Satire in the Holy Wonderland: The Comic Framing of Arab Leaders in Israel

Limor Shifman
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

This article traces the depiction of Arab leaders in televised Israeli satire during the last two decades. First, I discuss the construction of Yasser Arafat’s image in the popular show Hartzufim (1996–2000), claiming that his polysemic framing as an Arab-Jew served both the emotional needs of Jewish-Israelis in a bewildering era of transformations and the commercial interests of the show’s producers. I then examine the depiction of other Arab leaders in Eretz Nehederet (2003–present), highlighting the continuous dominance of the “Israelification” framing strategy as a mode of hegemonic cooptation. Yet, in contemporary entertainment-driven media environment, this framing of Arab leaders tends to be de-politicized and fantasy-anchored, rather than news-anchored.

In theory, Israel should be a great place for political satire. It may be a cliché to say that political reality is often far more surprising, intriguing, and unpredictable than anything a satirist could come up with, but when it comes to the Holy Land this is probably the case. Packed with a mindboggling array of contradictions and involved in a ceaseless conflict with its Arab neighbors, Israel is always either on the verge of a crisis, or in the midst of one. Yet when it comes to televised satire, the offerings are surprisingly limited. So far, only three prominent satirical shows have been aired in Israel: Nikui Rosh (“Head Cleaning”; 1974–1976), Hartzufim (“Crappy/Cheeky Faces”; 1996–2000), and Eretz Nehederet (“What a Wonderful Country”; 2003–present).1

This article focuses on the two latter programs, probing them in light of the dramatic political, cultural, and social transformations that Israel has undergone in the last two decades. Two intertwined realms of change set the background for this expedition, the first of which relates to the political economy of Israeli media. While Nikui Rosh was broadcast in an era of single-channel, national, public service-based television, Hartzufim and Eretz Nehederet emerged into, and were shaped by, a new commercially driven media ecology. In this environment, entertaining the audience to draw high ratings became a central logic underpinning all genres, including satire.

---

1This simplified shortlist consists of very popular shows that focused mainly on political satire: many other comic shows that incorporated some satirical elements have been broadcast in Israel over the years, as well as some purely satirical shows that were not as successful as the ones listed here.

I am indebted to Zohar Kampf, Ifat Maoz, and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt for their useful comments on this article. I am also grateful to the editors of this special issue for their valuable suggestions.

Correspondence should be addressed to Limor Shifman, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus 91905, Israel. E-mail: mslimors@mscc.huji.ac.il
A second transformation relates to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its representation on television. Following the Oslo accords of 1993, the ban on inclusion of Palestinian voices in Israeli media was removed. Since then, Palestinian representatives (both ordinary people and politicians) have been featured regularly on Israeli screens, and the trend continued even after the renewal of violence during the Al-Aqsa Intifada of 2000–2005 (Liebes & Kampf, 2009; Liebes, Kampf, & Blum-Kulka, 2008). This mediated deluge of Arab representatives—often framed in softer and more positive light than in the past—has not skipped satire. If in the veteran *Nikui Rush* Arab characters appeared rarely (mostly to criticize Israeli racism), since the mid-1990s Palestinian and other Arab leaders have become an integral component of Israeli televised satire.

The presentation of enemy leaders in comedy and satire is intriguing because it potentially spans a broad range of ideological meanings. On one end of the spectrum, we can find extreme racist humor denigrating the “other” and re-enforcing feelings of superiority among the in-group. Yet humor about the enemy may also bear an opposite meaning in which the other becomes an object of identification and the dominant in-group is criticized. In what follows, I trace the comic depiction of Arab leaders on commercial television in Israel during the last two decades, asking how Arab leaders are constructed by Israeli satire, and what is the ideological meaning of these representations?

The article opens with a telegraphic account of Israeli televised humor about Arabs in the precommercial era. I then describe the changing Israeli media landscape of the 1990s, moving on to analyze the depiction of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the *Hartzufim* puppet-based show. I claim that the hegemonic framing strategy of “Israelification” used to depict Arafat, as well as his polysemic construction, served both emotional and commercial needs. In the second part of the article I explore how other Arab leaders are depicted in the contemporary show *Eretz Nehederet*, highlighting the continuous dominance of the “Israelification” framing strategy as a mode of hegemonic cooptation. Yet the framing of Arab politicians in *Eretz Nehederet* veers away from the news to the realm of de-politicized fantasy, a transition I ascribe to political and commercial forces working in tandem. This leads to a concluding reflection on the ideological function of satire in contemporary Israeli commercial media.

**COMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ARABS IN 1980s ISRAEL**

The Israeli-Arab conflict, raging for more than 100 years, is one of the most intractable conflicts of our times. Of the numerous aspects of this multifaceted and traumatic conflict, I focus here on a rather narrow one—comic representation of Arabs on Israeli television. The roots of this humorous framing can be traced back to the early days of Jewish settlement in what is present-day Israel. Settlers’ attitudes towards Arabs were marked by a blend of admiration and condescension: they were conceived, on the one hand, as courageous, chivalrous, and close to the land (thus resembling biblical Jews), yet on the other, were looked down upon as primitive and culturally inferior (Even-Zohar, 1980). Following the eruption of clashes between Jews and Arabs in the 1920s, this dualistic approach migrated into the stereotypes of the “good” and the “bad” Arab. The “good Arab” served the Zionist vision; the “bad Arab” opposed and threatened it. This dichotomous mode of presentation was prevalent in Israeli theater, cinema, and literature until the late 1960s.
Processes of critical self-reflection following the Yom Kippur (1973) and Lebanon (1982) wars, as well as the first Intifada (1987), led to a challenging of previous stereotypical modes of representation of Arabs in theater and cinema (Urian, 1997). Comic sketches, however, continued to portray Arabs mainly according to the “good Arab” stereotype. These sketches, presented on Israeli television and stage since the mid-1980s, transformed the Arab from a potential threat to an object of ridicule. A prominent attribute of the “good Arab” sketch was its portrayal of Arabs with a composite of Arab and Jewish-Israeli traits. Arabs in these sketches spoke fluent Hebrew, were interested in popular Israeli culture, and were well-versed in local politics. In many senses, this mode of depiction can be interpreted as a mode of hegemonic cooptation (Gramsci, 1971) in which the ruling class maintains its power by assimilating potentially dangerous ideas in remolded forms.

In 1980s Israel, this process of cooptation did not include any reference to Arab leaders—only “ordinary” Arabs were featured in televised humor. The single prominent appearance of an Arab leader on Israeli televised comedy prior to the Oslo Accords took place during the first Gulf War in 1991, when Israel was under rocket attack from Iraq. A stream of vernacular jokes, stickers, and caricatures mocking Saddam Hussein was followed by the dictator’s impersonation on the popular skit show Ha-Olam Ha-Erev (“The World Tonight”). Saddam was depicted as a paradigmatic “bad Arab”: a ruthless and insane dictator, whose conditions for withdrawing from Kuwait included, for instance, placing young American women as servants in every single Iraqi household. The comic exaggeration in Saddam’s portrayal turned the great demon to a ludicrous butt, offering some comfort and relief in a time of great anxiety (Shifman, 2008).

The scarce comic representation of Arabs on Israeli television of the 1980s can be attributed both to the marginality of Arabs in televised news in an era marked by continued violence and hostility, and to the minor place of comedy in the programming of Israel’s single channel. This state of affairs, however, was altered with the advent of two transitions seeded in 1993, a year that carried with it dreams of a new Middle East and a new media environment.

1990s ISRAEL: TELEVISED SATIRE IN A NEW MEDIASCAPE

Until the 1990s, Israel had only one television channel. Funded mainly by compulsory fees paid by the public, this BBC-like station was particularly rich in educational and patriotic content. Yet a combination of political, economic, and social shifts, which may be crudely charted as underpinned by individualization and privatization, led to legislative changes and the eventual launch of the commercial “Channel 2” in November 1993. The new channel shortly became the most popular in the country, defining new norms in the Israeli media landscape. A flow of entertainment-based genres swamped the small screen, bringing the epoch of “infotainment” to Israeli primetime (Liebes, 2003). One of the most prominent changes brought about by Channel 2 was an increase in the variety and number of original Hebrew-language comedy and satire shows, which were considered ratings magnets. While some non-political sketch shows were

2The practice of using humor to cope with a perceived ethnic or racial threat is not unique to Israel, of course. In the American context, for instance, the Sambo comic stereotype has been extensively analyzed as helping whites cope with repressed feelings of fear and intimidation while maintaining their sense of control (Ely, 1991).
reasonably popular, it took more than two years and an extremely traumatic moment for the first successful Israeli commercial satire to emerge.

The Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians, signed in 1993, generated a heated debate in Israel: alongside enthusiastic supporters, an increasingly vocal series of protests was held in various settings by the political right-wing. On November 4, 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a young Israeli Jew from the radical right whose goal was to stop the peace process (Wolfsfeld, 2004). The assassination and subsequent elections, won by the candidate of the right-wing Likud Party, Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, and not Shimon Peres, Rabin’s natural successor, had a decisive impact on Israel’s televised satire. While between 1993 and 1994 the farcical and nonsense-oriented humor shown on Channel 2 had been born from a momentary feeling of relief after the Oslo Accords, Rabin’s assassination was a wake-up call for satirists (Shifman, 2008). Producers and creators of comedy, most on the political left, felt they had been too complacent before the assassination. Israeli televised satire blossomed; even programs that had not been especially critical adopted a more biting tone. Within this environment, *Hartzufim* ("Crappy/Cheeky Faces") stood out as the most successful satire of the late 1990s.

Modeled after the British puppet-based show *Spitting Image,*

**Hartzufim** was imported in an era marked by dramatic changes in political communication. The deep social processes of Americanization, liberalization, and individualization that had energized the changes in the Israeli mediascape also penetrated the political sphere. A steady decline in party membership eventually led to institutional processes of political personalization, followed by media coverage increasingly slanted towards individual politicians (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Reflecting this new epoch, *Hartzufim* focused on people and personalities rather than issues and ideologies. If the standard bearer of 1970s satire, the sketch-based *Nikui Rosh,* had dealt with the economy, education, and security, *Hartzufim* focused on Yasser (Arafat), Bibi (Netanyahu), and Dan (Meridor). Most politicians were depicted as uni-dimensional characters: one was presented as a weak kitten, another as Napoleon, and a third as a prostitute. In this sense, *Hartzufim* integrated perfectly with the image-based world of advertising surrounding it. While commercials were selling clear images of products, the *Hartzufim* marketed clear images of politicians.

Ratings showed that the Israeli public was enthusiastic about consuming the images the *Hartzufim* was selling. The program penetrated the very heart of Israeli public and political discourse in the late 1990s. The influence on the political system ascribed to it was enormous, from making and breaking the careers of individual politicians to bringing down the government. Two political figures were considered to have been the most affected by the program: Dan Meridor and Yasser Arafat. In the case of Meridor, who served as the Minister of Finance in the government formed by Benjamin Netanyahu after the 1996 elections, *Hartzufim* was credited with having contributed to his dramatic plunge in popularity and eventual resignation. In contrast, the

---

3 *Hartzufim* was based on a format that was utterly new to Israel but quite popular across the globe: puppet-based satire. The trademark of this genre is the use of grotesque “latex puppets of well-known figures and characters, both fictional and real” (Meinhof & Smith, 2000, p. 43). The visual representation of these famous figures varied across shows. For instance, the successful French program, *The Bebette Show* (1984–1995), used *Muppet Show* puppets to capture a “zoo full of political beasts,” starring Kermit the Frog as President Mitterand (Collovald & Neveu, 1999, p. 341). A different visual representation system was adapted in the British *Spitting Image* (1984–1996), which, as its name ironically hints, focused on caricaturized versions of politicians and other celebrities.
alleged influence of the *Hartzufim* on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat’s image was utterly positive: many commentators claimed that Arafat’s growing popularity among the Jewish population in the late 1990s could be attributed to the show. In what follows, however, I will cast some doubt on this prevalent interpretation.

