in the legislative vision for the commercial channel. Nevertheless, as I have just shown, it also demonstrates the ongoing if somewhat unconscious limitations imposed on this pluralistic vision by the process of the production’s selection and combination of elements which in is influenced by individual producer’s lingering (most likely unconscious) investment in exclusionary cultural hierarchies. This point will be further developed in my discussion of Kohav Nolad, which shares the basic mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in its delineation of Israeliness via popular music.

In any event, as can be seen here, the different games were designed to encourage the entire studio audience to collectively burst out in singing. As Hadar explains (personal communication, June 26, 2006):

The “boys vs. girls” thing was meant to turn it into a televisual format that creates conflict and drama. However the greatest fun was that all that was an excuse for the entire studio audience to break out in singing… the fun is that the whole studio becomes like a neighborhood party….

The atmosphere of “togetherness” created by the shirah be tzibur component of LNL was the most distinct feature of the show and it seem to be responsible for its success, as well as for the vibe and the vigorous discussion created around it in the press,
where it became a focal point for the larger debate about the Israeli cultural response to the national crisis of the times. As Ma’ariv television critic Shai Tzeler put it:

No matter how you look at it *Lo Nafsik Lashir* reflects the spirit of the times…singing together, without self-distinction or innovation…the outcome is very successful not because the game component in the game-show is really suspenseful, or because a particularly winning format was created here, but because television shows …create some sort of atmosphere, and in that regard *Lo Nafsik Lashir* does a good job….this corresponds well with the trend of creating a lighter, more entertaining screen and *rekindle the tribal bonfire*.8

As we start seeing in the above quote, the debate around LNL fleshes out the ideological implication of the nostalgic wave and the cultural significance of the embrace of SLI and *shirah be tzibur* at such times. However, the show’s entertaining, fun, and lightheaded nature also brought up in that discussion the perceived role of commercial television in fostering such cultural attitudes in times of a major national crisis, and consequently its national function as the new, commercial tribal bonfire.

3.7 LNL: REKINDLING THE COMMERCIAL TRIBAL BONFIRE

LNL’s producers were consciously and openly positioning their show as response for the national “situation” of the early 2000s. As Tzvika Hadar sums it up:

there is a really big trend right now with the collective singing thing, singing together, embracing our past and going back to our good-old-land-of Israel identity, our good old collectiveness…we hold on to things with the flavor of the
past, which make us feel good, give us a feeling of belonging, of togetherness...

Part of the role of entertainment television is to create an option, which is a little more optimistic. To break away just a little from the depressing atmosphere that has taken over us, and deal with it somehow. Escape a little… (Morag, 2002b)

Indeed, the show was widely acknowledged as a very successful, very entertaining, and very professionally executed commercial response to the Israeli national “situation.” As Kaminer (2002, p. 18) put it, “even the toughest critics melted faced with the blissful magic that pours from the screen.” Certainly, some of the most exacting television critics in Israel acknowledged the cleverness of the show’s format, its appropriateness as commercial response utilizing the nostalgic wave, and the professional quality of the production.

Interestingly, the critics praise for the show’s commercial appropriateness and professional execution are intertwined with an acknowledgment of the way it works to recreate a shared national space on commercial television. Time and again, critics invoke the term “tribal bonfire” not only to describe the show’s ideological function but also to describe its commerciality. This supports my argument that, in order to be commercially viable Channel 2 programs are literally required to address their audiences as members of a national collective. For example In Haaretz critic Rogel Alper praised the show writing:

*Lo Nafsik Lashir…emerged out of a widespread leisure culture, a ready-made tribal bonfire⁹ which was processed into an entertaining game show format that*

---

⁸ My emphasis S.S
⁹ My emphasis S.S
works well for television. The commercial concept is correct; the execution professional... the weakness in the suspense department is compensated for by the atmosphere of “togetherness” it offers... It is thus a legitimate, family oriented, sociable, and very Israeli summer entertainment program there is no reason for critics to get upset about people celebrating their cultural identity (Alper, 2002, p.16A).

Even those with strong reservations regarding the show’s ideological implication, or in other words the critics that “got upset” about the particular way in which the show invites Israelis to celebrates “their cultural identity,” were forced to recognize its success as a swaying entertainment format. A good example is Ruta Kupfer, another Ha’aretz critic who is openly appalled by the very idea of a shirah be tzibur game show, but still admits the show is successful and professionally executed. Kupfer tirade beings to flesh out some of the larger issues that were raised by the shirah be-tzibur nostalgic wave:

The very idea of a shirah be-tzibur game show provokes resistance, and the patriotic spirit emanating from the title “Lo Nafsi Lashir” only increases that. For the attitude according to which “if it'll be bad, and the taxes will go up, and in Moscow, the gates will be locked...we won’t stop singing” expresses obtuseness and herd mentality. Transferring this attitude to the commercial channel, the new tribal bonfire\textsuperscript{10}, with all its implications, causes even more disgust with the shira be tzibur fad that grows stronger as the times become harder. However, having said all that, I must admit: despite myself I enjoyed every minute in the first show
of LNL… the game show is swaying, exciting and enjoyable (Kupfer, 2002, p. D7)

Kupfer’s commentary is fascinating as it demonstrates how even someone who is critically repulsed by the ideological Zionist messages embedded in the *shirah be tzibur* nostalgic trend itself, and even alarmed by its repositioning in the new shared space constructed by the dominant commercial channel, can still be “lured” by the entertaining, fun, elements of the show. This is extremely important in considering the ideological function of show’s like LNL – and later KN, premised on the attraction of Hebrew popular culture as represented by Hebrew music.

Interestingly these shows, that would be renounced by Liebes as marking the end of television as shared national space, and by Weinman as hollow, cultural imperialism style “bonfire of vanities” seem to be effective in drawing towards a highly nationalistic and collective experience even the most cynical and critical viewers. They do so, not despite, but precisely because of their reliance on entertainment and the cultural pleasure they offer. On the other hand, this also allows for a qualification of Yuran’s argument – as clearly, enjoyment of Channel 2’s “nationalistic” entertainment does not preclude viewers critical rejection of certain ideological messages embedded in the cultural texts. It would thus be too reductive to portray the show as a straightforward tool of “Statist propaganda.”

Indeed, the nationalistic nature of the show is constantly pointed out and even ridiculed by critics. In his abovementioned review, Haaretz critic Rogel Alper actually

---

10 My emphasis S.S
compares Channel 2 primetime with “those educational workshops IDF soldiers go through during their basic training” characterizing LNL as “another attempt to lift the national moral and mobilize the nation into a combat Zionist unit” (ibid, 2002). In a television critique published in Zman Ha Sharon (Author unknown, 2002, July 28) an unknown author criticizes the show and the nostalgic wave it represents as reflecting the people of Israel’s political paralysis in face of the national strife. This critic also attacks the show’s format as unoriginal and innovative. In a manner reminiscent of both Weinman’s and Yuran’s analysis this critic exclaims:

Paraphrasing the joke about the boy that returns home with a report card full of F’s and an A in singing, and his dad slaps him and say “with such grades you dare sing?” – one can talk about the deteriorating not-to-say dying local television industry, the budget cuts for original production…and abundantly other F’s, and say that despite all these “Lo Nafsik Lashir” another…game-show that sanctifies …laziness and uncreativity, “dares” make an appearance on primetime…You could take it further and make an analogy to “the situation” – as host Tzvika Hadar tried to do…and say that the only thing left to do is to sing. Indeed there are no other options…protest the wrongdoings of the government? demonstrate? … In this hot weather?

However, even this critic acknowledges that “Judged in its own category Lo Nafsik Lashir is successful and proper” as a “relevant game show, based on the flourishing…trend of the last couple of months, which it applies in the best possible way.” Despite its political and ideological implications, the show is redeemed for this
critic due to its relevancy and authenticity, which also account for the rapport it achieves with its Israeli audience. “Lo Nafsik Lashir does not fake” he explains, “for better or for worse (the show) doesn’t try to be something it is not. And that’s actually what ‘the people’ want to see.” In other words the problem is not with the show – but with its audience whose needs it adequately recognizes.

To conclude this very initial debate begins to demonstrate the way in which LNL served as a viable arena which allowed Israelis to experience, celebrate, negotiate but also discuss and even reject, contemporary trends shaping and influencing the creation and maintenance of Israeli national identity in that time period. As this chapter’s combined production history and discursive analysis demonstrate - far from a copycat product of cultural imperialism, LNL was premised on a nostalgic attachment to some traditional Zionist cultural practices which it rearticulated within a new, commercialized televisual format. It is through this process of rearticulation, that this show and Channel 2 as a whole work to create a “shared national space.”

Neither the product of “junk industry” nor an agent of elitist Statist propaganda, LNL is the result of Teddy team’s creative process. As professional players in the cultural industry of commercial television, these producers are unapologetically invested in creating commercially successful entertainment. The story of LNL’s production demonstrates how they have learned gradually and with notable talent that to “crack” the Israeli audience they need to address it as a national collective, through programs that define and redefine Israelieness in entertaining ways.

99
Predicated on the “cultural glue” of the Hebrew song in itself a hybrid, contested, ideological nationalistic construction LNL, an entertaining game show influenced by a variety of different global or “foreign” television formats does not erase “the national” but rather updates it by rearticulating national ideologies and sentiment within the new, commercialized, postzionist banal nationalism of commercial television.
Chapter 4: Kohav Nolad is Born: Reality Comes to the Holy Land

4.1 Introduction

Lo Nafsik Lashir quickly became one of Channel 2’s favorite shows in 2002. However, after one successful season the production team decided the show needed a reformatting to boost its rating appeal. To that end, producers decided to add a talent competition component to the show, presenting for the first time in Israel several globally popular reality format elements or “engine” (Moran and Keane, 2008) while maintaining the original game show framework with its special Israeli cultural “atmosphere.”

When they introduced what they perceived as a rather minor change to the program’s format, the production team was hoping it would strengthen the show, making it “must-see” television. However, since interactive reality competitions in which audience members influence the outcome and a star is “crowned” were never before attempted in the country, they had no idea the new show titled Lo Nafsik Lashir-Kohav Nolad (We Won’t Stop Singing – A Star is Born) would snowball into a massive media event repositioning itself as:

A national event… the flagship program of “the Israeli dream”… The constitutive ritual of new Israeliness … The most important TV show of the current Israeli millennia, and probably in the history of Channel 2. (Golden, 2005)

Indeed, by the end of the first season the reality competition component, although relatively limited, turned the show into the biggest hit of that summer. After the first season’s big finale - probably the most talked about broadcast in the history of channel 2 and an unprecedented achievement in terms of scale and production values - it was
obvious that the show became one of the more interesting and central cultural phenomenon in contemporary Israel.

Over the next couple of seasons the show continued to evolve and transform its format, gradually shedding the game show elements and adding more of what director and Chief Editor Yoav Tzafir terms “hard-core” reality engines, while maintaining in different ways some of the original atmosphere and form of address crafted for LNL. Therefore, while by its fourth season KN\(^{11}\) may look to the outside observer as a pretty straightforward Idol “clone,”\(^{12}\) a closer look at its continuing evolution provides evidence against such a simplistic top-down “clone” framework.

The slow, gradual trial-and-error formatting process revealed by the KN industrial history doesn’t fit established narratives regarding the nature of the format phenomenon in academic literature and public discourse. Hence, the production of KN is neither the result of “the centralization of creativity” in global media industry (Keane and Moran, 2008), nor the end result of a process of slavish imitation of franchised or a “stolen” ready-made global TV recipe, which descended upon local television scenes “fully grown and armored” like Athena leaping out of Zeus’ forehead. Moreover, the shift from the patriotic \textit{shirah be tzibur} game show to the reality talent competition does not by any means represent a forsaking of the local and the national address of Chanel 2 in favor of the manufactured bland product of cultural imperialism with a built in ultra-capitalist

\(^{11}\) the LNL component was dropped from the title by the third season
\(^{12}\) a story covering the auditions for season seven states that the law suite from Idol never seemed closer (Noy-Gur, 2009)
vision of a “zero-sum society in which no one can win unless someone else loses” (Simon, 2005).

Instead, KN emerges upon closer inspection as a carefully orchestrated, creative, local process through which the producers negotiate and articulate different available formal elements, or “engines,” as they try to come up with a powerful and original format for an entertaining hit show that will work in the Israeli context. The show’s poetics, as revealed by the history of its format evolution, reflects producers’ creative negotiations of a set of particular constraints ranging from material limitations, such as the size and structure of the market they operate in, to cultural constraints including their perception of their audience’s tastes and preferences and the national culture shaping these.

In what follows, I will describe the history of the show’s gradual development, mapping out the evolution of its particular poetics while continuing to look at the type of shared national experience its unique format offers for the Israeli national audience. Drawing on producers’ interviews, press coverage, and debates of the show, this study argues that KN, despite its commercial orientation, is not the result of mindless format “cloning,” rather it is an exciting and vibrant instance of local cultural production. This complicates our understanding of the flow of global television formats.

The formatting of the show is revealed to be an ongoing and extremely dynamic creative process, a far cry from the image of mechanical cloning, mimicry and/or reproduction suggested by scholars who foreground the official format trade as the core of the format flow phenomenon (Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004; Keane and Moran, 2008). Also, unlike Albert Moran’s famous “pie metaphor” for format adaptation, my
analysis rejects the notion that the formula itself is the “pie’s crust” made of a pre-established “generic structural container” in which different local producers insert a changing “filling” of varying, local cultural content (Heller, forthcoming). Instead, my analysis foregrounds the way local circumstances, context, and constraints help shape the “crust” itself. Thus, it is the *formatting process and format* of KN itself that I view as the ground for and product of cultural negotiation between producers, critics, and audience members within particular industrial and cultural constraints. My approach to poetics is post-structuralist, going beyond the description and analysis of form and structure and how they convey meaning, to explore the cultural and ideological significance of their creative negotiations. To that end, the discussion goes beyond textual and formal analysis to look at producer’s and critics discourses of formal description and evaluations.

### 4.2 From LNL to KN: Cautiously Playing With Reality

In the summer of 2003 *Teddy* production and *Keshet* broadcast relaunched *Lo Nafsik Lashir* with the new title *Lo Nafsik Lashir – Kohav Nolad* (LNL-KN hereafter), adding a reality talent competition component to the successful game show. In the press, Israeli television critics positioned this innovation in the context of the global reality wave, with one important reservation, referring to the production’s choice to articulate the new reality component within the existing game-show rather than embarking on a full blown reality series.

Ha’ir journalist Or Knispel points out the ambiguous relationship between the new *LNL* version and the global reality trend:
In its current version LNL joins the global trend of reality shows, (in the style of “survivor”) that also combines a talent competition and creates young stars that conquer the hit charts…however the Israeli variation LNL-KN is far from being a reality series, probably for budget considerations (May 1, 2003).

This commentary corresponds in interesting ways with Jason Mittell’s (2004) argument, which states that rather than emerging from texts as inherent, formal characteristics, generic categories work to group texts together and link them into clusters of cultural assumptions through discourses of definition, interpretation, and evaluation. Here, the constraints of the local market (“budget consideration”) are pointed out as probable cause for generic hybridization, and the local program is understood as the result of an overlap of two different generic categories. Idiot Aaronson critic Riana Shacked who also qualifies the new shows’ compatibility within the “reality” family of texts makes a similar point:

The talent discovery format is conquering the world of television in recent years and produces mega-hits in the U.S and Europe… The new season of LNL represents channel 2’s hesitantly dipping one foot into this deep pool (May 1, 2003).

