Cultures in Context: Politics and the Production of Everydayness in Modern Israel

Course ID V55.9537 / K20.9601

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Class Details

Class Description Given its unique geo-political circumstances as well as its symbolic position Israel has attracted much attention. This is equally true of media coverage as well as more scholarly treatment of the Israeli-Arab or Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More often than not, Israel is portrayed through the lens of high politics or treated as an exotic anomaly. Whether popular or academic in its orientation, the study of Israeli society has thus tended to neglect everyday life in Israel. The course offers a unique opportunity to explore various aspects of Israeli culture as manifested in various sites: media, the arts, popular culture, architecture, as well as spatio-temporal arrangements of daily routines and practices.

The course consists of in-class lectures and discussions and guest talks on aspects of Israeli politics and culture (on music, documentary cinema, literature, politics and more); visits to art exhibitions and observations of street life in Tel Aviv. Further activities will be announced at the beginning of the semester.

Course Objectives Providing historical and analytical background to the understanding of Israeli culture(s); studying its relation to social phenomena and political events with the view of increasing the students’ understanding of cultural references and their ability to reflect on their everyday experiences in Israel.

Grading and Assessment Participation 15%; Two short reading-related assignments 20%; Mid-term exam 15%; Final Essay 50%.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component will result in failure of the class.

**Recommended Reading**


**Session 1**

Introduction I: **A Synoptic View**: Israel has been variously characterized as a settler/frontier/ethno-democratic society, at the core of which is a constant struggle over its collective identity, its relations to its Arab citizens and, after 1967, to the occupied territories and their inhabitants. In this introductory session, attention will be given to formative events in the history of Israel as triggers of change in Israeli society, its politics and culture.

Reading:


**Session 2**

Introduction II: **Cultural Production and The Everyday**: this session concentrates on issues related to various definitions of culture and its relations to social and political phenomena. Particular attention will be given to various mediums through which cultures come into being and manifest themselves: the organization of space; linguistic innovation; visual culture, music production etc. – these are the ‘building-blocks’ through which individuals and groups negotiate their identities. Rather than a coherent whole, they produce a polyphony of voices. The session will present a general overview of the ways in which various features of Israeli culture manifest themselves in Tel Aviv (including preliminary remarks on its economic and cultural significance).

Reading:


Erel Shalit: Within Borders and without: The Interaction between Geopolitical and Personal


**Session 3**

**Language and Literature I: The Creation of Collective Identity and the Individual:**

From its beginning in the Haskala movement, the rejuvenation of the Hebrew language has been conceived as having a constitutive role in the formation of Jewish nationalism and the creation of a new Jewish Self. In its Zionist context, the tension between Self and community has been intensified. Special attention will be given to the role played by poetic expressions in the formation of national identity as well as the particular ways in which the theme of the City has been variously used by different generations of poets as a symbol of ‘individualism’: a refusal to accept the dictates of the collective. (From Bialik and Alterman to Zach, Avidan and Wieseltier; the particular poems will be distributed).

Reading:


**Session 4**

**Literature II: Contemporary Developments:**

Meet the author: *Etgar Keret* a representative of the emergence of new genres of literary expressions and thematic concerns in the late 1980s. Rather than expressions of disillusionment and a search for authenticity, the works of this new generation reflect a sense of dissociation and fragmentation of de-centered selves in a world where grand narratives, Zionist or otherwise, can no longer exist.

Reading:

Session 5

Architecture and the Built Environment I: **Utopia in the Frontier**: This session will focus on the role played by (modernist, especially European) architectural ideas in the shaping of Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine (e.g. The Garden City; Bauhaus; The International Style). Particular attention will be given to the Kibbutz, the Tower and Stockade and the White City as spatial manifestations of the struggle over the ideal Jewish community. This will be followed by a critical examination of architectural ideas and practices as exclusionary mechanisms of control and territorial expansion.

Reading:


Barbara Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv and the creation of Jewish Urban Space*, Stanford University Press, 2006; Chap. 1,3,6.

Session 6

Architecture and the Built Environment II: **Tel Aviv-Jaffa**:

Guest speaker architect Dr. **Haim Yacobi**, a leading scholar of the geopolitics of cities in Israel. Special attention will be given to the history of the relationships between (the historically predominantly Arab) Jaffa and (the predominantly Jewish) Tel Aviv; a history which encapsulates some of the main characteristics of Israeli politics and culture, in particular, the ways in which urban planning and architectural design are related to issues such as power relations, social justice and identity politics in Israel.

