Tootsie in the Classroom: Male Comedians Performing Female Teachers on Israeli Television

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Figure 1 - A scene from "*Zbeng*" *Mrs. Grumpy* in her class

Abstract

This study examines the underlying meanings of the phenomenon of men impersonating women teachers on Israeli television entertainment shows. The "teachers in drag" reveal themselves as hybrid figures constructed by a long line of incongruities. Those contradictions might derive from a basic tension that exists between the professional and gender identities of women teachers. In Western thought, the woman inhabits the private sphere, while the teacher belongs in the public sphere. Why is this message conveyed through a grotesque drag show? Perhaps it is meant to inform the audience that if a woman takes on a historically masculine role, she necessarily diminishes her femininity. It is this combination of stereotypes of both teachers and women that conspires to produce an exceptionally grotesque and despicable figure

Keywords: Humor in Cultural Context, Media Representation, Drag Shows, School Bashing, Israel

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the meanings that underpin the phenomenon of "teachers in drag" as portrayed on Israeli television. The term "teacher in drag" refers to the character of a female teacher played by a male actor. This character has become increasingly common in entertainment shows, sitcoms, and comedy series for children and youths throughout the last 20 years. It seems that whenever the role of a female teacher opens up in a comedy, producers go out of their way to cast a male actor. This is especially true in one of the most watched and influential shows on Israeli entertainment television, *Eretz Nehederet* (Hebrew: *lit.Wonderful Country*), which is the Israeli equivalent of Saturday Night Live in the United States.

Here is an illustration: the figure of a stripper teacher appears in a sketch about fired teachers who had to adjust to new careers. "***Working in front of a live audience is… working in front of live audience***", says geography teacher Miri Dagan (played by Tal Friedman, a male actor) in a husky and tired voice. The camera then shifts to the Pussycat strip club. Two young girls dance on the strip-tease stage, with Dagan in the center, wearing underwear embellished with pink feathers, and moving heavily and clumsily. Suddenly she stops and addresses the audience in a loud voice, "**Pardon me, who said great boobs?**" The audience falls dead silent. The music restarts, but is stopped again by the irritated teacher, who asks in a teacher-like intonation, "**I hear w-h-i-sssss-p-e-r-s… who is whistling? I'm telling you for real: until the wise guy who whistled turns himself in, nobody here will see a nipple! Is that clear?!**"

The music continues but stops again when one of the spectators in the strip club audience makes a gesture of astonishment and appreciation. The teacher responds by asking, "**Did that have anything to do with the show? I ask you**! [Her voice goes up] **Answer me, here in front of all these people; did that have anything to do with the show?**" The spectator replies bitterly, "**Why me? Why is it always me? You always pick on me!**"

Figure 2 - A scene from *"Eretz Nehederet" (Wonderful Country) Miri Dagan,* a former teacher performs in a strip club

The described scene was mimicking the stereotypical behavior of teachers in Israeli classrooms. It stood out as exceptionally funny and is among the more memorable sketches from the series "Wonderful Country". It was uploaded to YouTube, where it attracted a large number of repeat views. Its magic seems to lie in the stark incongruity between the way the audience envisions a stripper's behavior in a night club and the male actor's actual performance, along with the contrast between a stripper's flexible and seductive body language, and the actor's deliberately cumbersome and labored movements. Moreover, a stripper is not supposed to talk, but to convey alluring messages through her body, while the actor who plays the teacher barely stops talking to the audience, reprimanding and threatening them. A stripper is supposed to meet men in an encounter in which the latter are free to express their sexual impulses, while she is inferior and reduced to nothing more than her looks. But in this sketch the relationship is reversed: the teacher forbids the audience to make impulsive expressions, taking a commanding and authoritative position

Like "Miri Dagan" in the sketch described above, all the "teachers in drag" are extravagant figures in appearance and behavior, played in a way that stresses rudeness and obstinacy. Some intriguing questions about what makes such scenes funny are triggered by this kind of entertainment. Why is there no symmetrical phenomenon of women actors masquerading as male teachers? What are the messages about women, about teaching and about teaching by women delivered by the "teachers in drag"? Why are these messages framed in a drag show?

The study will focus on the figure of the "teacher in drag" in an attempt to explain some of these puzzles. One cannot learn anything from a text about its reception or its effect on the audience. Instead, I will discuss its possible meaning using the conceptual toolbox of gender and humor theories in the particular context of Israeli society.

The basic argument of this article is that the "teachers in drag" is a comic spectacle about teachers that channels stereotypical ideas about gender. Sexist humor can be direct; for example, jokes about women's ability to talk endlessly or their lack of capacity to park a car, or it can be indirect, such as the jokes about nuns or the hot secretary. Male actors impersonating teachers belongs to the second kind of using a profession that is synonymous with a certain gender. Both are forms of laughing at the expense of women, but the indirect humor is latent and therefore less exposed to critical examination.