Shaked’s metaphor is useful as it captures the hesitancy with which KN experimented with the reality innovation in its first season. As suggested by Knispel, this caution was indeed driven by the vast uncertainty involved with introducing for the first time in Israel the mechanism of audience votes. This was risky, as producers could not take for granted the Israeli audience cooperation so crucial for the success of such shows.
In other words, they simply did not know whether or not Israelis would be willing to pay for SMS messages to vote in support of anonymous contestants (Z. Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006). This concern was considerable given the limited resources and small budgets Israeli production companies work with, which do not leave a lot of margin for error.

Maintaining the successful LNL framework with its reliance on shirah be-tzibur and its strong local Israeli flavor was a safety net for Channel 2’s first experiment with local original reality production. Thus, in the context of the early 2000 Israeli television market where audiences were not sufficiently familiar with the conventions of reality forms, franchising an expensive hit format made no financial sense. This begins to demonstrate the complex reality behind the alleged “risk minimizing” benefits of format adaptation in global television (Keane, Fung and Moran, 2007; Moran, 1998; Waisbord, 2004).

Despite the uncertainty involved, the production was willing to take a risk and change the game show’s proven successful format for the chance of fortifying its appeal and boost its rating, realizing it lacked a certain element of competition and suspense. As Hadar puts it:

Generally the show was successful. But I was going crazy because in the rating charts we were never in first place...We sat down to analyze what was going on, because the vibes around the show were excellent. And then we realized it’s not “must-TV,” i.e. you don’t have that thing where people say “I must stay home Thursday to see what’s going on there….We asked ourselves how do we do it?
According to Hadar the idea to turn the game show into “must-see” television by adding a talent competition element came to the production when a random contestant in the game-show’s first season was revealed to have a unique singing talent:

The contestants in LNL were totally random ordinary people, “Sara from Beer Sheva and Yossi from Haifa.” All of a sudden, in one of the programs we had a contestant that happened to sing really well…So we said lets bring people who can sing, and make one of the assignments that they have to perform a song. In other words, keep the game show format…but make it into a “must-see” competition…And that’s how it was in the first season it was LNL, games, charades, celebrities, us goofing around, shirah-be-tzibur, and then each contestant sings a solo and competes for the audience’s votes…

When asked if at that point they had the Idol format in mind, or considered approaching its copyright owners to buy the franchise rights for adapting the format in Israel Hadar exclaims:

No! Not at all. We didn’t really take notice of it. I can’t really explain it, it wasn’t in our genre. It was a different program altogether…there are audition shows everywhere in the world… the only thing was that one of our production assistants saw a similar Spanish auditions show, Operacion something (Z. Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006).

According to this account, the production did not consider leasing or franchising the Idol format, because they weren’t embarking on a systematic local adaptation process aiming to recreate a local rendition of the Idol show. Rather, they perceived their actions as a
creative evolution of their existing game show by incorporating one or two new reality engines or elements.

More than Hadar, KN’s Chief Editor Yoav Tzafir emphasizes the way producers’ familiarity with contemporary trends in global television influenced the LNL reformatting decision:

I have to say, both regarding LNL and KN, that it started from something very Israeli with the shirah be tzibur, etc. but it’s also a part of a global trend, which is not particularly Israeli. We do not operate in a vacuum. I personally always keep an eye out and stay updated on everything that goes on in the world...Similar shows existed in the world. Not exactly the same however, because we always see something and then we say – “let’s do something of our own in that area\(^\text{13}\)”. Kohav Nolad is of course in the area of Idol, Pop Idol, and Fame Academy (Y. Tzafir, personal communication, June 21, 2007).

4.3 NOT COPYCAT TELEVISION AFTER ALL

Tzafir’s perspective here is helpful as it sheds more light on the intricate interplay between national particularity and global influences that takes place in the cultural production process in minor television industries. “Local” producers are constantly on the outlook to check out the international television scene looking for ideas for the development of their own shows. This, however, is perceived not so much as a cloning or mimicry process, but rather as a “natural” process of influence.

\(^{13}\) My emphasis S.S
While not new, this flow of influence seems to be accelerating in a multichannel globalized television market where people all over the world are exposed to the dominant forms of global television industries. Moreover, not only is this process of influence flows not new, is it also not exclusive to contemporary commercial broadcasters. In fact, as an emerging body of research now demonstrates, it has an established history in Israeli television, as well as other “belated” television industries (Kumar, 2005; Shahaf, 2007; Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming; Ferrari, forthcoming; Straubhaar, forthcoming, Bourdon, forthcoming)

From the early days of (almost) global state monopoly in television broadcast, national broadcasters around the world were busily borrowing forms and programming ideas and using them to structure their own original shows (Shahaf, 2007, Oren and Shahaf, forthcoming). Shanti Kumar’s work on 1980s sitcoms in India (Kumar, 2005), Joe Straubhaar’s work on the development of the telenovela in Brazil and Latin America, as well as Chiara Ferrari’s work on Italian game shows in the 1950s and 60s (In Oren and Shahaf forthcoming), Yeidy Rivero’s (2007) discussion of Cuban television’s reliance on U.S TV forms, and many more examples all reveal that formal borrowing is part and parcel of television production in “belated” television systems developed after the two dominant U.K and U.S systems were already established.

This emerging body of research continuously demonstrates that borrowing of television entertainment forms is a long time practice that started before the global commercialization of television industries. It also highlights the fact that this type of borrowing does not necessarily preclude television’s national function and does not
“interfere” with its creative participation even in the most state-centralized projects of local identity and cultural production. For example, Kumer (2005) and Shahaf (2007) discuss the national role and function of 1980s sitcoms in India and Israel where national programmers produced shows that utilized these popular forms, articulating them within a local formal and cultural matrix.

Thus, the contemporary “explosion” of format flows is a multilayered, nuanced phenomenon with its own long history, consisting of a wide range of practices. Within this range, the formal trade of licensed format, perceived as the contemporary elaboration of a business model that “deals” with the “resilience” of national cultures (Waisbord, 2004), is just one end of the spectrum. Moreover, like several studies demonstrate (Kumar, 2005; Ferrari, forthcoming, De bruin, forthcoming), even a licensed adaptation within a commercial broadcast system does not mean television entertainment productions in different national locations with their own particular national broadcast traditions, necessarily reproduce homogenous “clones” of “static” established formulae. The local culture and industrial context and constraints are always influential and end products are always the result of local negotiations of the adapted forms. As Navarro (forthcoming) puts it, the performance or execution of borrowed global formula in these local contexts breathes new life into hybrid forms of local cultural production. Navarro’s emphasis on the concept of performance helps move the discussion from the narrow industrial focus on the adaptability of the formula to the flexible process of adaptation itself. This approach “challenges the assumption that formatted programs are merely derivative renditions of a stable formula” (ibid, p. 5 of manuscript). The notion of format
production as performance allows us to look at the very process of local production as an active process of formatting, articulating different formal elements together within the matrix of “local” cultural context, which is shaped by specific industrial, national, and cultural constraints.

Thus, the fact that KN is a contemporary example, and producers are borrowing a reality television form doesn’t mean they are necessarily participating any more than their predecessors in state monopoly television in the “corruption” of local culture or the global capitalist homogenization of culture everywhere, which is not to say the contemporary context of the reality format flow is not important to note. While established narratives on the significance of the global flow of reality forms argue that the result of globalization and commercialization of television industries everywhere is an acceleration of the industry’s copycat impulse leading to an infinite “replication” of the same dominant formula around the world creating a homogenous global culture where everywhere television is “exactly the same,” what we see here is much more complicated than that.

The reality wave is interesting to observe as the rise of a truly postmodern television genre, which is highly compatible with the needs of globalizing television industries as its forms are particularly flexible and open to processes of local articulation and hybridization. In fact, unlike any other genre before, reality television’s global fluidity serves as one of its definitive traits, but not because it is created as a complete and stable formula in some privileged location and then “travels well,” as a result of the erasure of any particular national trait (Waisbord, 2004). Thus, the mere fact that KN’s
producers create their show in a new global broadcasting context where the American commercial industrial model has influenced local broadcasting systems or the fact that they are now openly working for profit or rating, does not mean that the product they come up with is essentially the same as any *Idol* type show anywhere else, nor does it mean that the local context isn’t as influential as before.

To find out what makes KN “something of our own” despite the producers’ reliance on globally popular programming ideas, engines, or innovations the following sections explore the production history and poetics of KN. Looking at the evolution of the show’s format, its production practices, and the political economy and cultural context that shaped them, this analysis aims to answer the following questions: What makes KN an Israeli show and its format an original “indigenous” creation? How do producers perceive this particularity and link it to the unique Israeli industrial and cultural constraints shaping their work? And, finally (a discussion that will be continued in chapter 5), what specific elements in the show’s format (its form or structural “crust” rather than its content or “filling”) designate its particular Israeliness?

4.4 Season One: “The Age of Innocence” and/or Creating a “Ratings Monster”

The decision to incorporate a talent competition element in the show was the first step in transforming LNL from a nice, sociable game show to the first Israeli reality series and a culturally influential mega-hit. However, when producers first decided to make this change they had very little idea just how successful and culturally influential
the renewed show was about to become. The magnitude of the show’s success first hit the production team during the first season big final event. As Tzafir puts it:

When we first started with KN we didn’t know where we were going and how it would end. When the first final came around we were all in shock. We never believed that it was going to get so big. I mean we imagined that it would have more power than LNL…but we didn’t know it would get to that…today it seems a bit amateurish compared to what we have done since… (but back then) we were amazed with the astonishing energy of the audience that arrived…we had chills all through the broadcast because, even throughout the season we didn’t exactly realize the power of what we had created (personal communication, ibid).

The story of the LNL-KN first season is not the story of top-down “adaptation” of a ready-made hit formula, rather it is a story of the creation of a surprise mega hit—a experiment that created a “ratings monster,” which outperformed its creator’s wildest expectations. As this quote also begins to demonstrate, the producer perceived the first season as reflecting an initial age of innocence, both in terms of the production and the format and in terms of the audience of the show. The ensuing seasons in which the LNL format was gradually left behind in favor of a full blown reality talent competition format are perceived in producer’s narrative, in the press coverage, and in the show (including readers/audience’s online “talk-backs”) as marking “the loss of innocence” for producers, contestants, and audience members alike. As Tzafir puts it “In subsequent seasons we can say that the Israeli audience professionalized alongside with us.”
This unique process of mutual “professionalization” of audience and production through the evolution of a popular show’s format is significant as it demonstrates the crucial pioneering role played by the LNL-KN reformatting in the introduction of the reality genre in Israel, and at the same time, it points to the unique Israeliness of the show. The show’s development emerges as a significant factor both for the Israeli television industry and for the Israeli audience’s “socialization” and the development of its televisual literacy as it became more open to accept local production of shows including reality elements. Significantly, the show was able to do that exactly because it wasn’t a top-down format franchising or adaptation, but rather because it “mutated” from the ground up, beginning with a “very local” LNL, with its deep cultural ties to SLI and shirah be tzibur traditions and sustaining this local grounding as more and more elements of the global reality fad get incorporated into its format.

Another element that emerges as crucial for the special rapport KN has with the Israeli audiences, as well as for its success in introducing reality television to the Israeli market is the flexibility and improvisation inherent in the show’s production practices and formatting process. As is clear in repeated discussions of the show, KN producers perceive these two skills as key for the work on the show and its subsequent success. The ability to continuously make up and invent the show and its format “on the go,” based on the producer’s perception of their audience taste and on ongoing national events and atmosphere, is perceived as an inherently Israeli characteristic. This is expressed many times in producer’s narrative through self-juxtaposition with the American or British television industries, especially in relation to the difference in industrial practices.
involved in following though with a pre-given program format. For example, in an interview for this study executive producer Yardeni states:

There is no one set of rules as to how KN will unfold…Americans don’t work like that. There it is all schematic. There’s a way and you follow it to the tooth. We work according to what happens “in the field.”

Tzafir reinforces that statement connecting this improvisational tendency to both the producer’s and the Israeli audience’s “mentality:”

We are Israelis. We like to go wild with the format. We let ourselves live in the moment. We cannot sit according to some sort of robotics that is very American. The Americans, they can’t move an inch to the right or to the left. It’s not in their nature. We, on the other hand, have to improvise. As Israelis this is our mentality and our audiences’ mentality.

This tendency to improvise, understood a quintessential Israeli quality, as well as the “innocence” of the production in the early days of the show is reflected well in Hadar’s story about the very early beginning of KN. In his interview, Hadar describes how after the decision to add a singing challenge as the final game in each LNL show was made; the production was surprised by the overwhelmingly positive response to the auditions, which wind up changing the show’s intended scope. As Hadar relates it:

We ran an ad once or twice on television: “the program LNL is looking for people who can sing” with a date and location for the audition. We expected maybe a couple of hundred people to show up. We got this auditorium in Haifa… We traveled there in our own private cars with a really small crew, me, Yoav, Tmira,
a photographer...We didn’t even know we were going to shoot it for broadcast. It was for our own use.

However, when they got to Haifa the place was exploding with thousands of candidates who came to audition for the show Hadar:

When we got to the auditorium where the auditions were planned to take place I was sure the owner scheduled a different event there! I didn’t realize it was for the show….We started calling Keshet frantically saying “it’s not what we thought, it’s much bigger,” they immediately sent photographers, equipment, a broadcast van….We said it’s not the budget we talked of originally; we need to reopen this discussion and think how to proceed…we had emergency meetings at night, and crazy coordination efforts begun…

In light of the surprisingly big turn out for the first audition, Teddy and Keshet reassessed the situation deciding to increase the show’s budget, provide the production with more resources like a broadcast van, and hold two more auditions in the southern city of Beer Sheva and in the central Rishon Le Tzion – so that the three main areas of the country were represented. Teddy and Keshet’s willingness to accommodate the new show’s production to ongoing “events in the field” continued throughout the first season. As Hadar puts it:

This is how the season began and we did everything as we were going along. And suddenly we saw that we are really enjoying this, and one thing led to another, and we said let’s do this, and let’s do that, and bring this and that…
The surprisingly big auditions wind up drawing some 15,000 candidates, out of which a top 20 team was selected to continue in the show’s first season. As mentioned before, in this season, the game show format remained pretty much intact – the boy vs. girl, the celebrity “helpers, and the shirah be tzibur atmosphere -while very limited reality “engines” were inserted into it. The basic idea was to add a component of identification and interest in the anonymous contestants, who would continue to compete with one another throughout the season (T, Hadar, personal communication, June 26, 2006).

Consequently, the singing competition itself was limited to the last section of the show. Each week two contestants (a boy and a girl as the LNL competition format dictated) competed for a place in the quarterfinal by singing one solo in the “head to head” stage of the show. The winner was selected by the audience via phone, SMS, or through the show’s website. The eight candidates that made it to the quarterfinals were split into two groups, each one participating in two semi-final programs. The three candidates that received the biggest number of votes earned a place in the finale. Nevertheless, maintaining the game show framework meant that contestants got bonus points by participating in LNL games such as “who knows the song.” These points were taken into consideration alongside the audience votes and could actually tilt the score.