**DEPICTING YASSER ARAFAT ON HARTZUFIM**

The mid-1990s were characterized by a dramatic transformation in the way Yasser Arafat was framed and conceived in Israel. For countless years, the Palestinian leader had been presented in Israeli media as a bloodthirsty terrorist determined to destroy Israel. He was scorned and demonized, portrayed as “the Nazi in the bunker” or the “two-legged beast.” But mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO in the Oslo Accords brought about an utterly new media discourse about Arafat. Almost overnight, this leader turned from an “enemy” and “terrorist” into a “friend” and “leader” who signed the “peace between the brave” (Mandelzis, 2003).

Arafat’s puppet debuted on the show during its first season, and a poll conducted by the broadcasting authority found that it quickly became the show’s most popular puppet (Rot-Cohen, 2001). The results of the poll, wrote Ehud Asheri,

> reflected first and foremost the undeniable contribution of the *Hartzufim* to the dramatic change that took place in Arafat’s image among the Israeli public. The man with the hirsute face, the great demon, so recently public enemy number one, went through an accelerated process of exoneration, was formally absorbed into the legitimate Israeli political system, and is today accepted as an integral part of our lives, much like the *hartzuf* image that was designed for him: a mischievous, smiling, likeable, crafty, but harmless character who reminds us more than anything of the stereotype of the cunning Jew who knows how to get by. (1996, p. 3)

Asheri’s article represented a prevalent interpretation in the late 1990s, according to which *Hartzufim* legitimized the Palestinian leader in the eyes of the Jewish-Israeli public. Nevertheless, my close reading of the sketches featuring Arafat between 1996 and 2000 reveals that the positive image ascribed to Arafat’s puppet was only part of a more complex framing. The central framing strategy evident in these sketches is the depiction of Arafat as an *Arab-Jew*. Alongside his trademark keffiyeh, the *rais* is constructed through an assortment of Jewish-Israeli signifiers: he speaks fluent Hebrew, conducts close and warm relations with Israeli politicians, and is intimately familiar with Jewish traditions such as the festive Passover *seder* dinner. This juxtaposition produces a comic effect explainable by incongruity theories of humor, according to which humor derives from an unexpected encounter between two different spheres or elements (Billig, 2005). In addition, Arafat’s character is constructed as one that can be laughed at out of superiority: he is feminine, his voice is weak, and he tends to stutter. Arafat’s puppet can thus be analyzed as a demonstration of hegemonic cooptation, in which the “other” is remolded to fit in with familiar schemes.

However, a closer look at the skits reveals a gap between the softened *image* of Arafat and his actual *behavior*. While the image is that of a nonthreatening, feminine old man, his actions within the narratives reveal destructive intentions. The intimidating elements usually only become manifest at the very end of the sketches, when he threatens to carry out terror attacks. For instance, in one of the sketches, after both major political parties refuse to take Arafat on board their election
airlifts (flights chartered to bring Israeli expatriates to the voting polls), Arafat suggests he will “take Sabena,” a reference to the 1972 terrorist hijacking of a Sabena flight.

Arafat’s puppet thus consolidated for the first time in the history of Israeli pop culture the two contrasting hegemonic frames described earlier as the “good Arab” and “bad Arab.” These veteran framings were incarnated in two more specific images highly relevant to Arafat’s mediated image: the politician/statesman versus the terrorist. The superimposition of these contrasting frames into one puppet, I assert, served both the emotional needs of the Jewish-Israeli audience and the commercial interests of the show’s creators.

The construction of Arafat as a comic hero combining both positive and negative traits may have addressed the discomfort and dissonance generated by the swift transformation in Arafat’s public status in Israel after Oslo. This dual framing allowed bewildered Israelis to laugh at Arafat as well as with him, enabling them to hold on to old views and embrace new ones at the very same time. Thus, contrary to the claim that the popularity of Arafat’s puppet among Jewish Israelis was derived from its positive traits, I assert that its success was the result of the combination of negative and positive elements the puppet embodied. Weirdly enough, the consolidation of two hegemonic stereotypes of Arabs as good and bad into one character offered a new and somewhat subversive look, as it framed an individual Arab as a complex and multifaceted human being.