Reading:


Session 7  

The Visual Arts I: “Here” and “There”: Israeli Art between the Mediterranean and Diaspora  

Guest speaker the artist Dr. Ayelet Zohar will survey major trends and directions taken by Israeli visual artists, enquiring into several issues concerning the problem of identity in an age of immigration. Subjects discussed will consider the romantic and Orientalist attitudes towards the Arab population of Palestine in the 1920s; the material qualities of the new ‘homeland’ – from its bright light to the impoverished material culture; the idealized modesty and socialism of the 1950s-60s; the tensions between Holy Jerusalem and Secular Tel Aviv as a main theme in Israeli culture; provincial life vs. the big art centers in Paris, London and NYC; the cult of the Sabra. Her talk also addresses the cultural and political significance of the split from Judaism and diasporic Jews as expressed in the works of Canaanite artists; expressions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the visual field; works by Israeli-Palestinian artists who react to Zionist conventions, placing a reversed mirror and a critique of the Zionist project from their position.

Reading:


Background:


Session 8  

The Visual Arts II: Cultural Specificity and Globalization:  

Meet the artists:

Photographer Adi Nes will talk about the subtle relations between documentation and artistic expression in photography. His collection of staged photographs suggests a unique opportunity to reflect upon the intersection of gender, class and nationalism, with a special focus on the relations between nationalism and masculinity within Israeli culture.

A visit to the studio of the sculptor and multi-media artist, Uri Katzenstein. Presenting his works, including work in progress, Uri will discuss issues concerning artistic production, the processes involved in the artistic materialization of abstract ideas, as well as the relations
between the local Israeli scene and global trends.

Reading:

Dany Kaplan, *The Men We Loved: Male Friendship and Nationalism in Israeli Culture*, Berghahsan Books, 2006; Introduction; chapters II & IV.

**Session 9**

**Cinema I: Self, Other and War in Israeli Cinema:** This session will be dedicated to an investigation of representations of ‘Israeliness’ and its relations to ‘Othersness’. Special attention will be given to representations of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the ways in which this conflict of implicates, directly or indirectly, representations of subject-positions, regardless of whether these positions are depicted in national, ethnic or gendered terms.

The films that will set the scene for the discussion in class: I. *As if Nothing Happened*, a television docudrama (Ayelet Bargur); II. *Jerusalem Moments 2009*: Seven short documentary films by seven young Palestinian and Israeli directors; III. *Aajami*, an action movie depicting life in Jaffa (Scandar Copti & Yaron Shani); IV: *Waltz with Bashir*, (Ari Fulman).

Reading:


**Session 10**

**Cinema II: Documenting Israel:**

Meet the film director Mor Loushy, who will talk about ethical dilemmas and challenges in the process of making documentary films: the subtle relations between empathy and criticism; the interplay between cultural specificity and general message; representation and reality etc. These issues will be discussed in relation to her controversial documentary *Israel Ltd.*, which addresses issues such as the ways in which Israelis understand themselves, represent themselves to others, as well as their attitudes towards minority cultures, within the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict.


**Session 11**

**Music I: From the Invention of Israeli Folk to Rock and Role in the Orient:**

Guest speaker, the cultural sociologist Prof. Moti Regev, author of *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*. The session we will focus on Shiray Eretz Israel (The songs of the Land of Israel) and Shiray Milchamot (Songs of War) as playing a central role in the shaping of the Zionist ethos and the formation of ‘Israeliness’, their emphasis of Heroism, *Halutzim* (pioneering) and *Hahavat Hamoledet* (Love of the Homeland). Attention will be given to literary and musical representations of the ‘Orient’ as well as the history of *Musica Mizrchit* (The music of the ‘Mizrachim’) as struggle for recognition as well as the appearance of Rock
& Role in the mid-1960s as a ‘working class’ phenomena – a youth culture comprised mainly of Mizrachi and Ma’abarot children.

Reading:


Session 12

Music II: Empire of Trance: Escapism and Globalization: Rock & Roll and Musica Mizrahit represent a major shift in Israeli culture and a move away from a symbolic order at the centre of which is the Halutz (the Pioneer) towards expressions of individualism and daily happenings. Again, the mundane is represented as an antidote to the collectivist-nationalistic ethos. Within the Israeli context, however, the quest for “normality” stands in marked contrast to the intensity of political life, constituting a form of escapism. This feature will be discussed following the emergence of club culture and new musical styles in Israel from the 1980s up to the present.

Reading:


Session 13

A field trip to the South of Tel Aviv (Old and New Central Buss Stations; Shuk Levinski): An exploration of the hidden aspects of the city, the ‘new’ neighborhoods of labor migrants.

Reading:


Session 14

Workshop: Presentations of students projects and closing remarks
Final Exam/Project

Final essay (4000 words): Individual projects exploring the cultural meaning and significance of specific everyday phenomena, events or aspects of Israeli society.