While the common interpretations of drag shows tie this cultural practice with challenging traditional gender roles, the case of the drag teachers in Israel calls for a different reading, one that strengthens stereotypical ideas about the nature of women. The particular grotesque image is linked with other social phenomenon in Israeli society, such as the crisis in the education system and the militarist culture.

The crisis in the Israeli education system

Israel's education system is in an ongoing crisis, which is manifest in the failure of Israeli students in international examinations. Results reveal substantial gaps between students of differing ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds (Feniger et. al. 2012; Yemini and Gordon 2015). Teachers' occupational status is in decline, and so is the caliber of students seeking to join the profession. Research shows that 40% of all novice teachers quit during their first five years (Addi-Raccah 2005). There is a wide consensus that feminization, as a cause and an effect, is a dramatic factor in the process of teachers falling from grace. Women now constitute 86% of the workforce in primary schools and 78% of the secondary education workforce (Addi-Raccah 2002; CBS 2013). Although all western states have undergone feminization of the educational professions, the process in Israel was extremely rapid and accompanied by a dramatic erosion of occupational prestige (Goldring and Chen 2002).

School discipline in Israel is a bleak issue. Israel is a heterogenic immigrant society characterized by extensive social differences and inequality. Classes are noisy and crowded, with an average class size of 40, which is the highest in the developed world (Shavit and Blank2012). Some 80% percent of students were exposed to verbal violence by their classmates (Benbenishty et al. 2002). The picture would not be complete without the results of a recent survey that found approximately 90% of high school students reported surfing on their cellular phones during classes (Beeri and Daniel2016). Under these circumstances, teachers' constant complaints can be well understood, along with the findings from an international comparison of core values that ranked Israel on top of the "non-obedience to authority" ladder (Hofstede, 2013).

Media portrayal of teachers in Israel

The media's portrayal of the education system and the teachers in Israel reflects and feeds the crisis. A content analysis of news items reveals that 70% of the news feature titles dealing with educators have a negative character. Teachers are routinely characterized in Israeli newspapers as hostile, ignorant, unmotivated and "losers" in terms of their personal achievements. Schools have been described as intellectually poor and jeopardizing environments for pupils (Asaf et al.2012).

The negative impression of the education system carries over into fictional genres. While American cinema has yielded a mostly inspiring portrayal of teachers, Israeli cinema has presented the opposite image. The iconic teacher in American cinema is often a handsome, charismatic male figure who is devoted to his job and willing to confront superiors in order to ensure the pupils' success (Ayers 1994; Dalton, 2006). Popular examples include William Hurt as Mr. Leeds in "Children of a Lesser God" (1986), Edward James Olmos as Jamie Escalante in "Stand and Deliver" (1988), and Robin Williams as Mr. Keating in "Dead Poets Society" (1989).In contrast to this image, the iconic fictional cinematic teacher in Israel is that of a narrow-minded, unattractive, boring woman; an agent of a rigid institution, detached from her pupils (Turin 2013).

The education system in America is not free from many of the faults mentioned above; so why were two such different portrayals developed. Apparently, the meaning of teachers' representation in the media goes beyond a reflection of the profession. In both cultures, the image of teachers is a platform upon which various social ethoses and several symbolic meanings can be established (Gerbner 1963). In fiction, teaching

has much to do with questions of morals, spiritual leadership and in line with the current study, with gender.

Since most teachers in Israel are women, the representation of teachers has much to do with the representation of women. Lemish reviewed the body of research that has accumulated in Israel during the last 30 years. To summarize the consistent findings briefly, in realistic genres as well as in fictional ones, women are marginalized both in their roles and in actual appearance. Women tend to perform traditional female parts, which are marked by a personality, other than that of the "standard" manliness (Lemish 2004).These findings are no different from the results of dozens of gender representation studies, leading us to ask what the exception is in the Israeli case. According to Lemish, the Israeli version presents an extreme dichotomy between two prototypes: the "Madonna", or the mother, and the "Whore". The mother image involves life bearing, nurturing and sacrifice while the whore is a sex object.

One cannot underestimate the significance of Israel as a nation at war, living in violent confrontation with its neighbors throughout its existence. Societies in continual conflict tend to develop militaristic cultures associated with masculinity, the glorification of power next to a binary worldview: "us" versus "other", power versus morality, tough versus weak, peace versus war; masculinity versus femininity. This cultural context cultivates the polarized gender roles in the Israeli media. There is evidence that Israeli male teens are socialized to realize their masculinity in combat, while girls are educated to see a future role in supporting the males (Mazali 2004) as well as having children who can become future soldiers (Lemish and Barzel 2000).