This mode of depiction, however, did not serve emotional needs alone; it may also have served commercial ones. According to a series of polls conducted between 1994 and 1997 by the Tami Steinem Center for Peace Research, both perceptions of Arafat as a statesman and as a terrorist were prevalent in the Jewish-Israeli population of the time. The polls recorded some fluctuations following dramatic events of these years, which were marked by both suicide bomb attacks against Israeli civilians and continuous peace negotiations. Following Fiske (1987), I thus argue that the polysemic construction of Arafat as both a politician and a potential threat served the commercial purposes of the show, allowing various groups to interpret the program differently, each according to their own identity needs. As early as 1974, Vidmar and Rokeach showed that when faced with a polysemic character (in their case, Archie Bunker), people see in it what they want to see. Arafat’s puppet allowed similar freedom of interpretation: Those who perceived him as a terrorist could have found validation for their views in many sketches, as could those who perceived him mainly as a leader. In this sense, Hartzufim was satire catering to all tastes. At that point, the blend between satire and commercial TV had not yet reached its peak—that happened only in the third millennium.

“I’'T OKAY, YOU CAN SPEAK HEBREW”: ARAB LEADERS ON ERETZ NEHEDERET

Israeli Interviewer: It’s nice to discover you’re so up-to-date on our cultural scene.
Arab Interviewee: I am not that up-to-date in culture; I prefer your television. Let’s play “Which Survivor contestant do you most resemble?” (Bashar al-Assad’s character in an early appearance on Eretz Nehederet)

4The complete set of polls can be found at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research: http://www.tau.ac.il/peace/.
The most popular satirical program in Israel for the last decade has been *Eretz Nehederet* ("What a Wonderful Country"). Debuting in 2003, the show has been a jewel in Israel’s ratings crown, hooking audiences of varied backgrounds. Aired weekly, *Eretz Nehederet* is constructed as a parody newscast in which a straight-faced host tries to navigate his way through a minefield of wacky interviewees, an array of politicians and pop-culture celebrities imitated by comedians. Featuring actors rather than puppets, the show has been described as having certain elements in common with both *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, but also as being less sophisticated and more vulgar than these two older American programs (Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). *Eretz Nehederet* is regarded as prominent not only as a source of entertainment but also as a source of political information and evaluation of politicians, particularly by young people (Balmas, 2008). However, the show has also drawn severe criticism: some commentators claim that it leans towards popular entertainment, neglecting its satirical “mission,” while others, largely right-wing settlers, object to the show’s critical portrayal of Jewish settlers as a violent and somewhat insane group.

*Eretz Nehederet* has been broadcast in an era characterized by a series of negative developments in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Three months after *Hartzufim*’s last episode in June 2000, the Al-Aqsa Intifada broke out. A supporter of the widespread violence, Arafat was once again transformed—this time from partner to enemy—and was depicted as such in Israeli media until his death in 2004. The second Lebanon war (2006) and the war in Gaza (2009) marked an era of continuous bloodshed. Yet somewhat surprisingly, Liebes and Kampf (2009) found that even though violence increased, the depiction of Palestinians in Israeli media became more varied and positive in the third millennium, continuing the openness characterizing the representation of Palestinians since the initiation of the Oslo peace process.

In contrast to the standstill in the peace process, Israeli television kept moving ahead at full speed. A second national commercial channel was launched in 2002, operating alongside a plethora of cable and satellite-based channels that emerged in the late 1990s. Fierce competition between these various commercial players over the small Israeli market led to budget cuts in domestic programming production, affecting genres with higher production values, such as drama and documentaries (Shamir, 2007). In this new environment, heavily dominated by reality and quiz shows, the lines between politics and entertainment, fiction and reality, authenticity and fakeness have become more blurred than ever. The so-called postmodern era has finally conquered the Holy Land.