The first LNL-KN final was a groundbreaking event for Teddy and Channel 2. Again, the scope of the finale was an unexpected surprise, and Teddy and Keshet demonstrated an ability to respond “on the go” to the magnitude of the show’s popularity, producing within a few months an unprecedented media event, which would normally
take much longer to plan and execute. According to Tzafir, the finale was the most complicated live broadcast he had ever dealt with in his professional life up to that point.

With Coca Cola joining in as sponsor for the big event, which was held in the Holiday Village of Nitzanim and was watched by 26.7% of the Israeli households with 32.3% of all households tuning in to see the final results revealed. The production budget for the finale was estimated at unprecedented 200,000 US$. The cost for commercial ads was about 20% higher than in normal days, and the golden break commercial was sold in 100,000 NIS (around 25,000$). Hadar discusses the singularity of the final event in the history of Israeli television’s industry:

In terms of production values, there was never before such an event that was shot live in such quality of broadcast. I mean people shot live performances but it’s not the same as making television. And it was something completely different making television in the sand, it was like Homa U’Migdal.\(^{14}\)

The Homa U’Migdal reference, aiming to point out the pioneering status of the final’s production as well as its improvised nature (making television “in the sand”) is particularly interesting for its Zionist connotation. Homa U’migdal” was a Zionist settlement method used by Hebrew pioneers in pre-state Israel during the Arab revolt of the mid 1930s as response to the British Mandate’s authority restriction of Jewish settlements at the time. The name was derived from the need to set up a new settlement from scratch, overnight, to forestall Arab attack and British Mandate opposition. Pioneers

---

\(^{14}\)“Tower and stockade” – a type of early Zionist settlement practice where pioneers erect a new settlement from scratch, overnight.
would build a Stockdale and a tower in one night, determining facts “in the territory” and complete the rest of the settlement gradually later. Referring to the final’s production as a Homa U’migdal operation fortifies the relation between the KN production practices and the very nature of Israeliness by drawing this analogy between them and this Zionist practice of pioneering ingenuity through improvisation.

The LNL-KN’s 2003 season’s grand finale extravaganza broke new ground not only in terms of the industries’ production abilities, but also in the unprecedented national mania it created. Tremendous media fanfare was stirred around the show and more specifically the “new-born” star, Ninet Tayeb, a soldier from the small southern town of Kiryat Gat who first came to the auditions in her IDF uniforms. As described above, this national hysteria surprised even the folks at Teddy and Keshet, who now realized they had a national sensation on their hands.

In the following seasons the Teddy team strived to maintain this momentum, continuously modifying and developing the show’s format in correspondence with both cutting edge trends in global television entertainment, their perception of the particularities of the Israeli audiences’ cultural preference, and the influences of current national events and atmosphere. In what follows, I will look at this production history, explore the gradual evolution of the show’s format throughout the first couple of seasons, and examine the particular negotiations involved in this reformatting process and how they reflect the specifics of the Israeli cultural and industrial context. This analysis will help me move away from the common perception in the literature on format adaptation in which, as Navarro puts it “the local appears merely as a destination for a format that
originated elsewhere, the end point in a trajectory that can only confirm the presumed autonomy of the original model” (forthcoming. p. 9 in manuscript). Instead, my analysis meticulously maps out the process by which the local Israeli producers concoct their own original indigenous format.

4.5 (Re)formatting Israeliness

After the first season’s unprecedented success, the Teddy and Keshet team were faced with the challenge of recreating the success. As Tzafir puts it, “How to proceed from a successful first season and move on is always the big question, and it wasn’t simple.” The story of KN’s format development from the show’s second season and on demonstrates an extremely nuanced process of selection, the combination of reality engines taken from the global trend of reality competition shows, and negotiations of the particularities of the Israeli industrial and cultural context—especially the audience’s perceived taste, “mentality,” and expectations.

While the show’s first season was described by producers as a fun, unexpected adventure, the second and third seasons are described by Hadar and Tzafir as a difficult journey and a constant struggle to sustain the show’s success and power despite its continued dominance in the rating charts. According to Tzafir, the struggle to keep the show relevant consisted of a continuous process of reformatting, which pushed to increase the dose of “hard-core” reality elements and move away from the show’s initial “innocence” and warmth towards more professionalism, in order to maintain its power and appeal. Tzafir explains the need to keep changing the show’s format:
At first, we got a lot of compliments for taking such a format which is all about malicious criticism and making it all about encouragement-TV. In the first season, it worked like a charm. In the second and third season, we kept it, and it gradually lost its power and became too insipid. In the fourth season, we reached the hard-core reality, and it works. Today, the audience is much more ripe and ready for this.

Throughout, the process of reformatting was mitigated by what the production perceived as the Israeli audience’s particular sensibilities, more specifically, their difficulty to accept the more dramatic yet offensive elements of the reality talent competition format. As Tzafir puts it:

The Israeli audience prefers the “feel good” television rather than the “down” moments…although we have advanced a great deal since the first season of KN…people are still outraged by it…we thus transformed this in a real slow dissolve, slowly learning what hard-core reality is like.

Over the shows’ next three seasons, KN producers continuously reformatted the show gradually transforming it from LNL to KN; from a shirah be tzibur game show to a full-blown reality competition. To that end, the production team gradually diminished the LNL game component; expanded the singing competition element, adding more solos and more competitors to each programs; increased the role of the judges and professional critique; upgraded the studio in size and design to make the show more spectacular; increased the number and quality of edited “back stories” that serve to “brand” the
contestants and build them up as characters; and finally, enhanced the show’s “liveness” incorporating more and more live broadcasts.

These constant format changes and the discussion they generated amongst producers and in the press demonstrate the way in which the show’s format serves as a cultural arena for the negotiation of contemporary Israeliness. Thus, instead of a foreign imposition of “global” forms, the format of the show emerges as a process and a conduit through which the negotiation of Israeliness and the particularities of the Israeli cultural context take place.

The first element that changed the format significantly over the second and third season was the gradual disappearance of the LNL games. Hadar describes the process that lead to the decision to drop the boys vs. girl structure with the games and celebrity teammates component:

The games gave the candidates an opportunity to let loose. When you perform a song no one gets to know you for real. It’s not a program where we close them in a house and follow them around 24/7 – which is a format I dislike…the games and the boys vs, girl…brought out something different also in the celebrity participants… Only at the end of the second season we realize that our contestants are far more interesting than the celebs, and we understood it was redundant and took it down because all of a sudden no one wanted to hear the celebs singing…the audience wanted the contestants to sing and compete….and really in the third season we went with the same format but without the games altogether. and we also got rid of the boys vs. girls structure.
After losing the games and the boy vs. girl structure, the production went through a reconfiguration of the competition structure, taking pains to avoid replicating any copyrighted format (Y, Tzafir. Personal communication, June 21, 2007) Hadar recaps the major competition structure changes:

We developed a slightly different format and that went on in the second and third season. We made it into threesomes out of which…only one continues on. At the end they all unite and compete… And then we saw that it’s hard that you have a contestant singing in one show and the next time you see him compete is three programs down the road… So (in the fourth season) we made yet another change some sort of mix and match between all these formats…before they got into the studio we split them according to three geographical areas and had seven contestants each from the south, the center, and the north. Then, we sent someone home from each area, and then, they all went to the studio to compete.

Other changes to the format of the competition in season four were the live broadcast of the show two nights in a row and the introduction of duet assignments in the first evening. Hadar:

On Thursdays we had them sing duets…they have to choose a partner and a song by lottery… And than the audience chooses the best couple and they stay safe while the others compete with solos on Fridays. …

These constant changes to the competition’s structure are explained by Hadar as response to the special Israeli audience’s ”mentality” of impatience:
The fourth season in Israel is like the tenth season abroad. People are impatient. You can’t do the same thing twice...people will tell you “come on, bring me something new.” Even this format that is so popular, there is no such thing here… This connects back to Yardeni and Tzafir’s assertion that improvising and changing things up constantly is necessary to keep up with the Israeli audience.

Another crucial element in this reformatting was the gradual increase in the doses of live broadcast in the show. This is another element typical to the Idol type shows that was added in a very limited way in the first season LNL-KN and developed much more in subsequent seasons. In the original LNL game show, programs were shot and edited in advance and never aired live. In the LNL-KN first season, the studio shows were still shot and edited in advance, but went live at the very end for the result portion. This helped create the much sought after audience alluring suspense.

The big first finale was the first LNL-KN show to be shot and broadcasted live in its entirety. This helped give it the characteristics of a “media event” offering a national “sense of occasion” and drawing the nation together to share a moment on the little screen (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p. viii). As I will discuss further in the next chapter, this formal element contributes to the show’s self positioning as Channel 2’s commercial “tribal bonfire” fulfilling national roles, as liveness is crucial in creating a rhetoric of broadcast as a shared national experience.

Another reality engine that was introduced for the first time during the first season’s big finale and developed much more in subsequent seasons was the “back story” portions. In the first LNL-KN season, these short journalistic style clips presenting the
candidates background and personality through interviews and documentation of their everyday lives appeared for the first time in the finale. Each finalist and their family were visited in their home town by the show’s camera crew, and the clip was played immediately before each of them went up to perform his or her solo.

With the success of the first season, Keshet agreed to almost double the shows’ budget, and as a result, a whole “VTR crew” now accompanies the production from the auditions on and produces weekly installments of such back-story clips. According to Itai Segev, one of the veteran Comedy Store comedians and the Chief Editor of the VTR crew, these clips serve to create attachment to the contestants, “brand” them, and build them up as interesting alluring televisual “characters.” Thus, the VTR team’s job is to provide the audience with a narrative of the contestants’ background and personality, highlighting different demographic and biographic information that may induce audience’s identification (personal communication, June 14, 2007).

The VTR team’s work creates one of the crucial reality engines as it encourages people at home to develop a personal attachment to the contestants. As Hadar explains it:

[These are] the “telenovela” materials…That you are adopted, or blind, your mother is limping…You come from the north, or the south, or maybe from a rich family in north Tel Aviv, but don’t want your father’s money, it gives you a kind of…it’s the materials of telenovela. It works on the fact that you get attached to the people. Because you get exposed to their backstory…you get attached.

However, without a doubt, the reality engine whose elaboration since the show’s second season signifies more than anything else the show’s “loss of innocence” for
producers and audiences alike is the element of professional judgment. The evolution of this particular element serves well to illustrate the way changes to the show’s format became an arena for audience’s and producers’ negotiations regarding local cultural values and norms. The next section looks more carefully at that.

4.6 “HAVE MERCY” JUDGING THE JUDGES...

In the first season of LNL-KN the role of the judges’ panel, so crucial in the Idol format, was very small. To begin with, Hadar emphasizes that as part of the general tendency of the production to “make it up as they go along” the producers did not give much thought to the issue of casting the judge panel. As Hadar explains it:

We didn’t really make a decision about the judges. We said I am there; Asaf Ashtar (Hadar’s side kick figure from LNL who is an expert in Hebrew music) is there. Let’s add someone who is really top notch, so we got (the highly esteemed Israeli singer/song-writer/ composer/musical producer ) Mati Caspi.

Moreover, in the first season the judges did not play a big role in the program itself. As Tzafir remembers:

The first season almost did not have judges, it’s really funny. During the auditions … the judges didn’t talk to the candidates... During the season there were no judges what so ever. Later on we had some a little bit, only in the big final.

The judges that appeared in the show’s final were Roni Bar-on, the CEO of Helicon Records, one of the leading record companies in Israel, and singer/musical producer Yizhar Ashdot. Their limited clout included dispensing mostly positive feedback after all
three contestants finished their solos and giving them points that were worth 10% of all votes, and thus had no real influence on the final’s outcome.

Tzafir explains the absence of significant judge panel presence as stemming from the productions’ innocence, and their grounding in the “warm” or “soft” ambiance of togetherness and sweetness created in LNL by the dominant collectiveness of the *shira be tzibur* tradition:

> At this point the production team was really naïve. Everything was nicer and wrapped with sweetness…it took us some time to understand what the audience expects in a real reality show…also the Israeli audience back at the time was not ready to accept a cruel judge like Simon Cowell. It was the first reality show and everybody was still innocent.

In KN’s second season the production decided to significantly develop the role and function of the judges. Tzafir explains the production’s decision:

> In the second season we felt that it was time to add a more professional dimension to the whole thing. We knew we could no longer count on the initial charm that happened in the first season of LNL-KN, which was new and unfamiliar.

Accordingly, more thought was given to the casting of the panel. Additionally, the new panel - Roni Bar-on was joined by Tzedi Tzarfati, a well-respected stage and television musical director, and Israeli rock diva, singer Ricky Gal – received much more exposure. Ricky Gal even fulfilled the role of “cruel judge” so significant in the Idol formula. Nevertheless, even in this season, the judges’ roles were restricted and the element of direct and potentially harsh professional critique constantly curbed. Tzafir:
In the second season, the judges were mainly involved in the audition stage but again, during the show there was no judgment, today it sounds weird, even crazy, that there wasn’t critique after each song, but there wasn’t. There were songs-songs-songs and at the end of the show the judges talked. Today, it looks ridiculous, but it was that kind of format[ting process] of very slowly reaching the hard core reality.

Hadar explains the caution with which the judgment element was incorporated in the show in terms of the Israeli audience’s “mentality,” which is different than the perceived mentality of audiences “abroad:”

In Israel things that work well in American Idol will not work at all…This thing where you mercilessly attack people auditioning for you, in Israel it doesn’t work so well. The audience can have an oppositional reaction to that. It wouldn’t work in Israeli like Seinfeld wouldn’t work – something else works…The mentality is really different.

The reason for the Israeli audiences’ sensibility according to Hadar is the different nature of the social ties bonding Israelis together:

In Israel, we come from a place of respect. Even the weirdoes and the psychos, we have that Israeli thing where we give them the feeling that we respect them, and it’s important because the goal of the show is really to discover a star and not to disrespect people.

He also discusses the way this “mentality” was taken into account in the arrangement of the judge’s place in the show’s format, as the production was constantly
busy with “damage control,” making sure the audience’s negative response to the judges “cruelty” does not wind up hurting the competition and competitors:

You see it for, example, in the votes…the Israeli audience’s votes are votes of protest. For example, if one of the tougher judges, like Ricky Gal, was rooting for someone they would always vote against that person… In the singing, as well. If someone is good they don’t want the judges to criticize them. Even if you are giving professional critique. Its very different from the U.S. They don’t like it even if you are professional. This is why we reduced the judge’s score, or we put it after the audience’s votes were over…

Indeed, despite the production’s caution, the increased place of professional judgment got a mixed reception by the Israeli audience. A wave of protest in online talk-backs and in feedback producers received from “people on the street, which is the best feedback system available” (Tzafir), accompanied the second season.

For example, a Ynet.com story critiquing the harsh and unpleasant feedback given by the judges to people auditioning for the show generated 179 talk-back responses debating the legitimacy of Ricky Gal’s harsh critiques (Bar-on, 2004, March 31).