The study of humor

Humor provides fertile ground for social analysis. By investigating expressions of humor, one can uncover commonly held perceptions in society, Humor secures freedom of expression in a sense similar to that of the court jester, who is granted a broader scope of expression than all the king's men (Case and Lippard 2009).Humor as a social phenomenon has been researched through a variety of disciplines. The sociological paradigms provide distinct insights into humor. From a functionalist point of view, humor offers cohesion and solidarity; it forms group identity and affords a sense of belonging; strangers often cannot understand the jokes or can even be offended by them (Kuipers 2008). The common goal of all those functions is the construction and preservation of the social order. On the other hand, humor holds a

strong element of power and a joke can be a means of lowering or raising the status of both individuals and groups. Conflict theories perceive humor as a sword, either in the hand of a privileged group, utilized to perpetuate their status, or in the hand of the repressed, as a reflective and subversive tool (Lynch 2002).

Each stream of psychological theory proposes an explanation of humor; some are particularly relevant to the researched matter. From a psychoanalytic view, jokes are a sublimated means of expressing sexuality and aggression. Therefore, they serve as a mechanism for releasing inhibitions and as a bridge between the unconscious and the social environment (Freud 1960). Incongruity theory is another psychological model that explains laughter as an outcome of a surprising and impossible encounter between levels that cannot go hand in hand. This theory has a cognitive orientation, Humor stems from the fact that the interpretation of reality is suddenly annulled and an opposite interpretation is operated (Martin 2007). Another reference to contradictory levels is Douglas assertion that humor remains within a twilight zone, a zone of symbolic boundaries in which categorical distinctions are insignificant. The heart of the joke lies in the conflict that it creates between two zones separated from each other in everyday life by fictitious boundaries. For instance, photographs of animals wearing glasses or an apron reflect the twilight zone of the categorical distinction between animal and human being (Douglas 1975). A photo of a chimpanzee wearing a suit and tie, sitting at an office desk is a temporary violation of the common order, which does not create a new category, but rather confirms the original one.

Gender and humor

Two phenomena of the fields of gender and humor are relevant to the present work. The first is the relative absence of women from entertainment shows. The second phenomenon is that of women being made the objects of jokes. (Shifman and Lemish 2010). The over-representation of men in comic programs is also relevant in entertainment shows in which men dressed as women. Throughout the history of Hollywood and American television, more men have appeared in the guise of women than the reverse. For example, famous actors such as Dustin Hoffman in the role of *Tootsie* (1982); Robin Williams as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993); or Tayler Perry in the *Madea* film series (2009) have all had highly successful careers. Perhaps the greater occurrence of men impersonating women stems from the vast potential it has for

making an extravagant show. Whereas impersonating a woman can be an extreme and extrovert act for a man, for a woman to impersonate a man means to hide or erase her gender marks. The impersonation of a woman by a man is almost always comic by nature, and is accompanied by an iconographic set of behaviors such as a shrill voice, exaggerated anxiety and forced elegance as well as physical presentation of revealing clothing and accessories. In this manner such impersonation re-confirms femininity as an object of the male gaze.

Another possible explanation for the scarcity of women in comedy is that clowning has historically been considered an inappropriate form of behavior for women. Gender norms have connected femininity with modesty, the domain of the house, restrained behavior, and speaking in a low, gentle voice. In addition, women were supposed to keep their bodies and personal conduct under strict control at all times, something that stands in stark contrast to comic behavior, which is characterized by a lack of control over one's body, speech and laughter (Chiaro and Baccolini 2014; Kotthoff 2006).

The drag show and the carnival

Several theoretical approaches have the potential to draw insight from the "teachers in drag" phenomenon. For example, Butler's approach to drag shows and Bakhtin's concept of the carnival might be significant, and although they share some ideas, they shed light on the issue from different angles. According to Judith Butler, gender is nothing but an illusion of something essential; it is merely a social apparatus constructed by language. Butler does not deny the fact that there are physiological differences between men and women; instead, she wonders why these differences have become a symbol of the most basic division among human beings, rather than hair color or height, for example (Butler 1993a; Butler 1993b).

The analysis of drag shows is an essential component of Butler's queer theory. Butler argues that when people watch drag shows, they can appreciate the extent to which original identities are simply the outcome of playing a role (Balcerzak 2013; Spargo1999). In other words, they can examine the manner in which performance creates identity. Drag is the only instance in which a person performs a gender out of his own choice. Drag manages to present heterosexuality as a false and exaggerated copy of the natural. It is the opposite of framing a gender as natural and innate, since

it emphasizes the artificial nature of the subject, and hence, it makes an interesting and fruitful case for observation.

Bakhtin developed the concept of the carnival by examining the historical medieval feast. During the ancient celebration, participants ridiculed the church and the king, both of which were symbols of authority in medieval society. The carnival was a liminal domain, limited in time and space in which resistance to and criticism of hegemony were permitted(Badarneh2011). The medieval carnival was constructed as the antithesis of everyday life, where social boundaries were broken and the distance between the classes dissolved. A key element in this is masquerading; while masks enable the freedom of expression, they reveal no less than they hide. Bakhtin interprets both the mask and the body as grotesque—as a site of contrasting combinations such as the human and the animal, sacred and profane, death and rebirth. Bakhtin emphasizes that the spirit of the carnival is wild and kicking, and that it is not a delicate or witty satire, but a manifestation of chaos and anarchism.