Transformations in both spheres—the political and the cultural—are well reflected in the way Arab leaders are framed in *Eretz Nehederet*. Since its launch, many Arab leaders have been emulated in the show, including Saddam Hussein, Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad, Muammar Gaddafi, and Muhammad Abu Tir (from Hamas). Interestingly, those imitated most often were Israel’s most extreme and bitter enemies, mainly dictators depicted in Israeli media as terrorists. The more moderate leaders (in particular Arafat’s successor, Abu Mazen), were rarely imitated.\(^5\)

---

\(^5\)This falls in line with the findings of Balmas, Sheafer, and Wolfsfeld (2011), according to which Hamas representatives appeared much more frequently than Fatah representatives in Israeli news in the aftermath of the 2006 Gaza elections which brought Hamas to power. It also echoes the process described by Wolfsfeld (2004), according to which Israeli media tends to focus on the concrete, specific and immediate threats of terror associated with the Hamas rather than on the more abstract, general and distant discourse related to peace.
In all these cases, the same pattern of Israelification takes place, incorporating three main dimensions: linguistic, social, and cultural. The linguistic aspect is the most simple and straightforward: Not only do all the Arab leaders in the show speak fluent Hebrew, but they also have virtuosic control of contemporary Israeli slang (albeit with an Arab accent). Thus, for instance, in Saddam Hussein’s first appearance, the interviewer addresses him in English, but Saddam quickly assures him, “It’s okay, you can speak Hebrew.” Interestingly, when American leaders such as George W. Bush and Barack Obama are mimicked on the show, they do not speak Hebrew—they speak in English, accompanied by Hebrew subtitles. Moreover, the linguistic differences between American and Israeli politicians are often accompanied by cultural clashes and misunderstandings, particularly in relation to the peace process.

Surprisingly, such clashes do not characterize relations between Arab leaders and Israeli politicians on the show; in fact, their relationships are depicted as utterly harmonious. While the host attempts to ask serious news-related questions, his Arab interviewees drift into issues such as consumerism and popular culture. The Israeli politicians impersonated in the show seem quite happy with these topic shifts and make perfect partners for vibrant discussions about food, hairstyles, and getting high in Amsterdam. In some cases, the Arab leaders mediate childish fights between Israeli politicians; in others, they take part in carnivalesque panels involving showbiz celebrities and politicians. For instance, in one recent skit, Muammar Gaddafi forms a dictator support group that includes his “colleague” Bashar al-Assad, but also the mayor of Tel Aviv, the domineering mother of a famous model, and a hugely popular Israeli pop lyricist. The fiercest criticism in this sketch and others seems to be directed not at the Arab leaders, but against representatives of Israeli popular culture, mainly the lyricist and the shallow and commercialized field of contemporary Oriental music he represents.

The main process underpinning the encounter between Jewish and Arab leaders on the show can thus be described as de-politicization. Religious, political, and ethnic-based disputes are put aside in these meetings, conveniently replaced by more light-hearted and consensual issues. This mass-mediated fictional form of encounter echoes what happens in face-to-face real-life contact between Jews and Arabs. Studies have found that for Israeli Jews, the successful encounter with Arabs is very often one in which Arabs are de-politicized and their national identity, aspirations, and claims of injustice and discrimination are excluded from the discussion. This idealized de-politicized Jewish-Arab dialogue often focuses on folkloristic topics (food, ceremonies) and on the similarities between Jews and Arabs as human beings (Maoz, 2004, 2011).

In Eretz Nehederet, however, the strongest common denominator between Arabs and Jews relates not to the general human condition, but rather to their contemporary role as consumers of goods and popular culture. What marks the Arab leaders as part of the imagined Israeli community is not their perfect Hebrew or their communication skills, but their deep interest in Israeli popular culture and commercial television: Hassan Nasrallah is desperate to star on the Israeli equivalent of American Idol; Bashar al-Assad is particularly knowledgeable about Israeli commercials; and Muammar Gaddafi, in a glamorous golden robe, co-hosts a lifestyle fashion show. They comment on programs, actors, producers, and brands, proving to be extremely knowledgeable about Israeli football, music, cinema, and an assortment of TV genres.

Television thus becomes the main point of reference of Eretz Nehederet, the focal point of the world, the mode through which politicians from both sides experience themselves and their environment. This deep reliance on mediated images may be interpreted in two ways. First, one might read it as criticism of a highly commercialized postmodern environment in which instant
celebrities are at least as important as word leaders. Contrary to a show like *The Colbert Report* that contests fundamental aspects of right-wing political communication in the postmodern age (Baym, 2007), criticism in *Eretz Nehederet* seems to focus on the shallowness of postmodern popular culture.

