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DIRTY MINDS & FAILED ENDINGS: USES OF THE BAWDY IN JEWISH COMEDY, AMERICAN AND ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES

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A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

Le-Abba Ve-Imma

EPIGRAPHS

"All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of laughing people. Without hearing this chorus we cannot understand the drama as a whole."

- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

"Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know…. Nothing is so trivial as treating serious subjects in a trivial manner, and nothing is more entertaining than treating trivialities in such a way as to make it clear you are doing anything but trifle with them. The world will pass its own judgment on me, but unless my 'self-love' entirely deceives me, my praise of folly has not yet been altogether foolish."

- Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*

"I don't know the question, but sex is definitely the answer."

- Woody Allen

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ABSTRACT

DIRTY MINDS & FAILED ENDINGS: USES OF THE BAWDY IN JEWISH COMEDY, AMERICAN AND ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES

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The connection between Jews, Jewish culture, and comedy in the twentieth century has long been established. The dissertation looks at Jewish comedy, comedians, and comediennes who have made the bawdy a central feature of their work. Morever, it argues that the bawdy and the lewd have played an important role in the history of Jewish comedy and humor in the United States and in Israel. Aside from simply documenting various uses and occurrences of the bawdy in Jewish comedy, the dissertation seeks out some symptoms, as well as some underlying causes for the proclivity for such material in the work of Jewish producers of comedy by looking at historical, cultural, and personal contexts.

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: OR JEWS AND THEIR FUNNY BODIES

"I've been accused of vulgarity. I say that's bullshit."

- Mel Brooks

"Before I speak, I have something important to say."

- Groucho Marx

"Tits Up!"

- Miriam "Midge" Maisel

1.1 Prologue: Mastering their Domain

The scene and its location are iconic. As is the television show from which it is taken. Four New Yorkers—Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer—are sitting, as usual, at a booth in a diner. On this particular day, George, the group's malcontent and grouch, who has just showed up, begins by sharing a recent harrowing experience:

> GEORGE: (Slowly shakes his head) My mother caught me.
>
> JERRY: "Caught" you? Doing what?
>
> GEORGE: You know. (All three give him blank stares) I was alone..
>
> ELAINE: (Making a face of surprise) You mean..?!
>
> GEORGE: (Nods) Uh-huh.
>
> KRAMER: (Laughing) She caught you?
>
> (Elaine laughs with Kramer)
>
> JERRY: Where?
>
> GEORGE: (Not really wanting to embellish) ..I stopped by the house to drop the car off, and I went inside for a few minutes.. Nobody was there - they're supposed to be working. (Jerry and Elaine look at each other - enjoying the story) My mother had a Glamour magazine, I started leafing through it..

JERRY: “Glamour”?

(Kramer and Elaine laugh slightly)

GEORGE: ..So, one thing led to another..

JERRY: So, what did she do?

GEORGE: First she screams, “George, what are you doing?! My God!” And it looked like she was gonna faint - she started clutching the wall, trying to hang onto it.

KRAMER: (Reflecting on the story so far) Man…

GEORGE: I didn't know whether to try and keep her from falling, or zip up.

JERRY: What did you do?

GEORGE: I zipped up!

The scene, if you have not figured it out by now, is from one of television’s most legendary and successful sitcoms, *Seinfeld*, a show about the terribly mundane life of the show’s namesake, stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld—a show purportedly, as a later episode would suggest, “about nothing.” In reality, and in surprising fashion for a show about “nothing,” *Seinfeld* would change the landscape of American primetime television forever with an episode very explicitly about “something.” The episode from which the aforementioned scene is taken is entitled “The Contest” and the title is a reference to a rather radical contest of abstinence from masturbation, initiated by the group after George swears he’s “never doing ‘that’ again.” In a retrospective about the episode, Julia Louis-Dreifus, who plays Elaine, notes: “I got the script, I read it, and I said ‘nah, they’re gonna shut it down. This is absolutely not gonna work, because you cannot base an entire episode on masturbation. It just can’t work.’”[1] But in fact “The Contest” became the show’s first “water-cooler episode”[2]

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[1]See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQKpTH2W1b0&t=320s

[2]By “water-cooler episode” I am referring to an episode or popular culture moment that had people talking about it next to the water-cooler the next day.

and later that year, Larry David, the episode's writer and *Seinfeld's* co-creator won an Emmy for comedy writing.

Seinfeld, as has often been suggested, was the most Jewish of television shows.[3] Although Jerry Seinfeld's Jewish background was only just hinted at for the majority of the show's run, Jews far and wide identified the show as particularly Jewish. For most, even George Costanza, seemingly of Italian heritage, could be nothing else but a stereotypical New York schlemiel, especially once audiences spent more time with his bickering parents Frank and Estelle, portrayed by Jewish actors Jerry Stiller and Estelle Harris. The schlubby George was a direct descendent of the more intellectual schlemiels iconized, celebrated, and ridiculed in Woody Allen's films, and especially of Allen's alter-ego Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*. What most television audiences (Jews included), joyously aghast at the brazenness of "The Contest"'s explicitness did not know, was that the prurient George Constanza, like Alvy Singer before him, is part of a lineage of characters and comedians in Jewish comedy who found in sex and the body a treasure trove of comic material. From the Marx Brothers' clever double entendres and Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker's jokes about cunnilingus to Lenny Bruce and Mel Brooks, some of the most famous and successful Jewish comedians in the United States have found in sex and sexuality a bountiful crop for comic material and irreverence, or, in the old nightclub jargon, they "worked blue." In a manner of speaking, Jews (historically as well as currently) were never "Lords of their manor" or "kings of the castle," but rather always the liminal and in-between tax-collectors, and thus willing to stray from the royal road and into what was often regarded as obscene. To continue with "The Contest's" implied salacious metaphors, Jewish comedians in the twentieth century, after centuries and centuries of being denied access to manors and castles, became "masters of

[3]See Jarrod Tanny on *Seinfeld*'s Jewishness.

their domain" in the world of the bawdy.[4] This dissertation is their story. It is also the story of why sex and issues of sexuality seem to be found in so much comedy produced by Jews.

This project looks at why so much Jewish comedy and Jewish humor in the twentieth century has been "blue" and why so many Jewish humorists have found success with bawdy humor. Shortly, I will pursue more clarifications regarding terminology. One of the cardinal sins of research in comedy and humor studies (and in some less specialized studies of this type in Jewish Studies) is that the terminology regarding what may more productively be called "the comic constellation" (humor, comedy, laughter, jokes) is often jumbled and confused. Often, this is neither of major consequence nor the authors' fault. But for now, before I address the terminology, I would suggest that all of these categorically different concepts do ultimately participate in the discourse of Jewish humor. As Jewish American comedian Rodney Dangerfield (Jacob Rodney Cohen) would say, comedy and humor have a long history of "not getting any respect," but they are significant threads that run through society and people's lives. They have much to tell us about a certain culture. Renowned anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that humor, or more specifically in her terms, "joking," is unique to human identity, and is profoundly marked by a culture's essence:

> [A] joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time… all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur. The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a "told" joke: that is a dominant pattern of relation is challenged by another. If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear. (Douglas 98)

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[4]The phrases "lord of the manor" and "king of the castle" are used repeatedly in "The Contest" to describe one's ability to abstain from what George was doing before he "zipped up."

In other words, as Andrew Stott articulates nicely, "Jokes […] emerge from within the social framework and necessarily express the nature of their environment, which means that all jokes are necessarily produced in relative relationship to the dominant structures of understanding and the epistemological order" (10).

It is a matter of common knowledge that contemporary Jewish culture has been hailed as a culture profoundly comical, even though some scholars have challenged the notion that this comic aspect has historical or religious roots, a position which will be discussed in the chapter 3.[5] We do know that individuals of Jewish background have been significantly overrepresented in comedy in the United States and other countries like England and France. In an oft-cited study from 1975 S.S. Janus notes that eighty percent of America's successful comics are Jewish. However, the sources and characteristics of Jewish humor are matters of debate if not contention, as are many things of a "Jewish" nature (and Jews would most likely not have it any other way). Quite a few of the producers of Jewish humor, I contend in this dissertation, have produced bawdy humor, even though some very important scholars have resisted such a notion. The eminent social critic, Irving Howe, for example, writes:

> If we understand the word in its original Latin sense, Jewish humor is genuinely *vulgar*. It is earthy for the Jews lacked roots in the land and paid scant attention to nature. It is seldom obscene, for Jewish humor is too fascinated with the ridiculousness of man's fatal condition to be interested in his quickly decaying physical parts. But it is vulgar, common, ordinary, full of affairs of common life, its scenes are kitchens, market places, railroad stations and streets, its characters housewives, mothers-in-law, children, merchants and beggars. In Jewish humor we move along the social ladder from top to bottom, and often savor those delicious contrasts of manners between social strata which the Jews so enjoyed noticing. (22)

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[5]See Ben-Amos and Oring, "On the Conceptualization of Jewish Humor."