Bahktin's interpretation of the carnival and Butler's drag theory share some common principles, despite the fact that they are ground in very different theoretical foundations. To begin with, Butler and Bakhtin share the premise of social constructionism; they see knowledge and social facts as the outcomes of human perception rather than as a reflection of objective reality. Both theses refer to the significance of eccentric behavior; spectacles that glorify certain behaviors that are not legitimate in other contexts. In both situations, the performer exposes the latent side of human nature and society. Ultimately, in both the drag show and in the carnival, the construction of the body is unstable; both instances are temporary and contain subverted ideas against hegemony and social order. However, there are some differences between the two concepts; Bakhtin's carnival is not built around a performer. In the course of the feast, there is no distinction between the spectator and the performer, and so they are one. Butler focuses on breaking the categories of sex and gender, femininity and masculinity, while Bakhtin's carnival challenges social order and stratification.

These theories are relevant to Israeli television comedy. From Butler's point of view; the "teachers in drag" phenomenon can be interpreted as a means of putting female teachers' sense of femininity into question, and by doing so, challenging the common belief about the suitability of the female character for teaching. From Bakhtin's point of view, the "teachers in drag" phenomenon can be interpreted as a carnival that

enables role reversal, subversion against authority in general and against school authority figures in particular. The ridicule of the teacher can be seen as an anarchistic laugh of youth counterculture against the education system. Both interpretations can exist in harmony with each other, but the extent to which this act rewards women teachers should be investigated according to the particular context in which the show is taking place.

Methodology and Research Questions

Based on the above, this study poses the following two research questions:

I. How are "teachers in drag" constructed in terms of appearance, characteristics, and professional features?

II. What are the underlying messages transmitted by this construction in relation to gender and teaching in Israeli society?

Corpus

The corpus of this study included comedy shows characterized as follows: programs that are original products of Israeli television that were broadcast between the mid-1990s and 2010. In addition, at least one of the main characters must be a male actor performing as a women teacher. The programs that satisfied these three conditions differ in length, genre and target audience. Included were two successful television situation comedies that aired for three seasons, as well as another that was removed after only eight episodes. In addition, dozens of shorter sketches that were broadcast in variety shows such as "Wonderful Country" were included. The latter potentially had a greater significant impact in terms of high ratings and repeated viewings on YouTube. The full corpus yielded a total of approximately 25 hours of material featuring "teachers in drag".

Research Method

Interpretive text analysis is a term that brings together several methods, including semiotic analysis, rhetorical, critical and discourse analysis, among others. These methods all seek the connotative layer of the text by digging below the surface. All qualitative methods of analysis attempt to identify repeated patterns within the text. The content to be analyzed can be transcripts of interviews, observation reports or cultural products such as advertisements or in this case, television comedy shows. A

process of identification and naming these patterns is operated in order to assemble an argument about the latent meaning and text messages. The word "interpretation" indicates the active role of the researcher; themes or elements of text are not just simply laid there, but are constructed during category building and even prior to that at the question stage. The analysis of media products is always a process that involves translating and reducing that generally cost in certain simplification(Rose2000). The interpretation present here considers the text and its context. However, defining the relevant context is also a selection process that narrows and reduces meaning. In the current study, I chose to explain the "teachers in drag" in affinity with school-bashing and public discourse about teachers; other frames of reference such as subversive queer humor or resistance to school authority could be equally valid.

This research was part of a dissertation dealing with the Israeli media representation of teachers, which explored films to examine the diachronic aspects and changes in educators' image across time. A frame analysis of teachers' strikes in the news contributed the economic aspect and class perception of teachers. The investigation of television comedies provided rich materials for the study of the construction of gender underlying the teachers' figures. The focus on characters as opposed to cinematic language or plot narratives, for example, placed the framework for category organization around dimensions of the characters' construction. In building the categories, I made use of prior image research. The vast body of commercial and political advertising studies was responsible for the attention to maternity and sexuality, as well as iconography, what objects and surroundings are used to define the characters. The literature on teachers in Hollywood movies molded the categories of teaching style, motivation and appearance, age and style of clothing. Some of the categories resulted directly from the discourse of bashing Israeli teachers, such as knowledge and ignorance. By trying to assess the implications of cultural militarism, attention was given to manners of speech and discipline.

Practically, the analysis was conducted by the researcher, and the selected TV programs were recorded and viewed several times. Certain scenes were transcribed, especially interactions that included references to the occupational or gendered aspects of teaching as a profession, by either the teacher or other characters. Setting the categories, and articulating their borders and inner relations was done over the course of several rounds of refinement and reduction. During that time and on several occasions, I consulted my supervisor and six colleagues in a doctoral research

workshop, all of whom deal with gender and media. I presented the materials, using my colleagues for feedback and validation of my interpretation. This complicated process resulted in the selection of the following categories for analysis: appearance**,** linguistic characteristics, professional dimensions, iconography, motivation, knowledge, motherhood, and sexuality.