Yet a second interpretation of the program would suggest that alongside its manifest criticism of postmodern culture, the show’s mechanisms of representation seem to blend perfectly into it. The main pleasure *Eretz Nehederet* offers is that of identifying one familiar televised framing playfully juxtaposed with another. In this sense, the show seems to reflect what Meinhof and Smith—in their work on *Spitting Image* (2000, p. 57)—refer to as “TV pastiche,” that is, television based on a pleasure of “intertextual recognition of ‘life as seen on TV’” rather than on satirical commentaries on political processes. Interestingly, this depiction is less relevant to the Israeli show actually based on *Spitting Image*’s puppet format, *Hartzufim*, which focused much more on politics than on popular culture.

*Eretz Nehederet*, in contrast, is immersed in popular culture as much as in politics. Intertextuality in the show relates not only to other programs, but also to *Eretz Nehederet* itself. Thus, in the course of their re-appearances on the show, each of the Arab leaders becomes more and more self-referential to his own comic image and gestures, gradually turning into a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983) not of his news-based image, but of his *Eretz Nehederet*-based persona. Thus, for instance, television viewers learn to expect that any interview with Hamas leader Abu-Tir will eventually include a moment in which Abu-Tir hints that the host is gay. This comic gesture becomes an integral part of Abu-Tir’s construction—part of the unwritten pleasurable contract between the show and its audience. This contract, as unfolded below, has little to do with the way Abu-Tir is portrayed in the news.

**FROM NEWS-ANCHORED TO FANTASY-ANCHORED SATIRE**

In this final section, I wish to reexamine the ways in which *Eretz Nehederet* and *Hartzufim* frame Arab leaders in relation to what I tag “news-anchored” and “fantasy-anchored” modes of news parody. While in practice news-anchored and fantasy-anchored modes of satire are importantly intertwined, feeding off each other in multifaceted ways, I attempt to disentangle them here for analytical purposes. News parody programs, by definition, relate to news, yet the nature of the relationship between news and parody may vary greatly. At the *news-anchored* end of the axis we find programs that relate to televised news on at least four levels: (1) they imitate the newscast format, (2) they criticize it (as well as the workings of mass media in general), (3) they relate to people and events that appear in the news (and thus may provide “hard” political information), and, finally, (4) they criticize the political acts of public figures appearing in the news. This fourth layer of criticism, it may be argued, is what turns news parody into political satire. In other words, news-anchored satirical parody such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* criticizes not only the format of the news, but also the actions of its protagonists (Baym, 2005, 2007; Bennett, 2007; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009).

But news parody is not merely a reflection of the news. By its nature, it is based on distortion, playfulness, and the addition of new elements to those documented in news. In some shows these new elements become so prevalent that they constitute what I term *fantasy-anchored* news parodies. Such parodies imitate the *format* of the news and relate to the *people* who appear in the
news, but do not offer news-related political criticism (as is similarly the case on Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update” newscast, as observed by Day and Thompson in this special issue). In other words: fantasy-anchored satire presents news-related actors in a de-politicized manner.

Eretz Nehederet is rife with examples of fantasy-based satire, particularly when it comes to the depiction of Arab leaders. In such appearances, the host gives occasional news-related hints, but the characters themselves are just not interested in talking politics. Most of these sketches thus drift far away from the news to trance parties (Abu Tir), conspicuous consumption (Gaddafi), and, of course, television and reality shows (Nasrallah). A striking example is a sketch featuring the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi as a camp, shopping-obsessed weirdo, visiting Israel so he can spend money in the local malls.

“Fantasy” assumes two meanings in this satirical context. The first refers to fiction; that is, however loosely one may treat the terms truth and objectivity, it is quite clear that the portrayal of Muammar Gaddafi as an effeminate wacko buying dresses at the Israeli branch of Zara is fictional. “Fiction” relates in this sketch not only to the setting of the mall but also to the cluster of personal attributes that is relevant to the functioning of a certain political figure in the public sphere and is featured in the news. Thus, while the skit was based on Gaddafi’s extravagant lifestyle, it is still far-removed from his political attributes highlighted in the news.6

Yet in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, fantasy might bear a second meaning: that of wishful thinking. After many years of bloodshed, such portrayals of Arab leaders may reflect a deep-seated craving to lead normal, non-political lives, where small trivial details are far more important than ideological or religious disputes. But since such mundane details are linked in the show mainly to consumption, this fantasy seems to echo the dream of hegemonic capitalism as much as it relates to the utopian new Middle East.