In the next chapter I will address how problematic and myopic Howe's point is here. But he is not alone. Peter Berger, whose book *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience (1997)*—which will be cited extensively—is one of the most insightful texts about humor and comedy, like Howe notes, "Jewish humor contains almost no scatology and remarkably little sexuality (even the jokes about sexual situations are usually about something else, such as money or the complexity of female relations)." He adds, "one can say that Jewish humor is at a great distance from raucous carnival laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin goes on about" (88). One can perhaps chalk up Howe's purview to his essay's publication date of 1951 and his more conservative point of view in general. But even in his time, he was surrounded by the likes of the Marx Brothers and Sophie Tucker. And Berger? By 1997, the year his book was published, America had already been witness to Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks whose Jewishness was never in doubt, and neither was their "colorful" material. Obviously, both writers want to associate Jewish humor with things that are considered more wholesome in proper society. But it seems quite clear that Jewish humor in the twentieth century has not shied away from such matters, rather it embraced them. The appearance of sex in the work of many Jewish creators of comedy is not a bug; it is a feature. What could possibly be the reason for this? What does it say or what can it tell us then, if Douglas and Stott are correct concerning the function of the joke, about Jewish culture and Jewish identity in the twentieth and twenty-first century?

1.2 From Texts to Bodies

In his influential essay "Our Homeland, the Text," literary critic George Steiner articulates an important but rather anachronistic point that Jewish identity, particularly post-exile (second temple), is bound up with the *Mikra*, i.e. Jewish religious texts (*Tanakh* and *Talmud*) and textuality in general. This view holds that with the destruction of the

second temple in 70 CE in order for Judaism to survive after its cultic center was demolished, the rabbinical leadership that followed the Pharisees articulated and developed a Judaism that was invested in the centrality of Biblical texts and their interpretations (written Torah and oral Torah, the second of which would later be redacted as well). With texts and interpretation as its center, Judaism could now exist anywhere. It could be migratory, or it could be exilic if migration was forced upon it. Steiner argues that the "textual fabric, the interpretive practices in Judaism are ontologically and historically at the heart of Jewish identity." He contrasts this text-based identity with Hegel's quite vitriolic view of Jews and his call for a "blood and soil" nationhood. For Hegel, Steiner writes, "'the people of the book' are as a cancer—deep seated, vital, enigmatically regenerative." Steiner adds, "what is to Hegel an awesome pathology, a tragic, arrested stage, in the advance of human consciousness, is, to others, the open secret of the Jewish genius and of its survival. The text is home; each commentary a return" (6-7). Israeli author Amos Oz and scholar Fania Oz-Salzberger echo a similar sentiment in their 2012 book *Jews and Words* when they claim in their preface that:

> Jewish history and peoplehood form a unique continuum, which is neither ethnic nor political. To be sure, our history includes ethnic and political lineages, but they are not its prime arteries. Instead, the national and cultural genealogy of the Jews has always depended on the intergenerational transmittal of verbal content. It is about faith, of course, but even more effectively it is about texts. (ix-x)

The textual essence of Jewishness may be a legitimate way to find pride in a culture and a religion that clearly holds various texts as crucial to its identity and it has also clearly been a crucial connective tissue of Jewish diaspora for millennia. Disparate and, at times, ethnically distinct communities could claim a sense of connection and belonging because of their shared texts, which talked of and theorized a shared history. But is Judaism simply and

only a culture of ineffable textuality? What does this mean for the rest of Jewish identity? Are Jews, as Hegel and countless other anti-Semites have insinuated, shorn of materiality or corporeality, because of their geographical displacement? Quite the opposite. According to scholars of Jewish identity like Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, the designation of the Jewish people as only a textual community or "the people of the book," potentially obfuscates a vital truth about Judaism and Jewish identity. Namely,

> Since the content of 'the book' is not specified, what Jews study is treated as less significant than the fact that they are committed to books generally. One could never know, for example, that those books, which were of such obsessive interest to Jews, were deeply concerned with the body and bodily processes. Nor would one suspect that these books talk at length and in rich detail about matters such as bodily emissions, skin diseases, circumcision, proper positions for sexual intercourse, how to urinate, how to empty one's bowels, and so forth. (2)

Another important aspect to the textual versus bodily discourse is that, as Daniel Boyarin has articulated, from the point of view of the historical antagonists of Jews, alongside the censure of the Jews as a homeless people (i.e. lacking geographical materiality) another long held anti-Semitic view has been that Jews are bound to their flesh, or in the words of St. Augustine, they are a "carnal" people that are an affront to (Christian) spirituality.[6] In this sense, George Constanza is the Jewish comic hero par excellence: a reader of texts (merely *Glamour,* of course), but one that is seduced by the flesh. And leave it to his "Jewish" mother to chide him from her hospital bed and sarcastically turn the situation into a practical matter: "You have nothing better to do at three o'clock in the afternoon. I go out for a quart of milk, I come home and find my son treating his body like it was an amusement park." She continues: "Too bad you can't do that for a living. You'd be very successful at it. You could

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[6]See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the Christian view of the Jews as bound by the flesh, symbolically marked by their ritual of circumcision.

sell out Madison Square Garden. Thousands of people could watch you! You could be a big star!"[7]

In fact, the bed-ridden Estelle Constanza is essentially correct: several generations of Jewish comedians, particularly in the United States, have used various bawdy and bodily themes (including self-pleasure, sex, and even bodily functions) to become big stars. While Jewish culture is known for its intellectual rigor and respect for tradition, many Jewish comedians have made big careers discussing areas that the general culture has often deemed obscene or lewd. Is there a contradiction there, or does that aspect of Jewish comedy simply reflect, as Eilberg-Schwartz alleges, an important aspect of Jewish cultural identity?

While researching this project, I have often wished for some sort of scientific method to hypothesize and then prove that we can observe in Jewish comedy a proclivity towards a discussion of sex and a general lasciviousness. And perhaps, were I a sociologist or a folklorist, I would have taken the path of documenting and recounting the percentage of said occurrences in the larger discourse. But I am not. However, I can suggest non-scientifically and anecdotally that a lot of comedy and humor produced by Jews is attentive to sex and by extension to the body. And what I am attempting to do here is to point to a few such examples of these appearances in the larger discourse of Jewish comedy and subsequently to try and investigate what it is to which they speak.

For reasons that are perhaps obvious, a study of this aspect of Jewish comedy is needed. First of all, comedy and humor have seldom been topics that scholars or philosophers have jumped at the chance to pursue. I will elaborate on this resistance in

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[7]See Seinfeld https://www.seinfeldscripts.com/TheContest.htm

Chapter 2. Second, who wants to be known as the person who wrote about obscene and lewd humor? Most scholars would probably not want "was obsessed with sex" as their epitaph.[8] And then again, since the bawdy appears to be a vital aspect of Jewish comedy, it presents an important opportunity to look into the dynamics between Judaism, sexuality, and the body. Additionally, I have tried in this study to address other crucial shortcomings in the field. For example, the most clearly egregious omission in the research of Jewish comedy and humor are cultural sites outside of the North American context. Plenty of books that have sought to analyze Jewish humor end up substituting American Jewish humor for "Jewish humor," in general, with very little mention of Jewish communities outside of the US context. Even recent books on the subject mostly pay lip-service to the fact that they are not addressing Jewish communities outside of the United States. They then apologize that they are not versed enough in those research areas or locations and therefore will restrict their analysis to the American arena.[9] Even within the American arena, there is also a well-documented bias towards research that is Ashkenazi-centric with very few other Jewish ethnicities addressed. It has also been documented that this bias is merely a reflection of the Jewish demographics of the United States since the big migrations from Russia in the late nineteenth-century.[10] More Ashkenazi Jews yielded more comedians and more scholars familiar with that culture to comment coherently on that specific cultural background. But scholarship in Jewish Studies (especially in American academia) more recently has tried to offer correctives to these issues.[11]

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[8]There is, perhaps, the exception of Gershon Legman's career, which I will discuss promptly.

[9]See Dauber, *Jewish Comedy.*

[10]See Raphael and Sarna.

[11]See the work of Professor Aviva Ben-Ur.