Findings - characteristics of "teachers in drag"

Appearance

Clothing is one of the most gendered aspects of the material culture of the human race (Burman and Turbin2003). Feminine markers are used extensively to exemplify the well-mannered appearance of most "teachers in drag", including wigs, heavy make-up, mascara, lipstick—in short, the standard repertoire of all drag queens. At the same time, other significantly masculine markers are retained, such as beard bristles or connected eyebrows. From a queer theory perspective, the superfluous markers—that is, the exaggerated womanliness—can be understood as an attempt to compensate for what is in reality a lack of femininity.

Another way of constructing a "teachers in drag" appearance resulted in an anachronistic, old-fashioned look at odds with the shiny glistening look of the former: teachers in stiff, grey and graceless clothing along with thick-lensed glasses. The distance between the youngsters and the teachers was demonstrated in part through these visual means, as well as by their stammering and spluttering reaction to all things technological such as smartphones. In one sketch about teaching innovations, we see some farcical examples of teachers trying to overcome the crisis in education by adjusting the contents of their lessons to the tastes and habits of the younger generation: a chemistry teacher who teaches about drug compounds; a language teacher who makes the class write a composition of at most 140 characters to be sent to her by cell phone; and a math teacher who asks the class to calculate the time needed to download a porno film as a function of the internet bandwidth.

The "teachers in drag" are ridiculed by the great distance that lies between them and the essence of youth, like drugs and sex. In the same way that the teacher's inept attempts to connect with youth emphasize her incongruity in their world, so to her attempts to beautify herself merely accentuate her ugliness. The idea of a surface that cannot veil the essence will be a main theme in the construction of teacher figures by male actors.

Linguistic characteristics

Teachers in drag presented a unique feature of voice, a "teacher in drag" talked in a highly pitched and forced voice, while in the next moment "she forgot" her role and her voice lowered back to normal. In terms of their linguistic habits, they frequently used ordering speech acts: "Sit down! Get up! Get out!" Quite often, they used military language, for example: "You will call me Mrs. Grumpy and I'll call you down!" The teachers also made extensive use of the first person plural. Such as, "We laughed, we had fun, now we shall all get back to our studies." The use of expressions of sham solidarity is a linguistic cliché attributed to teachers and doctors: "How are we feeling today?" in both cases, it confirms the existing authority and hierarchy.

Another linguistic device often used by the drag queen teachers was a rhythmic, fast, staccato flow of speech, which constitutes a comic element. It also emphasizes that the teacher's power lies in her language. In a series of sketches performed on the popular entertainment show "Wonderful Country," we see a raucous group of people who caused havoc and destruction in a series of different scenarios: they made telephone calls in the middle of the Sabbath service in the synagogue, destroyed the furniture of a guest room in a luxury hotel, and smoked during a flight. The person who managed to put an end to their misdeeds was not a police officer but rather their former schoolteacher. We see the teacher taking control of the linguistic space. Her confident flow of speech is apparent in the following scene, in which the teacher (played by a male actor) is asked by the flight attendants to enter the restroom, where three passengers have lit cigarettes and caused a fire.

Teacher (frowning, speaking quickly and quietly): "Ohhhh…. Look who is here in the hashish den! I'm glad to see that you've progressed and discovered fire."

Passenger: "Teacher, it isn't me, it's him!"

Teacher: "So I see that you are his attorney, so we can move from here to the exams of the Bar Association without knowing how to read or write. I will give you two minutes to put out the fire and stand next to the pilot's cabin!"

Female passenger: "Teacher, it was just for laugh!" (Giggling)

Teacher: "I don't want to hear you." (In a threatening whisper) "And now, all of you go out and don't come back without your parents." (The teacher opens the door of the airplane and pushes them out. Parachutes are opened.)

Silencing the room by excessive chatter and fast flow of speech is a commonly held female stereotype, and typical of drag queens. The flow of speech and the teacher's authoritative position underline the regulatory function of the character. This teacher-like speech finds expression in other typical linguistic characteristics: an exaggerated standard language, a slow, nasal, and pedantic tone with an emphasis on pronunciation and clear separation between words. This normalizing and authoritative figure conveys the message that a teacher is always a teacher: reprimanding, imposing authority, fighting chaos and restoring order. The fact that the teacher-like speech leaks out of school and into another time and place reinforces one of Bergson's theories about humor. Bergson claims that the characters in a comedy are motivated by an obsession with one thing, for example greed in *The Miser* by Molière. In the same sense, a teacher is always a teacher, even after school hours.

Some of the "teachers in drag" demonstrated mixing registers; the drag teachers shifted very often from a standard, polite style of speech to outbursts of fury and cursing. The overall picture emerging from analyzing the linguistic features of the "teachers in drag" is of a demonstration of power next to distrust, nothing is what it purports to be, and all is fake. The figure is a teacher and is supposed to act with decorum, but the mixed register unveilsa figure of teacher who is far from being a role model.