One typical example is a post by talkbackist “Roi” who thinks that:

They should simply not air the auditions. If someone didn’t get accepted it is simply hurtful to then have to watch on television how not only you didn’t get accepted but also the insulting words that they are not ashamed to say in front of the camera.
Another anonymous talkbackist responds directly to the format change. Signing as “prefers the show’s earlier version” she observes that:

Ricky Gal takes the show more in the direction of American reality TV – with harsh insulting remarks. I much prefer the way the show went on in KN season one. Please return the innocence and encouragement!

On the other end of the spectrum, talkbackist “Sweet-N’low” from Hifa ridicules the protests. Upholding the *Idol* formula as a standard for evaluation of the local response he argues:

If Simon Cowell from *American Idol* would critique our “delicate” contestants whose illustrious careers in military singing ensembles didn’t prevent them from responding like little emotional girls, they would no doubt commit suicide…I am sorry to say, if you can’t handle this you must be in the wrong profession. And as for Ricky specifically, she gives professional critique, she has training, knowledge and experience.

In response to the audience protest as Hadar already mentioned above, the production changed the format, cancelling the judges’ participation in the studio until the semi-final stage. When the judges returned, the production had the contestants write, record, and shoot a video clip devoted to the judges, making fun of their cold-heartedness and begging for their mercy. Through this the production channeled the audience’s discomfort with the element of professional judgment, and gave it voice in the show itself.
This is a great example of the ways in which KN constantly addresses, negotiates, and renegotiates the compatibility of the more “hard-core” reality elements for its audience. It continuously provides different mechanisms that soften and “warm up” those harsher elements so that it fits the palate or “mentality” of the Israeli viewing audience. The perception of the viewing public as formed by members of a society that is tied together by collectivity and solidarity – is the hallmark of the programs producer’s know-how and professional understanding of their audiences.

4.7 PRESS BACKFIRE

Interestingly, the production’s “softening” efforts and the vacillating of the format drew a lot of criticism in the press, especially from professional television critics who uphold the Idol formula as a standard for it evaluation. For example, in response to the production’s second season decision to cancel the judge’s participation until the semi-finals Rating columnist Yaron Tan-Brink (2002) writes furiously:

Did everyone really fail to notice that (Kohav Nolad) is simply a lousy program, even in the forgiving parameters of the genre? The standard for comparison in my perspective is the British Pop Idol format…from which KN draws inspiration (not to say “ungracefully robs from”). No matter how you look at it, the Israeli production is messed up. Worst of all is the indecision about the status of the judge trio: in most of the other places in the world where the show is broadcasted the judges are the real stars of the show, and their conflicts with the contestants are big moments of drama, laughter, and tears. In our case, the panic-stricken
production shelved them at the very moment when Ricky Gal started triggering a strong negative response amongst viewers. Chickens.

In another story in Rating, journalist Moshiko Cohen (2004, April, 21) devotes a long column at the beginning of season three to suggestions for the KN production team on ways to improve the format, most of which are admittedly taken from American Idol. After declaring his love for KN, “the essence of new Israeliness wrapped up in a glamorous American package” Cohen admits that this love only “bums” him every time he watches an episode of “KN’s spiritual mother – American Idol”

Although …far from touching my soul…(like KN does) Idol … is an amazing television production – a stunning studio, tight format, and respectable treatment of each stage of the competition….Compared with this spectacle of virtuosity the dearly beloved and much more valued KN suddenly looks horribly half-assed…(ibid. p.54)

For this reason, “out of fear of more moments of annoying unprofessionalism,” as he puts it, Cohen presents a couple of “suggestions, requests, and pleas to the KN people (most of which were stolen from you know where).” Interestingly, most of Cohen requests seem to fit what Tzafir described as the general direction taken by the production anyways. For example, he asks that the “doses of reality will be increased,” that the studio will be upgraded, the number of solos to be increased on the expense of the “exhausting LNL games,” and that the judges will be allowed “sharper critiques.” As for the anticipated controversy that is sure to rise from the Israeli audience, he suggests:
And don’t panic by the onslaught of “what is all this evilness.” It is not evil. It’s a professional dimension that was missing before. A little bit more wit, sting, enthusiasm, identification, anger, and emotions on the part of the judges will do the job (ibid, p. 55).

Another interesting request Cohen makes attacks Tzafir Hadar and Yardeni’s “pride and joy” – the productions improvisational tendency, asking that the production “present as early as possible the exact format for the competition – without diverging from it during the season so there won’t be a remaining taste of improvisation and anarchy….” Interestingly, these professional critics seem to reject the very same elements that the producers mark as consisting of the show’s Israeliness.

Nevertheless, (whether viewing them negatively or positively) Cohen’s suggestions corroborate the very same elements producers designated as particular to the Israeli production – improvisation, careful negotiation of “hard-core” reality engines, and the slow gradual reformatting including the changing status of LNL games. Hence, for better or worse, KN’s format is recognized here as an indigenous creation. It also emerges here as a battle ground of sorts for the negotiation of producers, critics, and audience members regarding the desired and acceptable form Israeli reality television should take and the values it should reflect.

However, the critics’ analysis of the shortcomings of KN through an upholding of the Idol formula as standard for evaluating the local show seem to fall back on the established or clichéd “cloning” narratives that dominate the discourse on reality television forms and their global circulation. Most crucial in this regard is the implication
that the *Idol* formula serves as “ideal texts,” which the local KN should aspire to emulate more fully. However, despite the implicit suggestion that the format changes represent “progression” towards more “accurate” cloning of the *Idol* schemata, the process described by the producers reveals a subtle negotiation that continuously results in a very particularly Israeli end product, even as they view the show as “maturing” along with its audience and “reaching” a fuller actualization of the reality conventions.

Accordingly, despite the fact that by the fourth season the show reformatting indeed transformed it from the hybrid LNL-KN game show/reality program to a fully blown reality television program with its fare share of what Tzafir calls “hard-core” elements – it remains, as Hadar, Tzafir and Yardeni still insists, a distinctly Israeli show. Drawing further on producers’ interviews, the next chapter begins with further exploration of the Israeli particularity of the show mostly in terms of its structural elements, again moving away from a “crust/filling” approach which views the “cultural content” as distinct from “global form” in the process of adaptation. Drawing on producers,’ critics,’ and (via online talk-back forums) audience members’ public discourses this analysis will be followed by a discussion of at the nature of the shared national space constructed for the Israeli viewing public by *KN* and its new reality format.
Chapter 5 – Who Is an Israeli Idol? *Kohav Nolad* and the Negotiation of Contested Israeli Identity

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion of KN in Israel is part of a global conversation about the value and significance of reality television in contemporary postmodern societies with growingly globalizing and commercializing media industries. Around the world, many see reality television as a threat to traditional values. Its global proliferation is understood as a wave of cultural imperialism via “trash-TV,” debasing national cultural sensibilities in the name of a market led political economy, which blurs the distinctions between culture and commerce (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004a; Simon, 2005; Bourdon, 2008). As Bourdon (2008) puts it, reality, like other genres in the history of television before it, is singled out as the “bad genre” that demonstrates “how deeply corrupting television is as a medium” (p. 69). Reality formats are perceived as “shrewd and cynical formulae that manipulate the least admirable traits of the public” and dumb it down (Simon, 2005, p. 198). Some left wing critics see reality television as a reflection of conservative capitalist ideologies – individualism, the vision of a zero-sum society in which no one can win unless someone else loses, altruism and compassion are signs of folly and weakness, and solitary struggle is privileged over cooperative mutual aid (Simon, 2005. p. 198).

Similar debates and commentary accompanied the LNL-KN transition towards reality forms. In Ha’aretz, influential television critic Rogel Alper (May 2 2003, p. 16A) describe the shift as a move away from the celebration of old-fashioned collectivism and solidarity to the upholding of a new, capitalist version of the Israeli national identity:
The message of *Lo Nafsik Lashir* was the communal singing, nostalgia, love of the homeland, the national gathering around the tribal bonfire – songs that define Israeliness. The whole being of communal singing denies individualism and competitiveness... Participation is the main point, the collective experience... The culture of communal singing is tribal, anti-achieving. It doesn’t encourage excellence and distinctness... Out of this program emerged, in a dialectic process, a program, which is its complete opposite. The message of *Kohav Nolad* is that not everybody is as talented, successful, or lucky, and that individual success, attained always within a competitive framework, must come on the expense of others.

Alper is basically saying that *LNL*’s ideology invokes older collectivist Zionist ideologies and ideals while *KN* reflects a new postzionist capitalist market-oriented ideology, and the dismantling of older social ties of solidarity. In effect, his argument makes an analogy between the show’s transformation and the value shift from Zionism to postzionism. However this argument, while compelling, is a bit too simplistic because of the binary nature of Alper’s dialectic approach. As I have shown before, rather than complete opposites *LNL* and *KN* are located on a continuum both in terms of their production practices, their form of address, the relationship they create with their audiences, and their ideology. To that effect, I argue, *KN*, like *LNL* before it, continues to creatively create a shared national arena and accordingly, is invested, albeit in ever evolving ways in the ongoing debate about the nature and essence of Israeli national culture and identity.

136
Ma’ariv journalist Assaf Gefen (2002, August 31) compares KN’s format to the experience of multichannelism itself and explains how the show epitomizes the logic of Channel 2 and the new cultural space that it offers Israelis:

*Kohav Nolad* is the quintessential Channel 2 show in a positive way: allowing expression to sectors who would only be able to sing in their showers in the days of …public monopoly (except for Arabs which is unthinkable, and Ashkenazi which is totally passé, this was a carnival of minorities and peripheries); letting “the people” make the choice (now they can not only chose what channel to watch but also who to watch in the next show); giving the feeling that “anyone can make it” and also: cheep content in prestigious wrap and the inflating of nonsense.

Thus, in the Israeli context KN and its format have very specific meanings that emerge from the particular industrial and national context of its production. This chapter will explore producers,’ critics,’ and (via online talk-back forums) audience members’ public discourses addressing the significance of the show and will demonstrate that unlike in the UK *Pop Idol* and its famous U.S sister show *American Idol* KN is not “about” “exposure of pop’s dark underbelly” or of “the internal workings” of the music industry and “its manufacture of celebrity and stardom” (Holmes, 2004, p. 148), but rather about the exploration of the internal working of contemporary postzionist “Israeliness” as shaped and reflected by broadcast, in the dominant Channel 2.

While I agree with Alper that KN represents a postzionist value shift, I also wish to continue to argue that this shift is ambivalent, contradictory, and overlapping rather than dialectic or binary. It is the productive friction between commercialism and
nationalism created within KN’s format that constructs a relevant cultural arena in which the main tensions informing contemporary processes of Israeli cultural identity formation are negotiated.

This chapter continues to look at the nature of the shared national space constructed for the Israeli viewing public by KN and its new reality format. Ultimately, I will argue that the show became a national sensation not because its format’s drama of individualized competition and audience’s selection “abandons” the local and the national, but rather because it addresses more directly and in a more suspenseful way than LNL the question at the core of the “Israeliness” debate and allows expression of the multiplicity within this identity, previously perceived as homogenous.

While the competition is between talented individuals, the discursive battles raging around the show demonstrate how these individuals become representative of varied (sometimes overlapping) sub-groups that form the Israeli collective. Mizrahim and Ashkenazim; veteran Israelis and new immigrants from Russia or Ethiopia, or migrant workers from the Philippines or Africa; secular and religious Jews, gay and straight; rich and poor; central or “peripheral; left wing pacifist and settlers; ex combat soldiers and draft dodgers – Kohav Nolad brings them all together in a competition that is much more than a talent quest.

For that reason KN is constantly surrounded with high profile media controversies as any position the show may make in this contested ideological question incites the deeply rooted discrepancies regarding the nature of contemporary Israeliness. This chapter looks at the way KN producers perceive the Israeliness of the format as resulting from the
show’ constant exploration of the meaning of Israeli identity and its responsiveness to ongoing national events. The first half of the chapter continues to look at the way the show’s format, or more accurately its ongoing formatting process makes it an indigenous form of cultural production despite the reliance on global reality “engines” – in this case the auditioning process and the show’s “liveness.” The second half of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of a series of high profile media controversies that surrounded KN’s fourth season as a way to demonstrate the fierce debates on the nature of Israeli identity that the show’s format triggers.

5.2 “The Israeli Experience? What KN Is Really “About?”

Rather than a mindless “clone” of a global hit formula with a “built-in” set of capitalistic free-market ideological influences “corrupting” Israeli national identity KN producers insist that their show is an original indigenous creation, inherently different from the popular American variation on the popular reality audition show. When confronted with the common argument that KN is ultimately an Idol clone, producers Yardeni, Tzafir, and Hadar struggle to explain why that isn’t the case.

As their discussion reveals the origins of the show in the LNL format with its celebration of Israeli musical traditions and its link to nostalgic warmth and collectivity through the shirah be-tzibur element, stays extremely important in creating this distinction. When discussing the show’s particularity, executive producer Yradeni emphasizes the historical link to LNL and specifically the early 2000s context. However, beyond this historical argument Yardeni also asserts that through dealing with Israeli
music, the show taps into wider issues surrounding the nature of Israeliness itself. In that regard, she emphasizes the show’s unique multicultural address:

It’s not (an *American Idol* clone) because it didn’t start from *American Idol*. It started from a very authentic thing that is very Israeli – the return to the *shirah betzibur* trend. Thus its a strong program because it taps into something that is authentically out there...Unlike *Idol* shows in the world (where contestants sing American and British pop songs) we will never have anything but Hebrew music on the show...It’s a strong program because it deals with Hebrew music, but also with in the meaning of Israeliness and also really reaches out to all the different sectors of the Israeli society. (T. Yardeny, personal communication, June 28, 2007).

This particular Israeli cultural, national context is crucial in the KN’s producer’s perspective as it ultimately makes it “about” Israeliness, which accounts for its distinction from other *Idol* type shows, despite the resemblance in central formal traits. Similarly to Yardeni, Hadar also views the show’s uniqueness as emanating from its ongoing conversation concerning the question of Israeliness and Israeli cultural identity.

Interestingly, his discussion positions the show as the opposite of *American Idol* by ascribing it goals that seem to resonate the “official” national goals designed for Israeli broadcasters by the Israeli legislator, way back in the “melting pot” era of the Statist’s monopoly broadcast. As Hadar puts it:

American Idol ultimately comes from a totally different approach, I mean sure the bottom line it’s the same thing. You discover a star. But my axis in the show is
entirely different, this is a show that unites the people of Israel and connects to the peripheries… And I personally, my goals are to nurture excellence, in places where they don’t believe they have it… This is what the show is all about. That for instance you don’t have in the U.S. There it’s all about making money. In Israel “making money” are dirty words. Here the discourse is about nurturing talent.

Hence, despite the commercial nature of the reality competition format and the openly commercial motives of Channel 2, Teddy and Keshet, the producers, are invested in a perception of the show as “about” creating and expressing an Israeli national identity that is both inclusive and “unifying.” This, in turn, is viewed as the distinguishing feature of the show, differentiating it from the American variation on the format.