My hope here is to take the debate beyond the lip-service and to address Jewish comedy from a more well-rounded perspective. The dissertation looks at Jewish comedy and humor in two contexts: the United States and Israel. Discussing these two cultural contexts admittedly still leaves a lot of locations and cultures to be explored including, but not limited to England, France, and perhaps Canada. But, as the two largest centers of Jewish identity in the last seventy-five years, it is understandable that the US and Israel have produced the largest and most significant array of comedy. What makes this bifurcated exploration of American and Israeli comedy of sex, obscenity, and the scatological more pertinent is the sense of alterity that these respective settings can provide. As David Biale has discussed in *Eros and the Jews*,[12] Zionism cultivated a new kind of eroticism, manliness, and sexuality, and consequently one might assume that comedy and humor reflect such attitudes. The contrast between the uses and representations of sex in comedy in the United States and Israel should allow us to better understand the shaping of Jewish comedy and the shaping of two Jewish cultures through one, crucial, often neglected aspect of humor and comedy. Analysis of this contrast also allows for a critical window into the role of sex and sexuality in comedy in general and for interrogating the extent to which these topics transcend simple expressions of lewdness and obscenity.

In asserting that sex claims a unique and central place in Jewish comedy, I do not want to merely point to a notion of statistical presence (i.e., that we find sex and sexuality playing a central role in Jewish humor and comedy). Instead, I contend that this presence has served a function, as part of other important currents and ideas in Jewish thought. Thus making it concomitant with the larger argument throughout this project that inherent to comedy and humor is a political dimension and potential that is too often ignored.

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[12]Full title: *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America.*

Relegated for far too long to the annals of shamefulness as a result of its ability to engender joyfulness and happiness, comedy's critical prowess has at times been mistaken as a fleeting epiphenomenon, merely a shadow on a cave's wall. My aim here is twofold: first, it is clearly to argue that the role that comedy plays is much more than to offer escapist pleasure for audiences or an expression of wayward unconscious thoughts. Second, I argue that the sex that appears in comedy, and quite often in comedy of a Jewish variety, is functional, in that it serves an important and ignored function—it addresses issues that are vital to Jewish identity in the United States and Israel.

This dissertation also brings together different theoretical and academic perspectives that do not often coexist for a variety of reasons including professional specialization and academic bureaucracy. I believe, however, that the subject and the issues that it entails require a more diverse theoretical and scholarly approach. One can, of course, study comedy in the United States and never have to venture outside the framework of literary or performance studies. And one could also have plenty to say about comedy in the United States from the perspective of the social sciences or psychology. My interests and preoccupations being what they are, and my deep belief that the matter requires a transnational and multi-disciplinary perspective and analysis has yielded an investigation that is on the one hand committed to Comparative Literature, language, and comparative analysis in general, but on the other hand, is also invested in other fields that are more than simply adjacent to the topic or the ideas I am discussing, such as Jewish Studies and Jewish history, cultural sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, and gender and sexuality. I trust

that this interdisciplinary approach and the wide spectrum that it offers will enhance our understanding of the topic and the issues underlying it.[13]

Jewish humor/comedy, as with other things alleged to have a "Jewish" nature, often seems to fall under Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's notorious description of pornography in (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964): "I know it when I see it." But Jewish comedy does not lend itself to simple definitions, even though to some it may appear natural, straightforward, and recognizable. This is, of course, in part because comedy itself is wonderfully messy and perverted, and thus elusive. Perhaps comedy's roots in the orgiastic and ecstatic (as in *ek-statis*, "standing outside" the ordinary of everyday life) realm of Dionysian rites makes it resistant to logical and reasoned analysis.[14] It sets both visible and invisible pitfalls for those who wish to contain and delimit it. Shortly, I will try to shed more light on Comedy's complex and elusive origin story. Rest assured that this inquiry into the meaning of comedy, like those before it, will end up wanting and unfinished—in a perpetual state of unfulfilled desire.

1.3 Taking it Seriously

The cultic and libidinal origin of comedy not only bestows its rambunctious nature, but also is reminiscent of its ties to the body and sexuality. The study of comedy has always been given short shrift, perhaps because philosophers have always been unhappy with this

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[13]If one is looking for a method underlying this kind of analysis, it can perhaps be found in the notion of "Cultural Poetics" as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt. See Greenblatt's two essays "Culture" and "Towards a Poetics of Culture." But to be fair, Greenblatt's approach shares quite a lot, often unaccredited, with the work of the Frankfurt School theorists who found value in grounding their ideas and argument in whatever cultural material enhanced an understanding of a certain topic. And personally, I share more affinity with the work of people like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

[14]More on this in Chapter 2 where I discuss the history of comedy in more detail.

"inappropriate" undercurrent. Since being birthed by the Ancient Greeks as essentially the evolution of the religious cult for the Greek God Dionysus, Comedy has been considered with less gravitas than Tragedy, its stately and serious sibling. Both were performed in Greek theater festivals, but while Comedy's popularity was immense, Tragedy was clearly viewed as the more serious genre by the intellectual elite. This would remain the pattern until the present day when comedy enjoys immense popularity, but is to some degree shunned by the intellectual establishment. Even when philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are discussed on comedy, it is found it lacking and questionable. As Andrew Stott writes, "the reputation of comedy suffers from both the lack of foundational manifesto and an association with popular culture that results in its denigration and relegation in the hierarchy of literary forms" (14).

Even though analyses of humor and comedy have never been fully in vogue, there has recently been a critical resurgence in academic and intellectual interest. Slavoj Žižek's 2014 book, *Žižek's Jokes: Did You Hear the One about Hegel and Negation?* tries to put into practice Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion that a book of philosophy can be made up only of jokes. More importantly, Žižek finds value and importance in obscenity and the so-called dirty joke—beginning his book with a joke about Jesus healing a vagina.[15] More recently, in 2019, Terry Eagleton published *Humour*, a short but engaging study of humor and comedy. Jewish Studies has also been catching up to the publishing world at large which has continuously published books about Jewish comedy, but primarily for a general audience. More books, like Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder's edited collection *A Club of their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World* (2016) are getting published. In 2018,

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[15]And in another setting, Žižek addresses issues of race and difference by arguing for the positive potential in the dirty joke.

Jeremy Dauber published *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History.* In Israel, discussions of comedy have also been slowly gaining a foothold in academia. For example, in 2014, a conference in Jerusalem, "JJJ Comedy for a Change," looked at the power of comedy to propel political change.[16] And arguably Israel's most renowned author, David Grossman, dedicated his most recent novel, *Soos Echad Nichnas Le-Bar* (*A Horse Walks into a Bar)* (2014), to stand-up comedy. Since 2018, an exhibition in Tel Aviv University's Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutzot has explored the history of Jewish humor around the globe and in Israel.

One thread that will run through this dissertation is a clarion call to take comedy more seriously. I will not be breaking new ground with this plea, as many who have written about comedy and humor have inserted such a request at some point. Jeremy Dauber even has it in the title of his aforementioned book *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History*. I am not sure if Dauber is mistakenly suggesting that those that came before him have not taken Jewish comedy seriously, or that Jewish comedy in general has not been taken seriously. And one of the most prominent writers on Comedy, John Morreall, named his first book *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983). Thus my call to take comedy and humor seriously in is no shape or form unique and I will happily admit to that. But in the course of reading this dissertation, it will perhaps become clear that comedy still has much to travel before it is truly taken seriously, not only in academia but in the world at large. Think, for example, when was the last time that a comedy won an Academy Award? The various artists discussed in this study have throughout their careers been labeled as "childish," "sophomoric," or "outlandish," and "irreverent." This is clearly because they have sought to work in comedy and to top that by contaminating it with sex. But even if it might be difficult

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[16]For more information about the conference see, https://jerusalempressclub.com/jjj-comedy-for-a-change/

and to some degree beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully unpack why comedy is important, how it works, and why it might be a valuable tool for political and social intervention, I would like readers to come to these various discussions with an open mind as to the potential of comedy, not despite the bawdy, but perhaps because of it.

1.4 Bookend to Bookend: What Is Inside?

One obviously cannot finish an introduction to a text that deals with Jewish comedy without quoting one of Groucho Marx's more literary and intellectual gags: "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend, inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." Hopefully, as you move forward, you will have better lighting. Also, considering our current circumstances mid-COVID-19 pandemic, being inside a dog sounds like another situation that would call for a mask and nobody would want that.