Professional dimensions

Iconography

Photographs of the president, the national flag and the Israeli's Declaration of Independence were often placed next to the teacher characters. The affinity of these symbols and the figures of the teachers formed an integral part of their iconography. The symbols of Jewish history and the government fulfilled several functions: they marked the character's occupation and authority, and identified the teacher as part of the system and as a boring preacher.

A demonstration of the variety of these roles was found in the television program "Tonight with Eli Yatzpan," in which Yatzpan, a male stand-up comedian, played the role of the former Minister of Education, Mrs. Limor Livnat. Livnat revived the customs of raising the national flag in educational institutions and singing the national anthem. In Yatzpan's show, Livnat appeared as a teacher who instructs all people around her to speak only after raising their hands. She also cuts every interaction short

after a few sentences to declare, "It is unacceptable!" or "The national anthem!" On hearing the latter command, all those in attendance stand up straight next to her and sing the last word of the national anthem: "Je–ru–sa–lem".

The device of the abrupt interruption of Livnat's speech every few sentences to sing the national anthem is a form of mechanical humor. Bergson explains that one thing that makes people laugh is when a figure adopts a behavioral pattern and perseveres with it even when it is no longer relevant. An example of such a figure is the nomad played by Charlie Chaplin in the film "Modern Times" (1936). After working for hours on an industrial production line, Chaplin leaves the factory but continues to make a screwing movement on any living and inanimate object. The described scene can also be understood as a political criticism, stating that the use of national symbols has lost its significance in favor of superficial mannerisms. Singing the anthem does not stem from an understanding or social integration but rather from obedience to a horrifying figure.

The proximity of teachers with state symbols has historical roots in the early days of nation building. Between the 1930s and 1950s, teachers gained special status for curating the national symbols; they were the spokesmen of the Zionist leadership, responsible for raising the new child, no longer a persecuted Jew from the Diaspora but a proud, sovereign Israeli citizen. In their socializing role of the new generation, teachers were close to the political elite and enjoyed the prestige accompanied by this position (Tadmor-Shimony and Raichel 2013). Presenting the state symbols as props in a drag show has a carnival effect of tying the ridicule with the honored. This image also implies criticism of political leaders who failed to fulfill the promise of the Promised Land, that is, to bring peace and equality. The use of teachers to channel this idea locates them once again in the realm of facade, as speakers of empty clichés. It also demonstrates the elasticity of the teachers as an allegory. In a different context, teachers might signify "the governmental establishment" or "the political leaders", or simply "a woman".

Figure 2 - A scene fro*m "Tonight with Eli Yatzpan",* featuring *Yatzpan*as the former Minister of Education*, Mrs. Limor Livnat*

Motivation

"Mrs. Grumpy", the "teacher in drag" in the series "*Zbeng*" (in Hebrew: *Harsh Blow*) opens one of the first episodes with a confession: "I must be made of steel to keep coming here day after day for thirty years! Here, to this wretched classroom, and for what? A few miserable pennies!" At the end of the lesson, she announces "And now the crème de la crème: homework! [She strides around the classroom with an expression of deep satisfaction on her face.] "You'll write me a sixty-page paper for tomorrow."

Female student in a tender voice: "A paper about what, teacher?"

Mrs. Grumpy: "It doesn't matter; the only thing that matters is that it has to be sixty pages long." (Laughs maliciously)

One of the marks of a good teacher in Hollywood movies is their intrinsic motivation and ability to engage the students' interest in the curriculum. The "super teacher" makes learning an authentic experience and thus improves his students' lives (Dalton 2006). Mrs. Grumpy does precisely the opposite. The content of the curriculum means nothing to her. Homework has but one goal: to punish and inflict suffering on the students.

Knowledge

Not only are the "teachers in drag" utterly lacking in motivation, but also in any kind of knowledge. In the series "*Betzefer*" (a deliberate child-like distortion of the Hebrew word for school), Galit, the English teacher, played by a male actor, repeatedly makes

spelling and grammar mistakes. The poem she teaches is a Britney Spears song, from which she reads aloud with passion, stuttering and making mistakes: "My looonelliness is killing moi." In doing so, she grieves her own spinsterhood. Following the students' failure in the national comparative examination, Galit is instructed to provide pupils with the correct answers. However, due to her deep ignorance, she is unable to direct them in tricky questions such as, "How long did the Six Days War last?" In another episode, after the supervisor (played by a mustached man) threatens to close the school as a result of its low achievements, the school's manipulative and domineering secretary, who is also played by a man, makes some inquiries and discovers that the supervisor received her master's degree from a fictitious university. The secretary threatens to expose the supervisor in public and blackmails her into silence.

We are left with the impression that the entire educational system, from top to bottom, is infected. The ignorance of the "teachers in drag" is evidenced by their excessive preoccupation with activities that have nothing to do with teaching. Moreover, when they do set about the task of transferring knowledge, they deal in trivial details. In one sitcom, the teachers hold stage auditions, in the style of *American Idol*, for the position of the chair of the class decorating committee. Meanwhile, the literature teacher composes a multiple-choice test on the novel *Crime and Punishment*. Whenever a scene opened with a teacher engaged in teaching a concept or educational material, it very quickly descended into a scene of imposing discipline.