One other explanation for the de-politicized framing of Arab leaders on Eretz Nehederet relates to the political views of the show’s production team. Given their explicit dovish left-wing orientation, the show’s creators had to walk a fine line in constructing Arab leaders. On one hand, portraying them according to racial stereotypes of Arabs as stupid or primitive—similar to frames offered on right-wing-oriented Israeli television and Internet-based shows—was unacceptable; on the other, a complex political framing of leaders engaged in terrorist acts or direct attacks on Israel would probably have been rejected by the general Israeli audience. The de-politicized prism thus renders the portrayal of Arab leaders in a somewhat positive and “softened” light. In some cases, they are presented as better politicians than their Israeli counterparts, who tend to be portrayed in a more news-based and critical manner. Yet since the depiction of Arab leaders is rarely related to the news, the potential influence of this mode of presentation on Israeli viewers remains enigmatic.

In contrast to Eretz Nehederet, news parody as a genre was a much smaller component of Hartzufim: only a few minutes of each episode were framed as a studio-based newscast. Most of the show was made up of sketches placing politicians in varied settings, spanning bars and bedrooms, theater stages and meeting rooms, airports and kitchens. Yet ironically, when it came to the construction of Arab leaders, Hartzufim was much more news-anchored than Eretz Nehederet. Even when the skits were located in markedly nonpolitical arenas, such as dance floors, they were

---

6It should be noted that the news, in Israel and elsewhere, has itself undergone processes of de-politization and personalization (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Thussu, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2004), yet Eretz Nehederet’s satire on Arab leaders seems to have taken this trend one step deeper into fantasyland.
always tied to political events and they evaluated leaders according to their political conducts, as reported in the news. For instance, the skit in which Arafat tries to join the election-time airlift is packed with information about political players, relationships, and power struggles.

How can we account for this transition from news-anchored to fantasy-anchored satire? By way of conclusion, I wish to offer two explanations: the first relates to the state of Israel, the second to the state of television. As discussed above, Hartzufim debuted in an era of high hopes about the peace process. However, the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, as well as a series of further violent outbreaks throughout the decade, marked an era of growing despair. In such a state of standstill and absence of real negotiations, the need for fantasy may have increased. Satire thus seems to follow the trend that Liebes and Kampf (2007) describe as “routinizing terror”: the unrelenting multi-victim terrorist attacks on Israel in that era did not bring about a linear escalation in the intensity of media coverage of this issue, but rather were accompanied by escapist genres such as soap operas and lifestyle shows.

The second explanation is simpler and relates to the political economy of media production and consumption. Fantasy-anchored news parodies may be almost worthless in terms of political knowledge and democratic deliberation, but they seem to be good news for business, for two main reasons. First, such satire is so distant from reality that it is less prone to draw fire or disengage viewers. How can one feel outraged about a skit portraying Nasrallah as an ambitious candidate on Survivor? And second, in the case of Erez Nehederet, fantasy-anchored satire is often based on intertextual hints at other shows broadcast on Channel 2, thus highlighting their centrality and promoting them. While this journey from Holy Land to wonderland has probably been pleasant and amusing to its viewers, it raises a number of questions about the function of satire in the Israeli commercial context.7

If the main difference between Hartzufim and Eretz Nehederet relates to their reliance on the news, their most striking common denominator is the Israelification of Arab leaders. In both shows Arabs are portrayed as immersed in Israeli language, culture, and politics. They speak fluent Hebrew, serve as mediators among Israeli politicians, and never forget to watch local television. Thus, Arab leaders are transformed from existential threats to comic butts who are not that different from the average Israeli viewer. While this strategy may have helped in reducing the menace posed by enemies, it seems to keep televised satire about Arab leaders within the safe realm of consensus.

REFERENCES


7It is important to note that since the size of the Israeli market is so small, a commercial television show will not survive if it addresses only a small portion of the population. In other words, mainstreaming seems to be vital for the sustainability of Israeli commercial satire.