This dissertation is divided into three parts. Part 1 which is divided into three chapters, sets the historical and theoretical framework of the topic. Part 2 discusses Jewish bawdy comedy in the Unites States, and Part 3 discusses its Israeli counterpart. In the next chapter (Chapter 2) I dive into a deeper discussion of the history of comedy and its bawdy varieties which will lead me to a more in-depth discussion of Jewish comedy and its connection to Jewish culture and identity in Chapter 3. A better understanding of the difficulties that comedy represents as a mode and its uniqueness will help us understand why it might be more difficult than initially assumed to form a fully coherent understanding of Jewish comedy and the myriad ways the bawdy fits into its paradigm. As the final chapter of Part 1, Chapter 3 will raise important issues regarding the complexity of Jewish identity and its tendency towards ambivalence and incongruity. As will be discussed shortly, I believe in a layered theoretical engagement that brings into the conversation pertinent ideas and thinkers from a variety of fields, not only from the arts, literature, or Judaic

studies. I would like to approach this topic from the perspective that comedy and Jewish identity are more than merely epiphenomena of everyday existence, but are relevant to meaningful lives all over the world, and only a somewhat integrated analysis can do justice to that. Certain ideas that will be reviewed here will show up again in later chapters, where and when their relevance is appropriate. The primer established by Chapter 3 will enliven the ideas when they return later.

Following the more theoretical Part 1, the rest of this study presents specific test-cases that fall within the purview of the topic and the theme. As much as I would have liked to keep on reading and exploring the subject in an effort to perhaps find an artist or a book that exists out there that will provide the master code for the secrets of Jewish comedy and sex, I had to stop somewhere, and set boundaries for myself and the project. From an early attempt to break the "Enigma Machine" of Jewish comedy and thus succeed where others have failed (and admitted to it) and then dutifully apply it to different artists, I eventually decided to pursue more of a theoretical mosaic. Perhaps this method broadens the horizon of the subject, even if it does not necessarily result in the proverbial "key to the castle." This does not mean that the chapters and the topics will be completely divorced from one another, quite the contrary. Some of the individuals discussed in the project were or still are peers, and points of similarity and artistic and contextual convergence are unavoidable. But even more importantly, as texts were being read, research was accumulated, and eventually ideas written and structured into what one hopes is a coherent piece of scholarship, it became evident to me and to my readers that some ideas and themes kept returning. Some of these ideas are avenues of personal interest, roads of analysis that one finds oneself on perhaps even unconsciously, but some are theoretical threads that simply run through the work of these different individuals and their artistic output. And one of the reasons for such convergences, I would argue, can be shown to have Jewish aspects to it. Where possible and

where space and time allowed, I tried to pull at these threads, or at a minimum, identify them.

In Chapter 4, I turn to comedy in the United States, I begin with the work of Philip Roth. The chapter will give an overview of Roth's work and cultural significance with a more detailed and focused analysis of specific stories and novels that pertain to our topic. Over a long and distinguished career, Philip Roth articulated a vision of American Jewish identity—a mostly masculine, and possibly chauvinist vision—that has brought to light many issues that Jews in the United States have grappled with. In literary artifice that is much more experimental and edgy than is sometimes acknowledged, Roth used humor and comedy to address anxieties of Jewish identity in America. His work is notorious for its explicit use of sex and obscenity, and according to some, for its degrading depictions of women. The chapter explores how Roth combines comedy and sex to foreground anxieties about Jewish identity and masculinity. I begin with Roth because in many important ways his work is emblematic of a certain Jewish identity and its cultural representation. His uses and application of sex and the bawdy, both controversial and admired, are conversant with the discourses and ideas that inform this dissertation. Another theme that Roth's literature foreshadows for the rest of the dissertation is that even though his work has many comic aspects and instances of humor, it does not strive for continuous and immediate laughter.

In Chapter 5 another rather sharp turn occurs from the American Jewish masculinity industrial complex to a discussion of the work of Jewish American comediennes and entertainers, many of whom produced work that was colored by if not embedded in bawdy humor. The chapter offers an important contrast to the previous chapter where the Jewish male and his sexual and societal anxieties take center stage. We will look at how the work of the original bawdy Jewish comediennes of the first half of the twentieth century paved the way for the contemporary work of such prominent comediennes as Sara

Silverman, and the creators of *Broad City*, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson. I find it more than simply an interesting anecdote or coincidence that some of the more successful female Jewish comediennes have used sex and the bawdy as a central motif in their work. This chapter allows me to investigate the theories I discussed previously regarding sex and humor alongside and against theories about female sexuality, subjectivity, and performance as developed and articulated in the work of feminist and gender critics such as Hélène Cixous, Kate Millett, and others.

In Part 3 of the dissertation, we will migrate from the United States to Israel or as we say in Hebrew "make *alia*." The rich comic landscape of Israel shared many of the same roots and historical preoccupations of American comedy, but it took a somewhat different path. On this divergent path, it still seemed to disproportionately engage with sex and libido in important ways that are informed by Jewish history and tradition as well as the local context and its unique infrastructure. Chapter 6 will focus on the entertainer and filmmaker (now ultra-orthodox Rabbi) Uri Zohar's famous "Tel Aviv Trilogy" also known as "The Metzitzim Trilogy," which includes *Metzitizm* (*Peeping Toms, 1970*), *Einaim Gdolot* (*Big Eyes, 1972*), and *Hatzel Et Ha-Matzil* (*Save the Lifeguard, 1974*)[17]. Zohar is a landmark and transitional figure in Israeli comedy and cinema with his background in early Israeli culture as a member of the iconic Israeli military band, *Hanachal (*The River) and as a film archivist of the early cinema of Palestine. Zohar is known for straddling the fence in his films between entertainment and seriousness, between comedy and dramatic realism. Motivated by his background and general instinct as an entertainer and comedian, his films are primarily comedies, but they also quite often strike a rather serious and dramatic tone. He is a key figure in my discussion, because all his films foreground sex and sexual perversion.

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[17]See the bibliography for the full citation.

One could also argue—and many have—that some of the humor is sophomoric with a tendency towards misogyny. This aspect of Zohar's films was not unique to his work and can be found in other Israeli comedies of the period. But unlike some other cinematic products of his era, Zohar's films offer more nuance and complexity. I will consider his work's uniqueness, but also how it displays mainstream assumptions and attitudes regarding sex and gender in Israel of the time.

Chapter 7 will be the last case study in this dissertation and it will discuss the work of Israel's most important playwright, Hanoch Levin. Until his untimely death in 1999 at the age of 55, Hanoch Levin was Israel's most critically acclaimed playwright and satirist. Also a gifted and very influential writer of poetry and prose, Levin is undoubtedly best known for his stage plays. Levin's work drew inspiration from various sources. He was influenced by the political gusto and cabaret styles of Bertolt Brecht and the existentialism and absurdity of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Levin's art is a visceral social critique of the central issues of Israeli society: war, death, memory. But another way in which Levin challenged Israeli society was in his plays' open exploration of sex, profanity, and obscenity in ways much more prominent than we find in the work of most European playwrights associated with the Theater of the Absurd. The openness in Levin's plays with regard to sex and his joyous use of obscenities, made him just as much a cultural pariah in Israel, as did his politically charged plays.

Chapter 8 is a conclusion in which I mobilize the dissertation's different themes and ideas. I will try to unite what in certain parts of the dissertation may feel like discursive and thematic digressions, into a coherent and hopefully sensible articulation, and then point to some possible and programmable future ventures. I will also address some of the contemporary debates that are taking place around Jewish Studies and Jewish

contemporary identity such as how does one address essentialism and Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

1.5 Nemo Dat: My Cup Runneth Over

As is procedure at this point, one must profess to all the items that were planned to go into the dissertation, but did not. In this case, they belong to different categories. The first are artists that could have been studied in more depth, but were not. For example, the work of Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and Larry David all merit their own significant investigations. But unfortunately, the cutting room floor always wants its pound of flesh. Furthermore, I made a conscious decision to focus on two cultural contexts here, the American and the Israeli. This meant that other geographical and cultural contexts and their respective comedians also had to be left behind. For example, it almost feels criminal that the work of a comic artist like Sacha Baron Cohen, whose work would have been remarkably suited for the argument here, is not included.

As I noted earlier, most studies of Jewish humor have too unproblematically and uncritically replaced "Jewish" with "American" and treated Jewish comedy as though it has only been produced in the United States (even Canada is often totally ignored). As I have tried to expand the parameters of the discourse to include Israeli and Zionist humor, I did unfortunately still stay within the framework of a hegemonic Ashkenazi discourse. There is still a lot of work to be done historically and academically to unpack the comic cultures of Mizrachi and Sephardic cultures. For this project it was too complicated and far from my own expertise to analyze these cultures' comic tradition and any theoretical relationship they might also hold to the bawdy.