Motherhood and sexuality

The "teachers in drag" are far from the ideal of the teacher as an extension of the motherly role. On the contrary, they seem to draw satisfaction and pleasure from abusing their students. The school counselor from the series "The True Place" played by Moshe Glamin, a male actor, pushes a student out of her room, a girl whose peers are shunning her, and explains that she does so in order not to be seen with an unpopular girl. This counselor, when referring to her son, a pupil in the school, stated that on a one to ten scale she loved him on a level three.

"Three? But he is your son!"

"Yes, right, that's why I said three."

Most of the actors who were cast as drag queen teachers were found to be men of forty years of age and upward, a casting decision that strengthens the impression of

the teacher as an old maid who has lost her fertility and sexuality. A prominent stereotype in the construction of "teachers in a drag" comedy is a woman whose sexual lust and romantic aspirations are objects of mockery. When the dormant sexuality of these characters is ignited, destruction ensues. Almost all of the "teachers in drag" are aging spinsters. Mrs. Grumpy is married but childless. During the series, we learn that when she was young she gave birth to a child, but abandoned him, a fact that portrays her defective femininity. Not only do these teachers not have an active sex life, but they also fight any display of sexuality. In another episode, the school's nerd concocts a magic potion that makes every woman run in pursuit of "Ginger", an ugly and unpopular redheaded boy. Mrs. Grumpy also clings to him grotesquely. Later on, in the experiment, a fire breaks out and the entire school burns down. Shifman and Lemish (2010) found that while expressions of aggressive sexuality in men are presented in comedy as amusing but legitimate, similar manifestations by women lead them to be ridiculed and labeled as abnormal. The "teachers in drag" validate this assertion, for they are either framed as dry, unmarried woman wrapped up in frumpy clothing, lacking all desire, or as sexually frustrated and dissatisfied women who attempt to woo everyone they encounter, be they students, the janitor or the principal, but to no avail.

Lack of sexuality and romantic life is a central dimension in the way these characters are shaped. Gerber (1963) examined the fact that the most significant marker of teachers in the media is a lack of vitality. He explained it as a common motif in media representation of agents of knowledge like scientists or magicians. The scholars forfeit their romantic lives in order to devote themselves completely to teaching. In the current context, however, the lack of vitality and sexuality in the figures of the drag queen teachers expresses a specific position towards women teachers to a much greater degree than it expresses one towards them as agents of knowledge. In a historical perspective, the elimination of teachers' sexuality is a remnant of a time when women could teach only as long as they were single. This historical chapter has ended; nevertheless, the image has retained some of its popular currency. To this day, the stereotype of a teacher includes dryness and dullness.

Discussion

Explaining a joke

Television comedies often use stereotypes to accommodate the time limits of the medium and the genre's features. Yet, no generic conventions prepare us for the vulgar and flashy show of the teachers in drag. What makes male actors in the role of female teachers an amusing show? Why does watching a man in women's clothes roaring at frightened students provoke such a good laugh; what is the factor that makes this joke funny enough to suit both youth series and late night shows?

The toolbox of humor research provides several theoretical concepts with potential explanations for the question of funniness of the teachers' drag show. For example, a psychoanalytical approach might perceive the "teachers in drag" as a sublimation of aggression against a mother figure. Functionalist approaches will point at school as a shared experience that enables social integration around jokes. According to Bakhtin, the drag performance of teachers is a carnival of role reversal. In everyday life, teachers are considered as proxies of social order but in the drag show, they are agents of deviance behavior.

Incongruity is a particularly fruitful concept in the sense that it makes us notice fundamental tensions within the teachers' drag show. Incongruities were constructed in most aspects of the figures' portrayal: they establish a façade of good manners that covers aggression, a flow of florid language that descends into obscenities, a bank of knowledge that masks ignorance, and women who are actually men. Apparently, the basic clash drives from casting male figures in female teachers' roles. Certain occupations and positions are fully associated with a particular gender; hence, once we encounter a professional from the opposite expected gender, we experience discomfort. The eye searches for traces that enable us to restore the familiar order, for instance feminine markers in women bus drivers or shot putters. Sometimes these women make use of accessories as a form of defense, applying heavy lipstick or wearing earrings that catch our gaze. But in the described shows, the make-up, jewelry and physical mannerisms functions in reverse; the deceit is easily exposed to acknowledge the veiled masculinity. This is not always the case in drag shows; often the imitation is utterly convincing and the spectators search in vain just to surrender in wonderment, for there is not a remnant of the original sex.

Still, here the purpose is not impersonation but rather mockery, and the question of who or what is mocked must be asked. The blurring sexuality? Teachers? Since the

occupation of teaching in Israel is strongly identified with women, any aspect of the construction of these characters should be considered an expression of views about gender.