The juxtaposition of KN’s national goals with the perceived crude commerciality of the American variation of the format is particularly interesting. As Tasha Oren (2004) argues, one of the main arguments against the introduction of television medium in Israel back in the 1950s was the threat of “U.S popular culture” that will lure the young with “its offering of passive pleasures, consumerism, and explicitly sexual and violent entertainment” (Ibid, 68). According to Oren, in the past these fears were mitigated through the model of educational television, promising intellectual stimulation, active learning, and cultural participation that were supposed to moderate the downward slide of Israeli society into popular culture (Ibid, 68).

Here, in the post-Statist commercial broadcast era, Hadar’s discussion on KN’s message or goal and his juxtaposition of these with the perceived crude commerciality of
American Idol, seem to fall back on that same old conceptualization. However, when I asked if the show openly promotes national goals Hadar rejects the notion vehemently saying:

No national goals! We really don’t have national goals, the goals of the programs are to entertain, the result may have nationalistic elements but we don’t have such defined goals to make a nationalistic show. The goal is to make a mind blowing entertainment show.

Subsequently, despite openly owning up to operating for commercial entertainment motives, Hadar’s perception of his show’s Israeliness still resonates within these older binaries. In order to stay commercially viable, KN producers almost instinctively seem to rely on and articulate within their commercial entertainment production the nationalistic address of the older, "statist," public-service broadcast model. This tradition still shapes Israeli audience's expectations and demands from the medium of television. To successfully “crack” a wide national audience for commercial motives, broadcasters and producer intuitively attuned to their audiences needs wind up addressing them as members of a national collective. as Tzafir explains it:

More than trying to guess what the audience’s expectation are it is more us acting on a gut feeling that Tzvika and I have…as first viewers we are going through the same experience that the audience goes through. We feel we know what the Israeli audience needs and like, and luckily so far we were never too far off.

Therefore, exploring the particular considerations involved in the producers’ development of the format for KN helps flesh out the complex ambivalent relationship
between commercialism and national address in Channel 2. This sheds light on the nuanced negotiation of “old” and “new” cultural sensibilities that inform the KN formatting process and the way these particular local consideration lead to its emergence as an indigenous, original, local cultural production. Again, through juxtaposition with American Idol Hadar sums this point up by saying:

This national thing that we have here – this is the charm of the show. All these things don’t exist in American Idol, because it’s not the same show, it’s not the same national context, and it’s not the same power or responsibility.

The next two sections look at the way the show’s exploration of the essence of Israeliness manifests itself in its format and production practices, emphasizing two elements – the utilization of the documentary mechanism during the audition stage as a method to explore the many faces of the Israeli experience and the show’s use of liveness to address the particularities of Israel’s security situation.

5.3 The Quest for Israeliness: The Auditions as a Documentary Journey

One of the formal elements most typical for the reality competition is the audition engine perceived as one of the core element of the reality “traveling” format. Nevertheless, Hadar discusses the KN auditions as one of the more original features responsible for the program’s Israeliness (or Israelizing mechanism). Connecting the discussion to the show’s national goals of “reaching the peripheries” and “unifying the people” Hadar states:

For example, in the audition stage, we actively reach people and populations that would never have come otherwise. We take the truck and go on the road, we
travel to places in rural areas, and such...It’s really important for us to bring these people to the auditions to bring populations that would have never dreamed of it themselves. ...Every year we have 4 or 5 production assistants to look for people... We go to all the schools, all the community centers in Israel...we try to get to every special ethnic group that sings – every Ethiopian group… its important for us to bring as many people as possible…we audition them separately and then invite them to the general auditions.

Moreover, besides holding regular auditions in several major cities across Israel, the team also shoots special audition segments, documenting them as they travel in a broadcast van dubbed “the Tzvika-mobile” to reach various peripheral locations and hold surprise auditions.

In Ha’aretz, Ehud Asheri (2006, May 19) describes the special auditions shows, their documentary mode of address, and their unique charm:

Hadar is actually the hero of a documentary musical, documenting an entertaining journey to the glamour dreams of Israelis of all colors and types. He orchestrates this journey with natural ease, locating human stories instantly and extracts laughter wherever he goes.

These special auditions programs – which are indeed shot and narrated in traditional documentary style (and in fact do not exist in the American Idol show), are openly invested in the exploration of the many faces of Israeliness. In them, the production particularly emphasizes marginalized locations and ethnic, class, and cultural sub-groups. Some examples include auditions held in the street of the southern
development towns of Dimona and Beer Sheva, in the northern Tveria (Tiberius) and in the Golan Heights, in the “mixed” city of Akko, where the production searched in vain for an “appropriate” Arab contestant,\textsuperscript{15} and in the port of Ashdod, where a season 5 finalist Shlomi Barel first auditioned.

Another Haaretz writer, Orna Cousin (2004, June 27) compliments the KN audition shows for their diverse representation of Israeli identity:

It isn’t the quality of the singing or the songs…that turns [KN] into an appropriate entertainment show…but rather introduction and queasy-intimate familiarization with different Israeli archetypes…Thus, the positive potential of Channel 2 actually materializes in an entertainment show like KN. This is the place where the Israeli multiplicity can be expressed for one festive moment. The audition stage, before the system embraces everybody, blurs differences and creates homogenization – everybody is welcomed. Ashkenazi, Russians, Mizrahi, gays, Ethiopians – as diverse and as colorful as possible…

Thus, the audition stage, which opens each KN season and may seem on the face of it as cloned directly from the Idol format becomes something different as the production goes out of its way to make into an exploration of contemporary Israeli identity. This exploration takes many shapes and expends over unexpected geographical areas. For example, in season four the show held auditions for the first time outside of

\textsuperscript{15} The first and to this date only Arab contestant on Kohav Nolad was Miriam Tokan who participated in season five. Tokan, a Christian Arab from the northern village of Aublin made it a long way in the competition by continuously performing the most mainstream Hebrew SLI repertoire, albeit in an Arabic style
Israel as in cooperation with the International organization of the *Jewish Agency for Israel*. As Hadar describes it:

It started as Israelis and Jews from abroad have been bombarding us with requests to be addressed by the show…it turns out that in the U.S and other Jewish communities around the world people are watching the program, and they are connected to Israeli music and culture. The fact that the show covers these songs that we all grew up listening to- it works for immigrant communities as well… we and we though who can help, and finally got in touch with the Jewish Agency who were happy to help. They said they can organize video conferences in different locations where they have offices around the world. And they can do some research and see how many talented people they can find and they also said if we find someone they will bring it on their expense.

Indeed, after auditioning people from South America, the U.S., and Europe, one candidate – David Salem from France succeeded in the auditions, joined the show, and made it all the way to the quarter finals.

Similarly in season seven, a two hour special audition show was dedicated to a coast to coast journey in the U.S.A as Hadar, Tzafir and two of the KN judges looked for an Israeli or Jewish candidates to join the show. Two candidates – Paula Valshtein, a Russian born, Israeli musician living and performing in NYC, and Roi Matalon the son of two Israeli college professors who emigrated when he was one year old (and thus holder of a dual Israeli-American citizenship) made it to the top hundred stage. Paula made it to the top twenty and is currently competing on the show.
The show’s willingness to explore the “Israeli glory dreams” of the Diaspora Jewry, and even more so those of Israeli expatriates as part of an extended diasphoric community stands in an interesting relationship to the Zionist ethos. Predicated as it is on the idea that all Jews should come to live in Israel, the Zionist ideology’s approach to the Diaspora Jewry was always ambivalent at best.

When asked about the significance of these Diasporic auditions shows for the message of KN about the nature of Israeliness Hadar talked about the Diasporic Jewish candidates as representing a pure naïve Zionism:

It was really touching, this way they came from a place of nationalism and belonging. For us it is really taken for granted, we live here, but they have a tone about them as they talk about “Israel” and “Jerusalem” its this kind of attitude that you sit there and you say, wow, it’s a dream for them. We are already in the postzionism and they are totally into Zionism, I find it really amazing.

The targeting of Diasporic Jewry was one of the official goals prescribed by the legislator for the Statist monopoly television, IBA. As Schejter (forthcoming) points out, The Israeli Broadcast Authority law that regulated the operation of the IBA clearly addressed the issue of Diaspora Jewry, stating that “television broadcast must (among other things) reflect the lives of Jews in the Diaspora” and address Diasporic Jews as a relevant group in the IBA’s target audience (ibid, 107). However Schejter argues that on the one hand the legislation also distanced Diaspora Jewry as part of the nation and minimized their historical role by dropping the line “reflect the life of the nation in the Diaspora its fate and its struggle” from an earlier version of the law (ibid, 106).
Interestingly, as Schejter’s comparative analysis of the First and the Second Broadcast Authority Law reveals that the requirement included in the Broadcasting Authority Law to broadcast to Diaspora Jews and to reflect their culture in local broadcasting was omitted from the Second Authority law (ibid, 115). For Schejter, it seems only natural to require the Mamlakhiti (Statist) broadcaster to broadcast to Jews in other countries but unjustified to require commercial broadcasters to broadcast such non-commercial programs in the service of the state.

So, what do we make of KN’s reaching out to these communities? Apparently, in a manner that supports producer’s claim about the essence of the show as dealing with Israeliness and the significance of the Israeli experience, they find that the Israeli audience is interested in the exploration of Jewish and Israeli life outside of Israel. While Jews in other locations outside of Israel were always of some interest (as in a country so little and isolated Israelis like to know they have some external source of support), the attention to diasporic Israeli communities is a relatively new phenomenon.

Traditionally, the official attitude of the Zionist establishment towards Israelis who leave Israel and emigrate is extremely negative. This is best represented by the derogatory label “Yordim (“those who descend” from Israel) which is used to describe ex-Israelis by their juxtaposition with the Olim (“those who ascend” to Israel), the official Hebrew word for Jews who come to live in Israel in the Zionist Israeli vocabulary. In the 1970s the Israeli emigrant community was famously attacked by the late PM Rabin who described them as “fallout of weaklings,” traitors who abandon the Zionist cause in times of hardship for the pursuit of material comfort.
With the weakening of the totalizing Zionist meta-narrative as the only legitimate perspective for the evaluation of social and national issues, this community, previously either ignored or despised is finally getting some more diverse representation in the Israeli public discourse. With the state of Israel now in its sixties and the number of ex-Israeli living abroad estimated at 750,000 (Rettig, 2008, April 6), this diasporic community is no longer necessarily universally despised. The advent of globalization and available technologies of communication and travel that fortify the relations of immigrant communities with their societies of origin opened up a new phase in the relationship. Also, with the decline of Zionist ideals and the rise of globalized culture many now view the Israelis living abroad as living the “American dream” or just lucky to have escaped the dismal, Israeli day-to-day reality.

By reaching out to this community and exploring it in a curious and non-judgmental way, KN seems to suggest that the presence of this diasporic community is a mark of the times and one more of the many legitimate faces of Israeliness. On the other hand, as always Hadar’s commentary and input helps bring forth a mainstream feel-good nationalistic touch; in the case of the U.S. special audition show that aired June 8, 2009, this moment occurred in the L.A audition when Zeevik, a “sixty plus” years old economist from Sunny-hill CA came to audition for the show. After Zeevik declares that “there is no place like home, like Israel” and that “given the opportunity I’ll be heading back tomorrow” Tzvika interrupts him with a question:
There isn’t anybody almost from all the Israelis we met, and we have been on the road here for ten days already…we didn’t find one person who said “wow, we are happy here. Its fun here.” Everybody seems unhappy. Why is that?

Zeevik’s answer seems to reflect one of the reoccurring clichéd discourses about the nature of Israeliness – emphasizing again the warmth and collectivity of the Israeli experience:

If you work and make a living, life is comfortable here. But that doesn’t necessarily make them good or happy…what makes me happy in Israel is that you can come to a friend in the middle of the night unannounced, and he will welcome you, or he would tell you get the hell out of there…and its ok. Here, if it isn’t put down in the schedule two months ahead of time that you are supposed to come – it doesn’t work!

The other Israeli expatriates in attendance receive this argument with warm applause, and Tzvika sums it up – “you miss the Israeli camaraderie!” While KN’s journey to the Diasphora represents on the one hand a new post-zionist openness and acceptance of Israelis who chose not to live in the country, it also quite naturally falls back into a more traditional “Statist” Zionist mode by seeking first of all to include and thus “invite” them back into the Israeli collective. Therefore, it is not coincidental that the show’s exploration of life in “the land of the American dream”, ultimately wind up reaffirming the established notions of what Israeliness is “about” – camaraderie and warm collectivity.
To conclude this analysis points out interesting ways in which some of the globally influential reality engines, in this case the auditions, “borrowed” by the KN production serve a specifically “Israelizing” role in the program, not necessarily in the sense that Israeli cultural content gets “inserted into them”, but rather in the way these poetic and structural elements are articulated, or “wired” in the structure of the show. Thus the KN auditions although common structural features of the popular global Idol format, are perceived by producers as inherently Israeli because they are “wired” in the show’s format in a way that make them serve a specifically local cultural function.

5.4 “LIVENESS:” ADDRESSING “THE SITUATION” AS AN ISRAELIZING FACTOR

Another element pointed out by KN producers as Israelizing the show, distinguishing its format from other reality competitions in the world and investing it with a nationalistic address, is the unique Israeli national “situation” of ongoing violent conflicts which compels the producers to respond to the national context of ongoing events. As Hadar puts it:

We have a national address because we are a small state and the show is produced in crazy time periods… the situation here is not a sane situation...there are certain security related things that can happen only in Israel.

Hadar discusses the way these unusual security considerations influence the ongoing production practices. Again, here the self-positioning against the backdrop of American Idol and other TV productions in the world serve to express the particularity of the Israeli situation and consequently the Israeliness of the show:
We thought of that, how many things we have to deal with in Israel that are not even connected to television... for example 5 minutes before the first final broadcast that I think is comparable to events such as the MTV Music Award abroad ...I suddenly hear someone in my ear piece, “Hallo Tzvika, I am in charge of the security here...I am in the headquarter, if I have to interrupt you in the middle of the broadcast in case something happens you need to do this and that...we have such and such security threats.. I know you were an officer in the army and can handle this,”...and right then and there he proceeded to unload a full blown security debriefing on me – ten minutes before we go on the air! Now - I imagine, lets say, MTV, its like one big... everybody high, dancing, simply having fun, can’t wait to go to the after party. With us its “just don’t let them attack us from the sea just don’t let them come from this or that direction” – it’s insane it can only happen in Israel... 

The specific security constraints also influence the show’s budget and drain its already limited resources:

Think of budgets. Fifty percent of the budget goes to security. There is no such thing anywhere else. In the auditions, security is one of the hardest things we have to deal with. You are not allowed to create a big crowd of people. The police won’t have it. But you are doing auditions. You can’t tell how many people will come in advance. But they tell you “how many?” They set a limitation on the number of people you can have. We need to call people at home and coordinate ahead of time.