Finally, I also must confess to another way in which this dissertation falls short, but not uniquely short. There really are not any jokes (well, aside from one) and in general

please do not expect a lot of funny business or any funny things aside from talking about funny business and funny things. Elliott Oring, who has written elaborately on Jewish comedy bemoans in the preface to *Engaging Humor* (2003) that "when one speaks or writes about humor, there is often an expectation that the speech or the essay should itself be humorous" and that this could be sadly related to comedy's ongoing relegation to the category of triviality. Oring believes that by describing discourse that is already considered trivial like humor with humor it leads to a feeling that "serious talk about humor is participating in that triviality. A presumption seems to exist that the consequential cannot emerge from a contemplation of the trivial" (ix). Like Oring, I do not believe that humor is trivial. And I have tried to take it as seriously as possible. But, truthfully, the real reason for this omission is that I am not that funny. And neither is this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

COMEDY CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS: THE ORIGINS OF THE BAWDY

> "Tragedy flatters us into believing we are grand, when put to the test; something more than flesh that falls away. Comedy answers to suspicions that we are not grand at all, only flesh that falls away—but how much the more remarkable *then* our exuberant persistence."
>
> - Howard Jacobson

2.1 Introduction: The Ribald Conundrums of Comedy

The previous chapter referenced Irving Howe's description of Jewish humor. It might be worthwhile revisiting this passage from his short essay once more:

> If we understand the word in its original Latin sense, Jewish humor is genuinely *vulgar*. It is earthy, for the Jews lacked roots in the land and paid scant attention to nature. It is seldom obscene, for Jewish humor is too fascinated with the ridiculousness of man's fatal condition to be interested in his quickly decaying physical parts. But it is vulgar, common, ordinary, full of affairs of common life, its scenes are kitchens, market places, railroad stations and streets, its characters housewives, mothers-in-law, children, merchants and beggars. (217-218)

Since most of us no longer study Latin in Sunday school, the "vulgar" to which Howe is referring is the common or the everyday, sharing a root with the Vulgate (*Vulgata*), the 4th century Latin translation of the Bible, which is the common people's (*vulgus*) Bible. Howe's wording suggests a misunderstanding and also points to his career-long disdain for most things "common" and popular. As he attempts to articulate the basic tenets of Jewish humor—meanwhile, for some reason, ignoring the Jewish comedians of his era that were already dabbling with our "decaying physical parts"—he ends up describing not only Jewish

humor, but also the underlying basic features of comedy itself.[18] For comedy is the mode that deals with exactly these common, everyday issues. Moreover, "vulgarity," not in its Latin meaning, which Howe appears to disdain, has a deep connection to the birth of comedy as a dramatic discipline in ancient Greece. The two together are not only essential to the form over time, but also have been what has distinguished it from its sibling, Tragedy. Since its inception, Comedy has been considered as having less gravitas than Tragedy, its stately and serious sibling. Over time, from the classical period through modernity, Comedy may well have invited this lack of consideration by seeming to offer a theatrical modality for dealing with the more mundane aspects of life, as Stephen Sondheim astutely expresses in the lyrics to the opening number of his homage to Roman playwright Plautus, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum:* "Nothing with kings, nothing with crowns/ Bring on the lovers, liars, and clowns!" So is it "Jewish humor" or "Jewish comedy" or simply "comedy" of which Howe speaks? What then makes it "Jewish" for Howe?

As was touched upon in the previous chapter, defining Jewishness is a bit of a conundrum, and often a thankless task that can lead scholars to essentializing and particularism.[19] When it comes to people, we get clear instructions as to what is, or more correctly, who is Jewish. But of course even that has always been a matter of dispute, historical change, and scholarly evolution. Furthermore, modernity has introduced the complexity of splinter ideological groups and denominations, and then the establishment of Israel complicated things even further with concepts of nationality, statehood, and the "right of return." If human beings are difficult to categorize, concepts are infinitely more difficult. Concepts that stem from Judaism are relatively straightforward—we know for

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[18]The essay was published in 1951.

[19]I will address this is more detail in Chapter 3 as well as in Chapter 8.

example what makes a bris (Jewish ritual of circumcision) "Jewish." But for concepts that are not exclusively Jewish, such as "comedy," we must ask: in what way must they be modified to become "Jewish?"[20] And can we really ever generalize and call them Jewish? I will soon put some specific markers on what this dissertation will consider "Jewish" comedy. But as we shall see, the difficulty of defining Jewish identity is constitutive of the complex ways in which individuals who share that identity define themselves. And it becomes even more complex when, as has been the case with Jews throughout history, this definition or the placement into such a category, is not always of their own choosing. The same inevitably applies to concepts, which fall under the banner of "Jewishness," since they are ultimately entangled with said, complex Jewish identity.[21]

If the previous conundrum is not enough, let me introduce you to the deeper hole I have dug for myself. Comedy, as countless writers have told us, has a predilection for the bawdy and sex. Andrew Stott writes that, it "treats matters of sex more often and more openly than any other form" (62). And folklorist and cultural critic Gershon Legman asserts that:

> Erotic humor is far & (sic) away the most popular of all types, and an extremely large percentage of the jokes authentically in oral circulation, in this and apparently in all centuries and cultures, is concerned with the humor—often unwilling, unpleasant, and even purposely macabre—of the sexual impulse. (10)[22]

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[20]This would of course apply to any identity group. For example, what makes British comedy "British"?

[21]As I will discuss later, I believe that Jewish identity represents a unique kind of complexity that is particularly relevant for comedy.

[22]Legman is famous for his almost two-thousand-page, two-part project detailing varieties of dirty jokes and obscene humor.

If that is indeed the case, then in what way is the bawdy of the Jewish variety different from comedy in general, or other bawdy comedy? In the next chapter I will try to unravel these conundrums and keep others at bay, and see why, indeed, as I argue, a lot of Jewish comedy in the last hundred plus years is of a bawdy nature. And, finally, what can we say is unique about it, and what, if anything at all, does this have to do with the category of Jewishness. First, however, there is a need for a fuller understanding of comedy and its roots, before making some tentative arguments about the Jewish bawdy. In the case of comedy and humor, tentative arguments are often the best one can hope for.

2.2 Difficulties with Comedy

There are generally two matters of consensus in historical and contemporary writing about comedy. The first is that not enough has been written on the topic considering its salience to our everyday lives. This inevitably leads to an unhealthy imbalance, at least intellectually, between comic artistic creation and theoretical analysis. There is nothing new about this. Most writers have traced this imbalance to a disdain for the mode, and humor in general, in some of the earliest writing about comedy by Plato and Aristotle. Jan Walsh Hokenson writes that this ongoing "gap between artistic practice and critical thought has often been considerable" and "particularly in the Renaissance" when we saw a thriving comedy production, but a considerable dearth in philosophical and theoretical consideration of the topic.[23] To this day, theory has not kept up with production, which is alarming considering the plethora of production of comedy in various fields, and more importantly, the general awareness that most of us now share that comedy and humor play an important role in our lives, as echoed by the great Russian literary scholar, Mikhail

[23]See Hokenson 13.

Bakhtin, in one of the great books to tackle the subject, *Rabelais and His World*: "all the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people, without hearing this chorus, we cannot understand the drama as a whole" (474).

The second matter of consensus, and one that is undoubtedly related to the first, is that the topic is simply too difficult to fully comprehend and unpack. Even French Jewish philosopher, Henri Bergson in his famous 1900 treatise *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* [Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic], in which he develops some of the more influential and lasting ideas about humor, confesses to and beautifully captures the difficulty of conceptualizing laughter and the comic in a metaphor of a child trying to pick up the foam floated ashore by crashing waves:

> The child …picks up a handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self-same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter (61a).

Alongside these two issues, there is a third that is usually not addressed directly, and that is in my opinion, the crux of all discussion of this topic: the mangled and undiscerning use of the different terms associated with comedy. Comedy, laughter, humor, jokes, wit, and other terms are used interchangeably, or at times, even not addressed as distinct categories. In some cases, there is an unspoken admission of a failure to dig more deeply into the differences between these different concepts. Even Freud, whose work from 1905 *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* [The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious] is one of the first to be dedicated to a study of the topic, was a bit dismayed with such lack of

clarity.[24] Jokes for Freud are very specific things with specific rules and economies which are in some very important ways analogous to the work of dreams. Sensibly, Freud understands that jokes are different from laughter and comedy. Peter Berger's immensely useful book on the subject does a good job of defining these categories using the OED to define *humor* as "That quality of action, speech or writing, which excites amusement, oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun." Laughter however is of course the physical response of the human body to such things that may fall under the category of humor. Comedy is, however, something a bit different in that it is a theatrical form that developed in ancient Greece. An important term that, of course, does not originate with Berger, but which he develops in an extremely interesting fashion is "comic." One, adjectival meaning of the term is essentially synonymous with something that is "humorous" but another, nominal meaning is a person who performs comedy. But Berger, not afraid to show his sociology of religion roots, uses it quite originally as something that might be regarded as a life-force that is part of the life-blood of the masses and potentially an umbrella term under which the other terms exist: "The comic is ubiquitous in ordinary, everyday life. Not all the time, of course, but weaving in and out of ordinary experience. And it is not the virtuosi of the comic that we have in mind here, but quite ordinary people—specimens, if you will, of l'homme comique moyen" (5).[25]

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[24]From the Introduction to *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud writes: "Contact with the comic certainly does not apply to all jokes, not even the majority" (201).