Following Douglas's terminology, the incongruities are a conflict between two separate zones that generate laughter (1975). Still, would a chimpanzee wearing a suit in the office be parallel to a man dressed as a teacher in the classroom? What are the conflicting zones here? I propose a line of thought that suggests that in terms of gender, teaching holds a dissonance. On the one hand, teaching is associated with the domestic sphere and nurturing children; on the other hand, teaching holds a factor of professionalization and orientation toward the public sphere (Oram1996). Reconciliation between these two elements was made possible through the notion that women gain expertise in their "natural role" of caring for children. The tension between professional identity as teachers as well as gender identity as women is intensified by granting teachers power and authority. It means placing almost the entire education system in women's hands. The territory comes with the privilege to socialize and to coerce discipline. This fundamental tension feeds a series of incongruities upon which the drag teachers' figures are build.

Nonetheless, the described tensions and the feminization of education is a common feature on most educational systems in the western world, so why did the Israeli media develop such a specific grotesque portrayal of the drag teacher? What is the correct context to understand and explain this text?

I suggest that the relevant social context to understand the construction of the teachers in drag is the militarist Israeli culture spread by a century of war. One cannot underestimate the implications of Israel being a besieged nation. Like the Spartans, living on sword fosters ideology that glorifies power and results in extreme versions of gender roles in comparison with other developed countries. A thread can be drawn between the polarizations of gender roles in Israeli society on the one hand and the exaggerated teacher in drag shows on the other. Where sustaining order in a chaotic realm becomes a supreme target, on a regional and national level as well as in classrooms, it is a man's job to enforce order and women simply will not do. The process that lies at the heart of the described phenomenon starts with a specific social structure that yields social construction in the shape of beliefs regarding the fitness of men and women to certain tasks. Perceptions are reflected in cultural artifacts like comedies and jokes. The media distribute the image and fosters concepts, contribute

to the legitimacy of expressing those ideas (Ford et al. 2015) and to their acceptance as a common wisdom.

Liberation or contempt

Common interpretations of drag shows tend to highlight their empowering components. Drag shows are seen as a ridicule of traditional gender roles (Schacht 2004). Butler's theory highlights the performative nature of sexual identities. From this perspective, not only gender but also teaching might be understood as a collection of body language and intonation. Moreover, when the two roles are bound together in a comedy, the outcome is a most mannerist spectacle. Butler's queer theory sees the drag show as an act of resistance to social conventions, a site where humans can realize their full potential in a blurring environment that provides freedom of expression and a means of reflecting on our social constructions.

However, when considering the discussed Israeli comedies, casting male actors as women teachers is not a liberating practice; rather it reinforces traditional gender roles. The teachers in drag shows join the binary segregation that ranks masculine characteristics as superior to feminine merits. The shows suggest that you need to be a man in order to perform your duties as a teacher. They also stress that if a woman chooses a masculine role that involves discipline and order maintaining, she lessens and even loses her womanliness. The teachers, who have appropriated a role that was historically manly, pay with their feminine resources. They are doomed to sacrifice the valued assets of grace, tenderness and vulnerability.

Another problematic message lies in the concept of "imitation." In Western culture, imitation has a negative connotation. It denotes inferiority, a product that is of a lower quality than the original, like fake spare parts for cars or counterfeit brands. When a comedian imitates a political leader, such as Tina Fey for Sara Palin for example, the very act of copying creates ridicule. In this sense, imitation brings an awareness of dissimilarity (Bhabha 1984). The imitator always stands in a twilight zone, where he has no stable identity; he imitates something that he can never truly become. The same goes for the teachers in drag: their imitation is a deliberately poor impersonation that demeans its object.

Apparently, drag shows can have more than one meaning: in certain circumstances, they might promote symbolic annihilation. When the show criticizes gender in general it is empowering; when it uses theatrical impersonation to ridicule an identified target

such as a professional or a well-known persona, it loses its subversive potential. The portrayal of teachers in such drag shows should be read as an indirect form of humor about women, like gags about the dumb blonde or the nagging mother-in-law. In this case, when the spectacle joins the overall negative representation of women in the media and teachers in particular, the complex blend creates a particularly grotesque and despicable figure. To summarize, this paper attempts to show the connections among Israeli social patterns such as a militarized and machoistic society, the educational crisis as viewed via school bashing, and the formation of a unique form of comedy in Israel. Casting male actors as women teachers constructed a line of incongruities in all dimensions of the drag show, which were responsible for the humoristic nature of the teachers drag show and at the same time carried problematic ideas. The residual message is that teachers are not what they should be; what we see is not what they are. Their teacher-like nature is merely a thin veneer that barely conceals their true quality, which is of inferior value and ignorance. Another adverse message is that women are not fit for the task; one needs to be a tough man in order to project authority in a hectic classroom. These ideas join the findings from the body of gender portrayal analysis, which demonstrate how representations of gender in the media become more sophisticated and still deliver disparaging images.

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