152
The incessant security events that take place during the show’s different seasons in Israel also influence the ongoing broadcast. They present producers with difficult situations as they are producing an entertainment show in times when it may seem inappropriate to their national audience. Hadar describes this conundrum and the way it is solved through some more creative reformatting:

We had shows right after terror attacks where we had a dilemma – do we make the show or don’t we? You know, so we can begin the show with reference to the national situation “today there was a bombing” and then open with a relevant song like “Ein li Erets Aheret” (I have no other country”) that speaks to the situation. And we continue the show and say “they would not break us!” or “we would not be deterred” and all of a sudden it turns into something like that.” And sometimes you have all those people sitting in shelters in Kiryat Shmona up north so we dedicated a whole show to them…or the situation…in the south (season 4) was opened with two days of auditions in Sderot which is under continuous attack from Gaza. And so we went to Sderot, with the judges, with the big truck and all the equipment…

The response Hadar describes here is interesting for several reasons. First of all, this is another example of the way improvisation skills are required for producers as they cope with the particularities of the Israeli situation. On another structural level, I think it is

---

16 I have no other country- an SLI song written by Ehud Manor, composed by Korin Elal and first recorded by Gali Atari in 1986, the song was perceived as protest song responding to the horrors of the first Israeli-Lebanon war. Its words address the difficult national situation in days of crisis and the sense that despite these difficulties and the sadness they bring, one cannot leave Israel “I have no other country/ Even
markedly interesting to note how the KN producers utilize one of the reality genre’s more notable and contested definitive feature – its “claim to the real” (Corner 2002; Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Murray and Oullette 2004) to “Israelize the show by acknowledging ongoing national events both by broadcasting live “addresses to the nation” and by incorporating previously taped documentary style sequences highlighting specific areas under attack.

In this sense, these example begin to demonstrate, as my more elaborate discussion of the KN broadcast during the second Lebanon war will demonstrate below, the way the reality “liveness” engine provides the Israeli producers with a way to creatively format and reformat their program to deal with and contain ongoing national events. This makes the show more national and more “Israeli.”

Last but not least, Hadar’s example is important as it shows how the program cleverly uses Israeli music, in this case the SLI repertoire, and relies on its established set of national connotations and utilizes this music to articulate a specific type of national address in the show. By opening the show with a song like “I Have No Other Country” performed by the participants in the show – instead of having them compete each other KN indeed, positions itself in a unique place in relation to the Israeli public sphere. Despite the show’s entertainment goals and its reliance on “borrowed” global reality engines, its reformatting efforts continuously work to address its audience as members of

if the ground beneath my feet is burning/ Only a word in Hebrew/. Penetrates my vains and my soul/ this is my home.”
the Israeli national collective and offer a shared national space for them to process and address ongoing events that influence them as such.

As this analysis begins to show, while KN’s producers are operating within a commercial broadcast system and are committed to the commercial bottom line and the necessity to “bring in the viewers,” they have also crafted a certain type of national address for the show by responding to the cultural constraints shaping their target market that lead it to occupy a unique place in the Israeli public sphere. This national address makes KN both extremely successful and extremely controversial as critics from all sides of the ideological spectrum debate the show’s signature blend of nationalism and commercialism and the significance of the relationship between commercial entertainment-centered broadcast and the Israeli public sphere.

While many applaud the show for its exploration of contemporary Israeli identity, its multicultural inclusiveness, the “un-patronizing” democratic nature of its commercial format, and its unique local charm, others are appalled by its ideological influences and significance. This wide range of critiques fall roughly into the three discursive categories outlined in chapter two of this dissertation – the conservative Zionist, liberal, and radical post-national approach.

While the first two discourses differ on the main point of whether or not the show, and by inference commercial broadcast, represent the absolute demise of broadcast as national space or merely the “degradation” of said space in the name of cultural imperialism, they seem to share some central elitist cultural hierarchies. This “there goes the nation” approach looks at KN as epitomizing Channel 2’s “bonfire of vanities.” These
types of discourse seem to position KN as a scapegoat, singlehandedly responsible for every conceivable malady of contemporary Israeli society— the deterioration of national values and morals, the admiration for a hollow consumerist culture, the taking over of “inferior” Arab influenced Mizrahi culture or harmful, vain Americanized culture, the deterioration of local cultural production, and the dumbing down of the Israeli public and culture.

On the other side of the spectrum are more radical critiques that attack the popular show as perpetuating oppressive, old-school, hegemonic, western-centric, nationalistic/Statist ideologies – nationalistic chauvinism, militarism, Ashkenazi elitism, etc. Interestingly, this critique is also concerned with the show’s commercialism, which is perceived as underlining these other articulations

As a result, because of its commercial dominance and its cultural centrality KN threads a volatile line in its construction and representation of an Israeli national cultural identity that’s in flux in an age of shifts and transformations. Given the fluid and contradictory nature of the Israeli hegemonic process, whatever stake the show takes in its construction of Israeliness is going to be controversial because of the contested nature of this constantly forming national identity.

However, I argue it is precisely through such controversies that the show positions itself as a central cultural site through which Israelis negotiate the contested issue of what it means to be Israeli. Thus, KN succeeds, not despite, but because of its ability to contain and play out these contradictions. While this study cannot begin to exhaust the varied discursive field surrounding KN and the way it serves to negotiate
Israeli national identity, I chose to conclude here with a brief analysis of a series of controversies that accompanied the show’s fourth season, as I think they serve well to illustrate the type of negotiation involved as producers, critics, and audience members responding in blogs, chat forums, and talk-backs engage the show, as they negotiate the significance of the Israeli experience in contemporary postzionist times.

5.5 Season Four: “The Gift That Keeps On Giving”

For people like me, looking to understand the complex contradictory and ambivalent Israeli hegemonic process occurring on and through Channel 2, KN is the quintessential “gift that keeps on giving,” as it seems that every possible social and cultural tension characterizing contemporary Israel are negotiated and addressed by the show and in the unbelievably rich and vibrant discursive field that surrounds it throughout its seasons.

A particularly good example for this is the fourth season of the show, aired in summer 2006. In that summer, not only did the show transform itself into a nationalistic spectacle during the Israeli-Lebanese war, raising much public controversy and debate about the role of commercial entertainment broadcast in time of national crisis; but also, with the vast reformatting of the show described above, the season was accompanies by vigorous cultural debates discussing the production’s alleged rock-n-roll backlash against the Mizrahi trend that culminated when the previous season ended with the victory of Yehuda Sa’ado.

Sa’ado, like all the other stars “born” through the show in its three first seasons comes from a Mizrahi ethnic background. However, unlike Ninet Tayeb who won in
season one and season two winner Harel Moyal whose singing style remained squarely within the Israeli pop/SLI mainstream, the religious Sa’ado has a more hard-core Mizrahi “persona” as well as performance and singing style as he trills his voice in Arabic rhythms of quarters and halve tons (Aharoni, 2006).

As previously mentioned Tzafir and Hadar discussed the general weakness of the third season where, as Hadar put it “the talents did not match what the production could give.” As part of their efforts to take the show in a different direction, Tzafir mentioned that in preparation for season four they looked for “different type of contestants… more rock-n’ roll and more mature artists” and Hadar said “we emphasized people who are musician and song writers.”

Many critics like Aharoni (2006) and Pinto (2006) argued that Salado’s unexpected victory played a crucial role in the production’s decision to seek out contestants that would take the competition in a different direction. In this account, “more rock-n’ roll” were code words for “less Mizrahi” and thus catering to a much more “all-Israeli/Ashkenazi mainstream taste. Additionally, Mizrahi critics “reminded” the public that Sa’ado was in fact a musician and song writer, albeit, not exactly of the rock-n’ roll variety (ibid). The war and the Mizrahi/rock-n’ roll alleged backlash triggered a fair share of debate and discourses in the press and online, where Israelis fiercely debated the show’s choices and their significance and influence on Israeli national culture.

Nevertheless, the biggest most surprising controversy erupted one day after Jacko Isenberg, a 26 years old singer-songwriter “rocker” from the city of Natania won the season four big final by 46% of the audience votes. After a highly patriotic and
militaristic season, the people of Israel were shocked to discover their newly crowned star was a proud pacifist and a draft dodger—a far cry from the sticky national consensus promoted by the show during its wartime broadcast.

A raging discussion of the star culture, commercialism, anxieties about the show’s effect on national culture, patriotism, national core values and commercial television, militarism, altruism, national mobilization, and empty “star culture” ensued, and KN found itself once again in the eye of the storm. In the next sections, I look at these discussions a bit more closely, mapping out some of the major discursive articulations that emerged and accordingly, exploring the function of KN as cultural arena where contradictory contemporary articulations of Israeli national identity get negotiated.

5.6 KN GOES TO WAR: COMMERCIALISM VS. NATIONALISM

As the summer of 2006 was approaching the news of KN’s fourth season generates much debate, stirring up what by then had been established discourses of cultural anxieties surrounding the show. In these debates, even avid fans of the show felt the need to address their ambivalence about its commercialism. The following quote from Gili Bar-Hillel’s blog succinctly summarizes these concerns. Bar-Hillel a literary translator (who translates the Harry Potter series) writes in her blog about KN:

I know its not P.C to love this show, it is commercialized, populist, it reduces Hebrew music to prostitution “yadda yadda yadda.” But “fuck it” I *love* this show. Love isn’t the right word. Addicted to it (June 21, 2006).

---

17 An earlier version of this section was published on Flow, (Shahaf, 2006, August 18) http://flowtv.org/?p=24 159
This quote demonstrates the popular perception of the commercial nature of the show as a problem. It also reveals the way this fan perceives it as a “guilty pleasure” by invoking the addiction label to describe her attachment to it. This is clearly connected to the pleasurable, entertaining nature of the show, perceived as less intellectually appropriate. This perception is evident in the apologetic tone this die-hard fan feels she needs to take up as she concludes with a direct reference to the notorious allegation that KN is responsible for the “dumbing down” of the public:

I don’t care if some of my brain cells burn out and I loose some valuable I.Q points every time I watch the show. Thank god turns out I had enough I.Q points to survive a season or two. So all of you laughing out there can kiss my virtual blog’s ass.

This quote helps demonstrate the common perception (even amongst fans) that views KN as inherently low brow and shallow, due to its entertaining nature. Interestingly, it seems that the national address of the show serves to legitimize some fans’ viewing pleasures. This seems to be the case with “Ronit” who posts a response to Bar-Hillel’s articles claiming:

Me too! Me too! I am also a die hard fan of the show! … This makes me “lose points” in my husband’s score, so I excuse my watching as reflecting an anthropological interest in the Israeli society.

18 English in the original
Thus the strong nationalistic address of the KN format contains for some viewers the anxieties provoked by the Israeli broadcast turn to commercialism, which is one of the markers of the new post-Zionist age.

However this still remains controversial as the show’s nationalism is often attacked and deplored as a cynical, profit driven façade. One of the leading voices in this campaign was Ha’aretz renowned editor and television critic Ehud Asheri. For example in the day following the extravagant KN third season finale Asheri writes:

If you … didn’t feel abused by this vulgar commercialized manipulation – raise your voice! … The press also (joined in) with much joy and happiness…The withdrawal from Gaza? Sharon-Netanyahu? Hurricane Katrina? All peanuts in comparison with the real drama (of the show’s final)… it would be different if…Keshet had treated the show in the appropriate proportions as just another nice entertainment program. The minute it turned it into a forceful, Statist, Zionist project… it condemned it to an end by revulsion. (2005, August 30)

Asheri’s critique is rich with nuanced implications. On the one hand, he seems to argue that KN’s Statist self-positioning is harmful because it emphasizes light entertainment over political and security concerns. On the other hand, the show’s nationalistic undertone perpetuates old-school hegemonic Zionism, which is also undesirable. Therefore, KN represents a double danger. Not only does it signify commercial television’s threat to annihilate the space allocated for public debate of truly important national concerns in the name of a disproportionate propensity towards
entertainment and spectacles, but also this commercial entertainment spectacle is drawing on ideologically dangerous sources of forceful Statist Zionism, which the writer rejects.

The uneasiness regarding KN’s commercial statism was exacerbated in the summer of 2006 when, with the break of war, the show quickly “[t]ook upon itself the role of national Morale Officer” (Kristal; 2006). This not only made it the single Israeli entertainment show to survive the switch to wartime broadcast, but also allowed it to maintain its place at the top of the rating charts throughout the war, an achievement that cannot be taken for granted in the context of Israeli television.

As previously mentioned, in season four, the KN production drastically reformatted the show to make it more appealing. As a result, the show relinquished the patriotic LNL games and shirah be-tzibur elements and emerged as a fully blown reality competition. However, exactly at that point, national events once again spun out of control with the break of the second Lebanon war in July, and the KN producers again found themselves responding live to a massive national crisis.

The conflict begun on July 12 when Hezbollah militants attacked two Israel Defense Forces IDF jeeps patrolling the Israeli side of the border fence. During this surprise attack three soldiers were killed, two were wounded, and two more were captured and taken to Lebanon. Israel’s response was swift and (some would say disproportionately) massive. IDF extensive airstrikes and artillery fire damaged Lebanese civilian infrastructure. An air and naval blockade were imposed and, finally the Israeli infantry invaded southern Lebanon in a failed attempt to return the captive soldiers. In
response, Hezbollah launched more rockets into northern Israel and engaged the IDF in guerrilla warfare.

The war took the Israeli public by surprise. While several hundreds of left wing protesters demonstrated against it calling for IDF’s withdrawal, the general public in Israel was supportive of the war in its early stages. This consensus, typical in Israel with the outburst of conflicts, was short lived. However, in the first days of the war the media seemed to play along with the government’s narrative presenting Israel as a victim in a war of “no choice.” Despite the disproportionate Israeli response and the massive destruction of Lebanese civilian infrastructure, the majority of the Israeli public seemed convinced that the Hezbollah initiative and the kidnapping of soldiers – after the Israeli withdraw from Lebanon in May 2000 – justified the Israeli action.

The transformation of KN begun during the first week of the war and reflected the production's renowned resourcefulness in adapting its format to the demands of ongoing Israeli national affairs. Throughout these first weeks, the show kept transforming - its structure (e.g. canceling the competition portion in the first week), its song repertoire (i.e. selecting from a canon of quiet, patriotic SLI songs), and its location (e.g. airing from a northern border-town, and later on performing live in the southern resort village of Nitzanim, occupied by citizens who fled northern Israel).

The show was also flexible in its incorporation of “stories from the field.” Relevant strategies included holding song competitions between firefighters and police-officers, interviewing citizens sitting in bomb shelters, and, ultimately, helping arrange the wedding of a young couple from northern Kiryat Shmona, whose wedding location
was under attack. This particular instance quickly turned into a hetero-normative
nationalistic spectacle, as the correspondent reporting from the scene repeatedly declared
the wedding a “triumph over Hezbollah.” To top it all up KN production sent one of the
show’s past popular contestant season two’s Harel Ska’at to sing to the newly weds – and
the whole thing was broadcasted live on KN.

These examples begin to illustrate the show’s format reliance on the open-ended,
hybrid, and flexible reality form. Even more importantly however, it relies on the genre's
famous (if not notorious) “claim to the real” (Corner 2002; Holmes and Jermyn 2004;
Murray and Oullette 2004). When faced with a national war crisis, KN creatively
transformed itself by seamlessly borrowing from a whole range of reality forms - from
the news broadcast, to reality-soaps--all the time utilizing the genre’s capability to tap
actuality. These transformations, combined with the show's characteristic "liveness,"
reinforced the production's central legitimizing premise of “being with the people,”
“strengthening,” “supporting,” and “encouraging” the nation in time of war.