[25]Berger adds another fascinating aspect of "the comic." Informed by philosopher and social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, Berger develops a key insight, that the comic is a kind intrusion into mundane reality: "In ordinary, everyday life then, the comic typically appears as an intrusion. It intrudes very often unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality. These other sectors are colloquially referred to as serious. By implication, then, the comic is unserious. We will later have reason to question this interpretation of the ontological status of the comic; indeed, we may even dare to propose that the comic is the most serious perception of the world there is" (6).

Even if we cannot put our fingers exactly on the practical difference between some of these categories, it is clear that the comic, as understood by Berger, is a kind of umbrella term for the other categories. It is similarly clear that the use of these different terms too often gets confused. For example, jokes are often used as a method with which to understand Jewish humor and they provide easy and succinct ways to capture that humor. But many of these analyses of the so-called "Jewish joke" and its ubiquity do not offer nuance as to the peculiarity and uniqueness of the joke modality, compared to a passing comment in a conversation that might also be Jewish related and representative of a Jewish essence.[26] And yet, it is clear that they are both different from "comedy" and from "laughter," although we might find extensive use of them in books discussing "Jewish Laughter" or "Jewish Comedy." This dissertation is not immune to some inconsistencies in using these terms. But I do try to be attentive when possible to such distinctions. At the same time, I also honestly believe that their messiness is part of their epistemological uniqueness and the fluidity of cultural meaning they often speak to, especially in the Jewish world.

While I do try to be attentive and sensitive to possible distinctions, perhaps not always successfully, I would like to emphasize here that the Jewish "comedy" I focus on here is rooted in the idea of performance. That is, an explicit performance or creative representation, whether in literature, film, theater, or television of a certain kind of Jewish comic worldview that is in all likelihood undergirded by some sort of Jewish sensibility.[27] This does not mean that other aspects of the comic such as jokes and general witticisms do

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[26]See, for example, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's classic *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Tell about the Jews*.

[27]I will discuss in further detail the notion of a possible Jewish sensibility in chapter 3.

not show up. After all, they are part of the tableau. However, it is possible that speaking here of comedy as a kind of performance or an act of production may have valuable significance. Even though comedy of the performative variety may not exactly have the same kind of rebellious and counterculture spirit of the humor or laughter of the marketplace as touted by Bakhtin (although it may), it can still deliver a very intentional and distinctive "stick in the eye" to official culture.

2.3 Comedy: Salacious Roots and Bawdy Branches

The main topic of consideration here is the subset of comedy that is regarded as "bawdy," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: "Of, pertaining to, or befitting a bawd; lewd, obscene, unchaste. (Usually applied to language.)" But it is of value to have some understanding of comedy throughout history in order to point to the ties that bind capital 'C' comedy to the bawdy and to sex. In order to understand comedy, it is essential to situate it historically as a mode alongside theoretical understanding and philosophical insights into its meaning, as art and philosophy are never fully divorced from one another. In some cases, as we shall see, the theoretical and philosophical approaches toward comedy have influenced the various directions comedic performance has taken and its valuation.

Together with Tragedy and Satyr-drama, Comedy or *Komedia* make up the three forms of dramatic arts that developed in ancient Greece. It is believed that Tragedy was the first dramatic form to be introduced around 534 BCE, Satyr-drama the second (ca. 501 BCE) and finally Comedy was introduced in 486.[28] The comedic arts were featured in competition in ancient Greece during the festivals celebrating Dionysus, the Greek God of wine and

[28]Ancient critics further divide comedy into three separate periods: Old Comedy (486 to ca. 385), Middle Comedy (ca. 385-325) and New Comedy (325). See Storey and Allan.

fertility, the Lenea and the City Dionysia.[29] Tragedy was clearly more prestigious, but as Potts claims, "Athenians found that tragedy was inadequate to express their national life, and in the course of time they included a complimentary art-form in dramatic festivals."[30]

In his investigation the roots and meaning of comedy, classicist Erich Segal suggests a few possible etymologies for *Komedia.* The first which he describes as "fanciful" derives from *Koma* (sleep) and *oide* (song): a "night song," if you will. The second, borrows from the Doric tradition, which, according to Segal, found favor with Aristotle, derives from *kome* (country village) and *oide*: a "country song." Aristotle found the association provocative because of the *komadoi*, a troupe of "roisters" who were kicked out of the city for their inappropriateness and had to operate out of the countryside. This definition found many adherents in the Middle Ages. And interestingly, it does recall some modern resonances of comedy's iconoclasm and foreshadows the transgressive attitude and material we often associate with comedy. The third definition—which Segal admits is the most likely and is indeed now canonical—is derived from what he calls "the true father of Comedy" and that is the term "*Komos*." *Komos* was the term given to the crowds gathered to celebrate the cult of Dionysus. These rites included all manner of debauchery throughout the festivities including heavy drinking and orgies. Dionysus was not simply the god of wine and fertility, he was, "the god who violates all ordinary boundaries as do his devotees, who become satyr-like creatures, a grotesque hybrid of humans and animals" (Berger 16).[31]

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[29]See Sommerstein xxiii. He writes that there were probably only four tragedies performed at the Lenea, while The City of Dionysia featured about a dozen.

[30]See Jacobson.

[31]To this day celebrations reminiscent of the Komos are enacted in Greece and across Europe in phallus festivals. See https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5413557/Penis-fertility-festival-held-Greece.html

Tracing the uses of the bawdy and the users of the bawdy clearly needs to start with the form's provenance in the work of the Greek playwright Aristophanes, essentially the originator of Greek comedy. It is assumed that Aristophanes wrote more than forty plays, but only eleven are extant. His comedies won numerous prizes in the City Dionysia and the Lenaea.[32] It is not a straight line that runs from cultic celebrations of merriment, debauchery, and sexual ecstasy to comedy as an art form, which Aristophanes is credited as originating and which is now regarded as "Old-Comedy" (Aristophanes's plays are the only remnants of this mode). Yet there is obviously a strong relationship and affinity. Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* that: "Growing from an improvisational origin—both tragedy and comedy, one from the leaders *(exarchontes)* of the dithyramb and the other from the leaders of the phallic songs, which are still performed in many cities—it gradually increased" (Pickard-Cambridge 133). The same energy, the same preoccupation with libido and licentiousness informs the form's pioneer.

In *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' bawdy satire, the women of Greece decide to withhold sex from their husbands to bring the Peloponnesian War to an end. As stated earlier, unlike tragedy, whose chief concerns are stately, and its personae often elevated in status, comedy's subjects are the common man and woman (but mostly man), and it embraces the depiction of our base desires and needs. As Segal writes, "the tragic hero dies for what is nobler in the mind, the comic hero lives what is humbler in the flesh" (12). What this shows us, and it is worth emphasizing again, is that the bawdy is much more than a subcategory, a type, or one possible aspect of comedy, but perhaps its most basic essence, its truest and most authentic and original form. Or, as Howard Jacobson pointedly notes,

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[32]See Sommerstein xxiii.