This does not mean everyone accepted the integrity of KN’s new national role.
This was especially clear in the public discussions by journalist, critics, and audience
members debating the topic in online talk-backs. Here again, the tension between
commercialism and nationalism dominated the discourse. In Ha'aretz television critic,
Ehud Asheri revisited his argument about the show’s “fake Statism.” While Asheri
viewed the decision to adapt KN’s format to the circumstances as “legitimate marketing
gimmick.” The problem for him was:

The megalomaniac “statist” pretense that characterizes … Keshet in general,

In online talk-back on the Haaretz website, Asheri’s readers debated passionately whether this “is indeed an example of ‘fake statist broadcast,’” which presents exploitive “false national concern, in favor of ratings and high profits from commercials” (“reader and viewer”), or an example illustrating that:

Wonderful television stars like Tzvika Hadar should and can serve as responsible, national, role models in these war days and in other days as well. (“Hannan from Jerusalem”).

A different take on the issue is presented by Ynet TV critic, Meirav Kristal, who criticized KN’s “multiple format transformations.” Kristal seems to reject the compulsion of Teddy and Channel 2 to conform to nationalistic address in times of crisis. To her, the pressure of national responsibility reduced the contestants from potential stars to “a chorus-line, collectively chanting patriotic songs.”

Kristal wraps up by asking, “why don't the Israeli fans demand back the show that the war confiscated?” “Israel is a weird nation,” she concludes in her answer, “when we are offered peace we are startled and divided, and when we are surprisingly presented with a war we fall into silence and unite.” This discussion demonstrates the complexities of the tensions between commercialism and nationalism in contemporary Israel. The reliance on a nationalistic address within a popular commercial television format is
criticized as either exploitive and pretentious, or unnecessary and perpetuating chauvinistic nationalism.

My next section looks at the way these anxieties regarding commercialism and national culture get articulated in the discourse around the show and its format as internal tensions characterize the debate on the nature of Israeli national identity – namely the question of identity politics - class, ethnicity religiousness, region, and cultural capital.

5.7 **The Mizrahi Cinderella Syndrome**

Not surprisingly, for those familiar with the history of Israeli culture and society, some of the main tensions constructing the debate on KN’s format and the way it represents Israeli national culture revolve around questions of identity politics. Considerable anxiety and tensions revolve the question of ethnicity and the long standing tension between Ashkenazi hegemony and Mizrahi challenges. This is one of the main issues and tensions dividing Israeli society and an extremely important element of postzionist critique deals with the way the Zionist establishment, dominated by the founding European Jews, oppressed different immigrant groups and enforced its version of Israeliness.

Interestingly, as Tasha Oren demonstrates, the anxieties about “Americanization” were mingled with anxieties about Arabization within the discourses surrounding the development of national broadcast in Israel. As I have already shown, the rise of commercial television is strongly connected to a post-Zionist shift towards multiculturalism in Israeli culture in general. The question remains, to what extent does
multiculturalism work when it is applied as a strategy by an Ashkenazi dominated broadcast industry?

A famous controversy in the early days of Channel 2 happened when Alex Giladi, one of the founding owners of *Keshet* declared in 1993 that “Keshet will provide television for the entire nation, both to the upper tenth and to Masuda from Sderot.” The name Masuda designates a low class, older Mizrahi female immigrant. The implication for many was that for the Masuda’s a low quality commercial product will suffice. This statement triggered a wave of interpretations and criticism attacking the patronizing, racist, binary thinking. Interestingly, the Hebrew Wikipedia entry on the Masuda controversy states that one perceived implication, “supported by the nature and low quality of the programming fare offered by *Keshet* at the time” was that Giladi believes a low income Mizrahi stratum is best serve by “populist game-shows” with “poor cultural quality” (Wikipedia.co.il).

As this quote demonstrates, the controversy unleashed public anxieties about the relationship of Ashkenaziness/ Mizrahiness and high/low culture, as well as revealing the reproduction of the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi power relations in the commercial television industry. Historically, the perceived mission for Israeli national broadcast was contributing to the Eurocentric “cultural uplift” melting pot policies directed by the veteran Ashkenazi elite at newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries (Oren, 2004). Television was thus supposed to uplift backwards Mizrahi to the cultural level of “superior” Eurocentric Ashkenazi. By this logic, if commercial television caters to the tastes of despised stereotypical Mizrahim, national culture is diminished.
In that regard, it is interesting to see the way anxieties about U.S style commercial entertainment were articulated here alongside anxieties over the decline of the dominant “all-Israeli” Ashkenazi culture, and the rise in the popularity of previously marginalized Mizrahi culture and cultural tastes.

To return the discussion to KN, a common argument asserted about the show’s format is that it benefits Mizrahi, working class contestants from the peripheries, because they fit the Cinderella narrative that works so well with the show’s formula. In this context, the show’s format was attacked for its reliance on personal stories of contesters rather than on “real talent.” These attacks are connected to the low-brow commercialism anxieties as “the personal story” and the dramatic transformation involved when someone “who would not have made it” if it weren’t for the show is crowned as star - is perceived as a distraction overshadowing what should be the real issue – which is the talent.

Here as well, the hybridity of the reality format and its ability to rely on a variety of established plot devices borrowed from a wide range of narrative conventions and genres – comedy, melodrama, etc— is articulated alongside other factors in the cultural debate concerning the evaluation of the show’s cultural significance and value.

The success of Mizrahi contestants throughout the seasons was grounds for ongoing debate. This issue became the focus of much controversy however, around the end of the third season of KN that was won by Yehuda Sa’ado, “the only winner that manage to make it to the final with a Mizrahi singing style, that is even reminiscence of the religious singers (paytanim) in the Moroccan synagogue”(Pinto, 2005, August 29). In an article entitled “Can an Ashkenazi Win?” Pinto qualifies the discussion:

168
Before we think for one moment that the Mizrahi revolution was completed, at least on Kohav Nolad one must remember that almost all the Mizrahi contestants that capture the hearts of the viewers had to bow down before the mainstream, mostly Ashkenazi musical past…even Sa’ado had to sing “Makom Ledeaaga”\textsuperscript{19}

Shalom Shitrit, one of the prominent Mizrahi post-Zionist scholar-activists agrees with Pinto that the ethnic background of the young contestants might be Mizrahi, but their singing style isn’t:

The official ID card of the state of Israel is still Jewish-Zionist-secular-Ashkenazi…to get to the center stage you must go through training in good-old-Israeliness. Only after you went through there, you can start thrilling in a Mizrahi style a little (ibid).

These critiques which accelerated with the end of season 3, Salado’s virtual disappearance from the public eye, and season fours’ well publicized rock-n’ roll turn created a wave of discourse accusing KN of an anti-Mizrahi back lash. For example, after Jacko Isenberg won the fourth season, Idan from Jerusalem posted this response to a Ynet.com story about him (Barshkovski, 2006 September 14):

What you don’t know is that this year the KN “council” decided that whatever happens, the star that will be born will be Ashkenazi. Not that I have anything against Ashkenazim, we are all Jews…but even if this year someone as good as Sa’ado would arrive they would not give him the time a day because they wanted and Ashkenazi and only an Ashkenazi.

\textsuperscript{19} An all-Israeli canonized SLI song written by Ashkenazi songwriter/performer Mati Caspi
Television critic Matan Aharoni, carefully maps out these dynamics by analyzing what he considers to be a “slip of the tongue” by Hadar at the audition stage of season four, in which he defined two Mizrahi contestants as possessing “a special voice” and than pitted them against each other, by allocating just one spot for that “type of voice” on the show. This makes Aharoni conclude “I discovered that Kohav Nolad …seeks to maintain the style of (Ashkenazi) pop as the hegemonic, canonic, cultural style in the Israeli society.”

Aharoni claims that Salado’s voice was also positioned as the special voice that the show chief editor, Yoav Tzafir, had to fight to keep in the competition in face of a general demand by the program editorial board to let him off. Thus, the victory of Sa’ado was an unexpected result for the producers that, according to Aharoni benefit more from a pop style “star.” This “has everything to do with their greed and patronizing Ashkenazi-centric approach,” in his perspective. Sa’ado, Aharoni claims, is a burden for the production as they can’t profit as much on him as his singing style does not fit the windows of distribution they are connected with: children’s song-festivals, Telenovela, stage shows, commercials, CD sails etc.

The pop singers’ mainstream, familiar voice has an establish audience and sells very well. However, Mizrahi music is still on the margin and will not be easily accepted to these big commercial productions due to patronizing Ashkenazi approaches that dominate the market. Thus a “star” that sings in Mizrahi style does not yield as much profit as a “star” that sings pop. The limited financial prospects of such candidate’s accounts for the limited quotas they have on the show.
5.8 Be Careful What You Wish for: The Israeli Rock ‘n’ Roll Bad Boy as PZ Scapegoat

If indeed the production’s “new direction” taken up in the fourth season of KN was designed to tone-down the “Mizrahi Cinderella” syndrome, it worked. For the first time, the final three contestants - two “rockers” and one pop singer-song writer - while not necessarily ethnically Ashkenazi, were all more compatible stylistically with the Israeli euro-centric musical mainstream. Rafael Mirila’s parents immigrated from post-soviet Georgia, Maya Rotman and Jacko Isenberg both have Ashkenazi fathers and Mizrahi mothers. However, their Ashkenazi last names and their overall Western-oriented musical and performances styles led to their common perception as the most Ashkenazi top three ever on the show. All three were thoroughly submerged in western musical traditions. The production celebrated their ascendance to the final by “summoning” Israel’s “top five rock-n’-roll guitar players” who performed with them live from the big stage in the heart of Tel Aviv.

The crowning of Jacko Isenberg, the first rocker to ever win KN seemed like the most appropriate ending for KN’s big rock-n’ roll season. However, as the fireworks went off and the newspapers hit the stands, Jacko’s one night in the warm embrace of the Israeli collective consensus was over. KN’s production may have wished for a rock ’n’ roll bad boy, but the people of Israel were certainly not ready for Jacko Isenberg’s rock ’n’ roll life style. The result was nothing short of tragic, as the quick crowning mechanisms revealed its dangerous reversible potential. It took Jacko three months to sway a mass national audience and only about three days to have them turn against him in one of the more dramatic scapegoat scenarios ever in the history of Israel.
As the charismatic Jacko, who apparently lacked experience with handling the press, made his press victory rounds he made some provocative statements that pretty much ended his career before it had a chance to begin. Ironically, after KN assumed even more of a nationalistic address than ever before the war, its new bad-boy rock star was suddenly discovered as a proud draft dodger, not hesitating to brag about avoiding the mandatory IDF service. Many were offended by such statements as “you need someone to sing sad songs on Memorial Day,” “I can’t hold a rifle,” and by the words “the state is a prostitute, the state blows,” which were part of the lyrics written by Isenberg for a song recorded by his band before he joined the television talent competition.

The leading voice in the anti-Jacko campaign was Ma’ariv journalist Ben Caspit. After the publication of Caspit’s brutal tirade against Jacko Isenberg, KN, and the phenomenon of draft dodging, Helicon, the record company that promised to give the new “star” a record deal retreated quickly, and online talk-back was exploding with thousands of posts for and against draft dodging, KN, and boycotting the new star.

The public outcry that emerged seem to have turned Jacko into a scapegoat for the entire war, by then extremely controversial in its own right. By the end of August, a group of Israeli reserve soldiers and parents of soldiers killed in the fighting started a protest movement calling for the resignation of PM Ehud Olmert and the establishment of a state commission of inquiry. The protest movement swayed hundreds of protestors who set up a protest tent outside of the Israeli parliament, The Knesset, in Jerusalem.

On the backdrop of this heated atmosphere Ben Caspit’s passionate column quickly propelled a public moral panic, setting in motion one of the more dramatic
scapegoat dynamics in the history of the country. Caspit condemned Jacko’s proud draft dodging and claimed that the fact someone like him can win in KN is the real reason behind the state of Israel’s problems, which led to the breakdown of the Israeli army during the war:

Indeed what a stupid rotten country makes such filth into...a national hero. He broke into the top of our society while hundreds of IDF soldier are on Lebanese soil. He became the sublime star of our youth while ...Gilad Shalit (who was kidnapped by Hamas at the beginning of the war) still isn’t home. These are the things I would have the government investigative committee look into, this is our real problem. How did we let out culture dumb-down so badly? How can any despicable draft dodger become a mega-star?...the cultural vanity and the corrupted political system combined so that Jacko can boast publically, and the world will be quiet and salute him. (2006, September 14).

Caspit’s article created much media fanfare and a massive discursive battle ensued with dozens of press article and thousands of talk-backs. The outcry about the KN winner’s army service record is particularly interesting as it seem Jacko fell victim to the show’s own nationalistic or Statist address as “Barak, officer in reserve,” who responded in talk-back to Caspit’s article put it:

If you want to become Statist, and winning KN is indeed very commercial but also Statist, and requires that you respect the entire nation, especially when you

---

20 For example its online version generated 1133 talk-back responses  (Caspit, 2006, September 14).
win a competition that took place during a war in which more than 100 soldiers died.

Many talkbackists pointed fingers at KN and its production for misleading the public by “hiding” the fact that Jacko did not serve in the army so that his success on the show will not be hindered. For example reader “Itai” posted this talk-back:

The blame is all on the KN production that “neglected” to mention this little minor detail as to not ruin his chances to get ahead in the program and so that his musical talent can earn them a lot of money.

Others rejected the way Caspit linked KN and the state of Israel, making the argument that commercial broadcast cannot be perceived as a mouthpiece of the state or the government:

Jacko won a singing competition...organized by a commercial channel and financed by commercial bodies and not by the government. Your attempt to link the state and the competition is unfair and misleading. The state didn’t give the guy a stage nor financed the production. Jacko is indeed not a very good model for the youth and unfortunately one of many who didn’t go to the army...leave the guy alone.

Another prominent discursive articulation returned to the ethnic in an interesting twist, connecting the debate about the star’s ethnicity with the question of national values as reflected by his draft-dodging. For these talkbackists the production’s “decision” to crown an Ashkenazi star as backlash for Sa’ado’s victory is all to blame for the outcome. In this discourse, Ashkenaziness gets articulated with the post-national “decline of
Zionist values,” One good example for this surprisingly prevailing approach is a response to a Ynet.com story about the boycott against Jacko (Barshkovski, 2006, September 14), posted by talkbackist “Mali”:

They wanted an Ashkenazi – that’s what they get – the first three stars were great also in their personality and humanity…but the Ashkenazi wanted a representative and who did they pick? Calling the state a prostitute …this is the education they get.

Conclusion

This last post throws into sharp relief the way in which the different tensions informing the negotiation of Israeliness as national identity collide in the discursive field generated by KN. This discussion begins to show how through the “crowning” of pop stars KN creates a shared national experience, which is then used to debate multiple tensions informing the contested issue of “appropriate” Israeli identity in an age of shifting national values. Rather than the show being about the musical industry’s internal workings as the way Pop Idol is perceived, it seems to indeed revolve more around the exploration of the internal working of contemporary post-Zionist “Israeliness” as shaped and reflected by broadcast, in the dominant Channel 2.

Thus, this nuanced process of negotiation help reject looking at KN as a copycat program importing to Israel the reality format as “designed” elsewhere fully grown and armored” with a set of built-in cultural influences and significance. Instead, this analysis fits other accounts of reality television, which highlight the way it serves to negotiate
different social and cultural issues and tensions informing the process of identity construction in a multicultural postmodern society (Simon, 2005, p. 198).

Similarly, I argue that KN, with its gradual introduction of reality elements and constant mediating efforts, serves as arena for the negotiation of the ongoing dynamics constructing the national/cultural identity of “Israeliness,” in an era of structural and ideological transformation. Through the process of drawing on popular global formats and engines that are the hallmark of the postmodern reality genre, KN is busily creating an effective cultural arena for the expression and negotiation of contemporary Israeli postzionist culture and identity. Commercialism, “Americanization,” or globalization, on the one hand, “Statism” on the other hand, and yet on a third level post-Zionist multicultural and post-national notions are not “interruptions” corrupting this identity or its broadcasted reflection. Rather, I argue that it is through the ongoing friction between these elements that this identity is constructed.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Because they are on the cutting edge of production practices in new commercial television systems around the world, for many, formats based productions are the symbol of new, sophisticated version of cultural imperialism. These local productions franchise, “borrow,” or “mimic” popular global televisual formulas and are perceived in academic and public discourses surrounding them as inherently connected with the global expansion of U.S style commercial, multichannel broadcast system and it’s accompanying “franchise-capitalism” industrial model. As such, they are recognized by many as symbolizing the centralization of creativity in the global industry; cheap strategies for local producers to produce low cost, successful, mindless entertainment rating bombs, which dumb-down the audience and are responsible for the debasement of television as a medium for the expression and creative negotiation of national culture.

Similarly in Israel, reality television, the most prominent representative of which is the ultra successful mega-hit show Kohav Nolad, is perceived by many as epitomizing the ill effects of globalized popular culture, in general, and commercial television, in particular, for Israeli national identity. By looking at KN, its production practices, and public discourse surrounding its reception, both in the context of local Israeli national history and in the context of the global wave of reality format flows, this dissertation explored and complicated these accepted scenarios.

Developing a postzionist approach for the study of Israeli television, this dissertation offered a more nuanced understanding of the complex, ambivalent, and contradictory cultural dynamics that govern the transformation in national television
broadcast from Statist and public to commercial and multichannel. The framework offered by the phenomenon of format flows is particularly productive for this project, as it seems to embody some of the central contradictions characterizing contemporary processes of globalization.

After providing a historical overview of the shift from Statist public monopoly to commercial multichannel broadcast in 1990s Israel, while detailing the wider ideological, economic, and cultural shifts transforming the country in the postzionist age, and looking at the specific legislation policy that created Channel 2 as a privatized national channel, the second chapter of this dissertation explored the cultural anxieties surrounding this shift in broadcast and its alleged cultural and social “effects.” Chapter two engaged three main positions shaping the debate about the shift to commercial broadcast – the conservative Statist Zionist approach; the “pluralist” liberal approach; and the “post-national” radical approach— and then argued that they fail to grasp the multidimensional, flexible nature of the hegemonic process taking place in and through Channel 2. The overarching problem shared by these otherwise quite different approaches is an underlying disregard for the way in which Channel 2 broadcasters and producers— working within a specific set of commercial, institutional, legislative, industrial, ideological, cultural, and national constraints— generate a viable cultural arena that gives voice to a new, postzionist Israeliness. They do so exactly because they struggle and manage to give voice to some of the main tensions informing the ongoing contemporary construction of “Israeliness” in a postzionist era. Commercialism, “Americanization,” or globalization, on the one hand, “Statism” on the other hand, and on a third level
postzinosaur, multicultural and postnational notions, which are not “interruptions” corrupting this identity or its broadcasted reflection. Rather, I argued that it is through the ongoing friction between these elements that this identity is constructed.

Critiquing all three approaches as reductive, chapter two stressed the importance of a contextualized study of production and reception processes in order to demonstrate how, despite its commercial orientation, Channel 2 continues to offer a shared national space for the Israeli viewers as it responds, in significant and profound ways— albeit via entertainment programs based on popular global programming ideas and forms— to the ongoing events and cultural tensions shaping the Israeli national experience.

To begin such a contextualized study, chapter three opened my analysis by looking in a highly contextualized manner at the pre-history of KN through a detailed exploration of the production history of KN’s “mother-show,” the patriotic game show LNL. Positioning the show both in relation to the national Israeli political context of the early 2000s, the industrial context of Channel 2, and the wider context of global trends in television industry in the age of the “global formats,” this chapter demonstrated the particular ways in which Channel 2 responded significantly and profoundly to the Israeli experience— through the adaptation of popular trends in global television entertainment.

Looking at the historical context for the production of the KN mother show LNL, this chapter explored the particular local context that shaped the evolution of KN’s production, text, and public reception and the nature of the shared or collective national experience Channel 2 offers the Israeli viewers in its central entertainment content. Despite the producers’ appropriation of ideas and elements of “foreign” shows and their
articulation of some old-school hegemonic Zionist cultural practices and traditions, this chapter showed that the result of their creative efforts was neither a bland, copycat product of globalized cultural imperialism, as conservative Zionist and liberal pluralist critics would have it, nor was it a pure and simple nationalistic mechanism of Statist propaganda, as radical post-national critics would no doubt perceive it. Rather, the show’s rearticulation of some fundamentally Zionist traditions represented by the Hebrew song (Zemeri ivr) and the practice of collective singing (shira be tzibur) within a new, commercialized, cultural field represented by Channel 2’s style mix of contemporary “globalized” televisual forms of entertainment, glamour, and celebrities—created an updated, escapist, commercial, nostalgic celebration of the “good-old state of Israel” identity which serves as a quintessential example of the postzionist cultural dynamics typifying Channel 2.

Nevertheless, more than LNL, it was its “offspring-program,” KN, that, as many critics point out, manage to best define the spirit of its times, or in other words, capture the fundamental nature of the very same postzionist cultural dynamics whose televisual manifestation this dissertation explored. Looking at the gradual process through which KN’s format evolved from the LNL mother-show and at the fierce debates surrounding its particular blend of commercialism and nationalism, the final two chapters of this study explored KN by looking at the factors that make it possible for its producers to argue it is not a “clone,” but rather a unique, original, indigenous program which continues to represent and explore the nature of Israeli national identity despite relying on global format elements.
As demonstrated in chapter four, the slow, gradual trial-and-error formatting process revealed by LNL-KN’s industrial history doesn’t fit the established narratives regarding the nature of the format phenomenon in academic literature and public discourse. Taking up some of these cliché narratives this study demonstrated that the production of KN is neither the result of “the centralization of creativity” in global media industry privileged locations in the dominant “West,” nor is it the end result of a process of mechanical cloning of franchised or “stolen” ready-made global TV recipe, which descended upon local television scenes “from above” as part of a top-down process of globalization.

Moreover, this chapter demonstrated that the shift from the patriotic shirah be tzibur game show to the reality talent competition did not by any means represent a forsaking of the local and the national address of Chanel 2 in favor of the manufactured, bland product of cultural imperialism with a built in ultra-capitalist ideological vision. Instead, KN emerged upon closer inspection as a carefully orchestrated and extremely gradual, local, creative process through which the producers negotiate and articulate different available formal elements, or “engines,” as they try to come up with a powerful and original format for an entertaining hit show that will work in the Israeli context.

The show’s poetics, as revealed by the history of its format evolution, reflects producers’ creative negotiations of a set of particular constraints ranging from material limitations, such as the size and structure of the market they operate in, to cultural constraints, including their perception of their audience’s tastes and preferences and the national culture shaping these. Drawing on producers’ interviews, press coverage, and
debates of the show, this part of the study looked at the way KN introduced to the Israeli television market - through ever gradual and careful process of negotiation – some of the more globally popular elements, or “engines,” of cutting edge reality television. Throughout, the study found that producers emphasized the way they negotiated the introduction of such elements, taking into account the Israeli audience’s special “mentality” and the initial innocence of both the production and the Israeli audience.

This unique process of mutual “professionalization” of audience and production through the evolution of a popular show’s format is significant as it demonstrates the crucial pioneering role played by the LNL-KN reformatting in the introduction of the reality genre in Israel. Simultaneously, it points to the unique Israeliness of the show. The show’s development thus emerges as a significant factor both for the Israeli television industry and for the Israeli audience’s “socialization” and the development of its televisual literacy. Significantly, the show was able to do that exactly because it wasn’t a top-down format franchising or adaptation, but rather “mutated” from the ground up, beginning with a “very local” LNL, with its deep cultural ties to Zionist cultural traditions and sustained this local grounding as more and more elements of the global reality fad were incorporated into its format.

Positioning the Israeli public discussion of KN in the context of a global conversation about the “effects” of reality television formats, the final analysis chapter, chapter five, explored producers,’ critics,’ and (via online talk-back forums) audience members’ public discourses addressing the significance of the show and demonstrated that unlike the U.K Pop Idol and its famous U.S sister show, American Idol KN is not
“about” “exposure of pop’s dark underbelly” or of “the internal workings” of the music industry and “its manufacture of celebrity and stardom” (Holmes, 2004, p. 148), but rather about the exploration of the internal working of contemporary postzionist “Israeliness” as shaped and reflected by broadcast, in the dominant Channel 2. To that end, the first half of the chapter continued to look at the way the show’s format, or more accurately its producers perceive its ongoing formatting process as an indigenous form of cultural production despite the reliance on global reality “engines.” In this case, the auditioning process, used to explore the nature of Israeli identity, and the show’s “liveness,” was used to tap into actuality and thus, maintain the show’s connection to ongoing national events.

Examining the nature of the shared national space constructed for the Israeli viewing public by KN and its new reality format, this chapter ultimately argued that the show became a national sensation not because its format’s drama of individualized competition and audience’s selection “abandoned” the local and the national, but rather because it addresses more directly and in a more suspenseful way than LNL the question at the core of the “Israeliness” debate and allows for the expression of the multiplicity within this identity, previously perceived as homogenous. The second half of the chapter explored this by looking at a series of high profile media controversies that surrounded KN’s fourth season as a way to demonstrate the fierce debates on the nature of Israeli identity that the show’s format triggered.

This discussion demonstrated the way in which through the “crowning” of pop stars KN creates a shared national experience, which is then used for the negotiation of
multiple – ethnic, cultural, class, political and ideological tensions - informing the contested issue of “appropriate” Israeli identity in an age of shifting national values.

Looking at the production and public reception processes surrounding KN this dissertation used the show to demonstrate the multidimensional nature of the cultural hegemonic process taking place through Channel 2. By exploring in great detail the show’s production history and its public reception I set out to demonstrate that, despite its reliance on elements of globally popular entertainment formulas, KN is hardly a copy-cut product of cultural imperialism threatening to obliterate the distinctiveness of the local culture. On the other hand, I demonstrated that despite the show’s overt nationalistic address, it is not merely reproducing old-school Zionist hegemonic ideology either. Rather this dissertation explored the way this show, which emerged in a very specific intersection in Israeli history, through a specific set of industrial and cultural constraints, powerfully relates and gives voice to a distinctive Israeli contemporary cultural experience and the complex dynamics and contradictory cultural logics of postzionist Israeli culture, as they get shaped and reflected by commercial broadcast.

This study offers only a very limited and initial exploration of the topic of global formal flows and the way these figures through the creative process in which Israeli television producers negotiate and give voice to the contested, local, national culture and identity of Israeliness. First of all, while this study begun tackling, describing, and addressing the multiplicity of the identity of “Israeliness”, and the contradictory, contested process involved in its mediated construction, the richness of this negotiation begs further consideration. More specifically the very dynamics I have been able to
describe need to be further explored by drawing on more in depth analysis and discussion of theories of the nation, nationalism, globalization and its relationship with the fluid construction of other subject positions such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion and more.

Another rich discussion I didn’t get to fully develop in the scope of the present research is the relationship between reality forms with their special claim to “the real” and actuality and between the notion of time and temporality as they relate to the process of nationhood, particularly in the context of globalization on the one hand and fragmentation of cohesive identity formations on the other hand. These debates can lead to a better understanding of the way the data described in this study contributes to a project of de-westernizing media studies.

Furthermore, as this study only hinted— the practice of formal borrowing or adaptation has a long standing history in Israel— even in the days of the Statist monopoly television service. Looking at older examples – local game shows modeled on the American Hollywood Squares and That’s My Secret aired on the IBA general service, sitcoms like Krovim-Krovim which aired on the educational television service sharing the one monopoly channel (Shahaf, 2007), as well as looking at the influences of foreign forms on other original drama and comedy productions— would be a very fruitful endeavor as it would enrich the discussion.

Furthermore, by focusing on one show— even as prominent and central as KN, is the methodological choice I made allows for a highly contextualized analysis. However, this naturally provides only a very small part of the picture. Since KN first introduced the
interactive reality competition to the Israeli market, the flood gates were opened and reality and other format adaptations are saturating the small Israeli television market. In this regard, a fascinating process takes place where different niche and national commercial channel compete with each other through format adaptations. This, of course, leads to even more public controversy over the place and role of these globalized forms in the construction and negotiation of contemporary Israeli culture. Also, not all format based production are as invested as KN in the creative rearticulation of global elements with local considerations – although I would argue they all wind up with a very “localized” products.

In the summer of 2007 the struggling commercial channel 10 tried winning the rating war with Chanel 2 by placing the Israeli franchise of Survivor across from KN only to fail miserably. Interestingly, the other Channel 2 franchise company, Reshet, managed to beat KN, as the final for its rendition of the BBC’s Dancing With the Stars received better ratings. Future research will certainly need to account for these wider dynamics and their significance for a small, belated struggling television industry, whose entire potential audience is composed of approximately 7 million Hebrew-speaking native Israelis.
Bibliography


Asheri, E. (2006, July 16). Yatzanu mehuzakim. [We departed strengthened]. Haaretz.co.il


Bar On, Y. (2004, March 31) Lesevel noldu [Born to suffer]. *Ynet.com*


Hecht, Y. (2003) Digital culture – the struggle on hegemony in the online market – the
talk-back case-study. *Online Journal - Israel Internet Association*


193


Routledge


Yosef, R. (2004). *Beyond Flesh – Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli


Shapir, G. and Peled Y. (2002) Being Israeli the Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press


Zohar Israel, November (15, 2003, Ynet.co.il) Kohav shuv nolad [a star is born again]

http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2818467,00.html, Accessed on July 19, 2009
**Vita**

Sharon Shahaf was born and raised in Nes-Ziona, Israel where she attended the Ben-Gurion High School. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Tel Aviv University in 2000 and the degree of Master of Arts, also from Tel Aviv University, in 2004. During the years 1999 and 2000 she serves as the Assistant to the Editor of the Arts and Leisure Section of Haaretz daily in Tel Aviv. In August 2004 she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. Her co-edited anthology *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television across Borders* is under contract with Routledge Press and forthcoming in 2009.

Permanent address: 2894 Blackwood rd. Decatur Georgia, 30033.

This manuscript was typed by the author.