> the entire experience of theatre-going, for the Greeks, was phallus centered. A statue of Dionysus, or a phallus in his honor, was paraded to the theatre, where it was installed in a position of prominence for the duration of the performance. The comedy you watched was burlesque-priapic. The satyr play which rounded off the day was priapic-tragic. (44)

In *Lysistrata,* an essential aspect of comedy is expressed via its sexual and common-folk energy. Additionally, it speaks to comedy's long-standing radical energy. Comedy, like its *Komos* antecedent, conjures a world upside down. This time by placing a woman in the center of the play, giving her control of the situation and giving her lines like these in response to her compatriot Myrrhine's skepticism regarding the entire ploy, "How? Well, just imagine. We're at home, beautifully made up, and we walk around the house wearing sheer lawn shifts and nothing else; the men are all horny and can't wait to leap on us; and we keep our distance and refuse to come to them—then they'll make peace soon enough, you'll see" (146). And as is true of comedy, the characters understand their role in upsetting the proverbial apple cart:

> Lysistrata: …Good Morning, Calonice.
>
> Calonice: Same to you, Lysitrata. What's bothering you, dear?
>
> Don't screw up you face like that. Knitted brows really don't suit you.
>
> Lysistrata: Sorry, Calonice. But I'm furious. I'm really disappointed in womankind. All our husbands think we're such clever villains—
>
> Calonice: Well, aren't we? (141)

As comedy evolved in the classical period it was tamed and domesticated in a very literal sense, when it found new masters of Greek theater like Menander and later on the Roman dramatist Plautus. It loses some of that explicit sexuality and it transforms into the theatrical mode which unlike tragedy mostly articulates the lives of ordinary folk and family life. It still gives center stage to characters like slaves and courtesans, from which a bawdy line could sprout at any moment, but usually in more nuanced ways. Sex and sexuality are

thus never completely forsaken, but the original radical energy of upheaval is reserved for the representation of the everyman and his mischief or troubles.[33]

The notion that analyses of comedy and humor have been to some degree neglected in the annals of history is usually associated with the mostly negative attitude towards the mode by the classic philosophers. Plato took issue with both comedy and tragedy, because of their mimetic essence. But comedy was especially contemptible because it set out, according to him, to ridicule: "the malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbors misfortune: we feel malice and laugh" (*Philebus* 48-50). Aristotle, like Plato, did not write much about comedy, save the purported second part of his *Poetics*, which allegedly on comedy, but was lost.[34] Just like Plato, Aristotle bemoaned comedy's depiction of ridicule as a representation of our lesser selves for audiences to ultimately benefit from a sense of superiority as he states in the *Poetics*: "Comedy, as we have said, is an imitation worse than average" (1449a). Both thinkers believe that there is a basic moral failure in comedy's tendency towards ridicule and belittling. Though most of their critique was aimed at the New Comedy of Menander, Aristotle has even less positive things to say about the Old Comedy of Aristophanes, which he especially disliked because of its language. In *Ethics* 4.8, he notes that "the earlier dramatists found their fun in obscenity, the moderns prefer innuendo, which marks a great advance" (Hokenson 27). The impact of these classical philosophers on the general view of comedy cannot be overstated. Such views of comedy have been deemed the "Superiority Theory" of humor. And this view, that comedy is

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[33]This is, for example, the case in Plautus's play, *Pseudulos*, whose namesake, a cunning slave, is given the central part in Stephen Sondheim's musical homage to Plautus, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.*

[34]Italian novelist, Umberto Eco cleverly used this as the premise to his medieval mystery, *The Name of the Rose*.

somehow bad or malicious because it thrives on attacking the weak in pursuit of selfish vainglory, runs through discussions of comedy. The tone that was set in these early texts has been one of the reasons that comedy, despite its ubiquity, has been so under-explored by many of the foremost philosophers.

Hokenson believes that the classical besmirching of comedy most carried over into the Middle Ages, even though the Greek plays were lost, because "the theories filtered into medieval schools through the Latin grammarians" (30). Influential figures like Evanthius and Donatus find some virtues in comedy, but their thinking is cloaked in a kind of social utility of comedy, which was to depict forms of ethical living, rather than challenging the social status-quo. With the strengthening of the Church a dimmer view of enjoyment and frivolity that was associated with comedy took hold. Therefore comedy's production took a back seat to its more serious counterpart, tragedy. It is however clear to us now that comedy was never fully undermined or restricted; it may have just been displaced, both physically and figuratively, to outside of official discourse.[35]

Transitioning to another cornerstone of the bawdy leads us to Rabelais, whose gift to culture and literature, in addition to his great Renaissance comic epics of *Gargantua and Pentagruel*, is of course the term Rabelaisian, which is essentially shorthand for the bawdy articulated in this dissertation. The French Renaissance physician, just like one of his greatest admirers Erasmus, the philosopher who was one of the first to dedicate a long essay to the comic (*In Praise of Folly)* was a deeply Christian writer who was, according to the eminent scholar M.A Screech, "the high-priest of wine happily drunk in good company.

[35]Bakhtin discusses this throughout his book on Rabelais.

There is a Dionysiac savor about many of his best pages" (xix).[36] Rabelais's texts' uninhibited bawdiness and general lewdness was intended as "a satire of superstition and hypocrisy" (xvii). The best reader of Rabelais was unequivocally the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. In his groundbreaking text on Rabelais, Bakhtin does not commit himself to much close-reading, but his analysis of Rabelais' literary artifice and the way the work was situated in its historical moment has been deeply influential. It still remains a text that is practically unmatched in its analysis of the immense popularity of the comic in the lives of the people and life in general. What is essential for Bakhtin about Rabelais' humor is that it was the last time that the energy of folk culture coincided with those remnants that were so crucial to the original form of comedy:

> Laughter and its forms represent, as we have said, the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation. The narrow concept of popular culture and of folklore was born in the Pre-Romantic period and was basically completed by Von Herder and the Romantics. There was no room in this concept for the peculiar culture of the marketplace and of folk laughter with all its wealth of manifestations. Nor did the generations that succeeded each other in that marketplace become the object of historic, literary, or folkloristic scrutiny as the study of early cultures continued. The element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics. Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people's laughter was completely distorted; entirely alien notions and concepts of humor, formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, were applied to this interpretation. We may therefore say without exaggeration that the profound originality expressed by the culture of folk humor in the past has remained unexplored until now. (4)

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[36]*The Old Testament* (While it should probably be referred to as the "Hebrew Bible" is this kind of dissertation, Rabelais most likely thought of it as the *Old Testatment*) offered many of Rabelais scriptural references. Interestingly, he also read the *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* [Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer].

For Bakhtin, Rabelais represents a kind of humor and laughter of the masses that remained strong and in effect as a counterweight to the "serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (4).

Both in philosophy and theory we begin to see more openness in the Renaissance to exploring the meaning of humor. Of course, as noted, Bakhtin was not in agreement with these new directions. The most influential work in this regard was Erasmus's aforementioned *In Praise of Folly.* The book, spoken from the point of view of *Stultitia* (Folly) herself, celebrates the idea of the unserious aspects of life and exposes through satire the pretense of seriousness and high-mindedness of some aspects of the Church.

Since that period, comic production grows exponentially, as well as comedy's general acceptance into society. Similarly, more philosophers and critics engage with comedy and humor, but not nearly in step with its rising popularity in culture. In the nineteenth century, the influential idea that humor and comedy operate through contrast and incongruities develops. The rather minimal writing on comedy in the work of Kant also contributed to our view of humor. Kant's phrase that "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" is often cited with respect to the strain of thinking about humor that has solidified over the years into the very influential "Incongruity Theory" of comedy.

It is only in the twentieth century that we find comedy and humor being taken more seriously as elemental, yet universal aspects of human behavior. In 1900 Bergson published *Le Rire* (Laughter). And, as mentioned earlier, in 1905 Sigmund Freud dedicates a whole book to humor by way of focusing on Jewish wit and its jokes. Freud finds a correspondence between unconscious desires that appear in our dream-state to the release that occurs in laughter as a reaction to the work of the joke: a release of pent-up energy previously

occupied in keeping uncomfortable desires and wishes under wraps. Freud's understanding of comedy and earlier lesser known adherents to similar notions like English philosopher Herbert Spencer now comprise what is known as the "Relief Theory" of comedy.

2.4 The Bawdy: Sex and Comedy

It is important to note that by "bawdy" I am referring mostly to the sexual, similarly to what Eric Partridge in his original study from 1949, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* outlines. The idea is not to deal with any sort of vulgarisms as they might appear, although they do at times appear in some of my analysis as a corollary to a sexual discourse that is used by some of the artists in ways that push against standards of propriety and decorum. At the same time, certain distinctions that Partridge makes in his well-known book do appear outdated. For example, when he says in contrasting Shakespeare with Rabelais,

> Shakespeare was not a Rabelais: he took very little pleasure in the anatomical witticism and the functional joke unless they were either witty or sexual. Scatology he disdained, and non-sexual coprology he almost entirely avoided; if one may essay a fine, yet aesthetically important distinction, Shakespeare may have had a dirty mind, yet he certainly had not a filthy mind. (9)

This is a move that is not unique to Partridge, who finds sexual discourse antithetical to normative discourse. He seems to want to rescue the reputation of Shakespeare from sinking too deeply into the depths of vulgarity, but it is simply a little difficult to fully distinguish the filthy from the dirty and, after all, these things are matters of societal norms that evolve and change over time. Then again, the bawdy that concerns us here, somewhat like Partridge, is the one that deals with sex, not what Partridge calls the "non-sexual" bawdy, of which he finds very little in Shakespeare. But certain aspects of the non-sexual bawdy will show up, as some of these are very much like sex in that they are an extension of a relationship to the body. Though such things like urination and even flatulence are of

relevance because they are usually, as used, a reflection of a certain perception of embodiment. Though the body and what is discussed and presented are also significant, what I am mostly talking about here is a comic discourse in which sex and sexuality are principally featured and that crosses boundaries of propriety into what much of society deems as obscene or lewd. The body and the way it is represented in culture and society is also important, since the discourse of sex is entwined with the way bodies are understood and monitored in culture. There is also a clear difference between the bawdy as it intersects with male bodies and the way it intersects female bodies, and more importantly their representations in art.

There has been perhaps no single critic more dedicated to the bawdy than cultural critic and folklorist Gershon Legman, whose two-part tome *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: an Analysis of Sexual Humor* (1968) catalogues a vast array of jokes of the sexual and obscene variety, as well as offers some theories into its "function" or "rationale."[37] The ratio in Legman's work between prescriptive analysis and documentation is in my opinion lacking and disappointing, but he does offer some important insights. The foundational argument of his research echoes my previous thought:

> [E]rotic humor is far and away the most popular of all types, and an extremely large percentage of the jokes authentically in oral circulation, in this and apparently in all centuries and cultures, is concerned with the humor—often unwillingly, unpleasant and even purposefully macabre—of the sexual impulse. The humor of scatology must be assimilated to this, if only because both operate under the same physiological and verbal taboos. (9-10)

[37]Legman published multiple other books that research the subject. *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke* was published in two parts totaling over 1900 pages.

Legman was a dedicated Freudian disciple, and as such he maintains that the dirty joke is an act of misdirected aggression.[38] Freud addresses sex and what he refers to as the "obscene joke" but much more modestly in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious,* as one of the two kinds of "tendentious jokes" (jokes that serve a utility, rather than "innocuous" jokes which an "an end to themselves"): 1) a hostile joke, 2) obscene joke. These kinds of jokes not being an end to themselves are informed by Freud's idea here that they do not operate in a straight line or are fully transparent, but rather are symptomatic of certain ideas that cannot be spoken:

> It is also characteristic of bawdy talk that it is directed at a particular person by whom the speaker is sexually aroused, and is meant to make them aware of this arousal by listening to the bawdy and so becoming sexually aroused themselves. Instead of being aroused, the person might also be made to feel shame or embarrassment, which only implies a reaction against their arousal and, and in this roundabout way, an admission of it. (91-92)[39]

Freud's view of jokes and humor in general (despite his own dislike of the mixing of categories, Freud's book is full of them) and obscene jokes in particular is that they "speak" of and to things that are not to be spoken or are generally not spoken. This idea makes complete sense within Freud's general theoretical apparatus, in that for Freud there is much shared between dreams and jokes, and in fact his work on jokes was spurred on by his work

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[38]In the 1960s he founded a Freudian quarterly *Neurotica*. Like much of the rest of life's work, its idiosyncrasy did not lead to wide readership. Also, about the Joke as misdirected aggression see Legman 12-13.

[39]In the rest of the passage Freud cannot avoid his well-known gender biases and issues when he writes: "Bawdy talk, then, is in origin, directed at women and is to be regarded as the equivalent of an attempt at seduction. So if a man in male company telling or listening to bawdy stories, the original situation—which cannot be realized on account of social impediments—is also imagined as well. Anyone who laughs at the bawdy talk they have heard is laughing like a spectator at an act of sexual aggression."

on dreams.[40] For Freud, the surface meaning of the joke, as in dreams, is simply a façade which is representative of a deeper hidden meaning. As such, jokes, like dreams, become a mechanism for release.

Like much of the rest of Freud's oeuvre, his book on humor mainly posits a philosophical framework with which to think. The notion that a joke or humor can serve more than merely a transparent utility may be instructive to us. It lets us look beyond the simple surface projection of the bawdy, the dirty joke, or the generally obscene, as meaningless tawdry playfulness and seek out what other, and less transparent function they may serve. In other words, if Jewish comedy indeed gravitates towards the bawdy, we may want to inquire into what purpose the use of sex in such comedy serves. Freud's fellow Jewish modernist, Bergson, pointed us to the social function of humor (to be later echoed in the work Mary Douglas) in *Le Rir*e:

> To understand laughter we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social significance. (12)

There is much more value than we might immediately recognize in Bergson's idea here. He is setting up an understanding of the bawdy with relation to Jewish identity and Jewish culture that suggests a kind of functionality rather than essentialism. And that is crucial to our understanding of Jewish comedy and perhaps all kinds of ethnic comedy in that it does not isolate a certain characteristic necessarily as innate to that group, but rather it points to

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[40]See Theodor Reik. Reik, one of Freud's first students, wrote one of the first books dedicated to Jewish humor. The book was published in Germany in 1929 as *Lust und Leid im Witz*, and published in the US as *Jewish Wit* 1962. And as one reviewer put it "a homespun medley of digressions, peptalks, and childhood recollections."

the possibility that by means of this functionality, the humor or comedy is participating, indirectly or subversively, in the larger cultural discourse of that group. And as I will soon articulate, when it comes to Jewish comedy, there is immense value in that understanding.

As a subcategory of sexual fiction there is much that we do not know about the bawdy. And one of the reasons that we still lack more insight into it, is because the general discussion of sex in literature has been wanting. So much of this discussion either bemoans it in literature as too obscene and inappropriate or alternately tries to redeem it from such propositions. Thus little time is left to seek out what it actually does in a certain work, what is its functionality, if not purpose. For example, Maurice Charney points to Steven Marcus's censure of sex in Victorian literature in his attempt to dissociate it from actual "literature": "Most works of literature have a beginning, and an end. Most works of pornography do not" (quoted in Charny 2).[41] Charney spends a significant amount of time in his important book *Sexual Fictions* challenging Marcus and his preconceptions and bias about what we can call "literature."[42] But Charney's work reveals its author's own problematic bias, when he writes, "I believe that sexual fiction stimulates feelings and excellences of its own that are different from either comedy or tragedy" (11). Trying to place literature on some sort of pedestal comes, in my opinion, from a bias against literary forms like comedy, as they do not hold up to the "excellence of other fiction." What we often find is that the bawdy struggles in its quest for meaning and legitimacy against two forceful agents. The first, as articulated earlier, is the historical, yet still operational view that the comic is unserious and cannot express matters of importance. The second is the general distrust of sex and sexuality in culture, a kind of shaming regarding its prevalence throughout society echoed in Michel

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[41]See Marcus, *The Other Victorians.*

[42]See Charney 7-11

Foucault's famous first lines of *A History of Sexuality Vol. 1*: "For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (1). But it is my view that the bawdy has some important and perhaps dark secrets to tell about the human condition, or the Jewish condition in particular, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

JEWISH BAWDIES AND BODIES

> "If I knew who or what I were, I would not write; I write out of those moments of anguish which are nameless and I am able to write only where the tradition can offer me a discipline, a means to articulate and explore that anguish. Against the self-image of the age, it has been within the philosophical tradition, which for me includes social, political and religious thought, that I have found the resources for the exploration of this identity and lack of identity, this independence and dependence, this power and powerlessness. My difficulty is not addressed in any rejection of the tradition which would settle for any one side of my predicament; lack of identity, dependence, powerlessness, or any account of otherness which theorizes solely exclusion and control."
>
> - Gillian Rose

3.1 Introduction: Jewish Humor or What is a Hat

A few years ago, British comedian Ricky Gervais interviewed fellow comedian Larry David for a television special. Approximately half-way into the conversation the pair had the following somewhat awkward exchange:

> Ricky: I love Jewish humor, but I don't know exactly what it is, what's Jewish humor?
>
> Larry: Pff, umm… you know what, I really don't know. I don't know what it is; I know that there are a lot of Jews in comedy.
>
> Ricky: There's (*sic*) themes to Jewish humor that you could probably cite: neuroses….
>
> Larry: There's a lot of complaining I guess; being dealt a bad hand. It's Tevye, isn't it? The weight of the world on your shoulders.
>
> Ricky: Brilliant, fantastic.
>
> Larry: Complaining, I think it's a lot of that.[43]

[43]See *Ricky Gervais Meets Larry David*.

It is striking and somewhat strange that Gervais claims to love Jewish humor, yet he freely admits to not knowing what it is. One can, however, imagine that he speaks for a general societal view of Jewish humor. After all, there have been countless numbers of Jews who have had immense success in the world of Euroamerican comedy.[44] It is therefore only reasonable that a notion exists within this cultural sphere that Jews are funny and, by extension, that there is some intrinsic relationship between Jews or Judaism and comedy. And David's reaction to Gervais's enthusiasm is also apropos. Despite being a comedian and a Jew, it is not totally surprising that he cannot exactly define Jewish humor, as with all things related to the "comic," definitions are quite elusive, as I noted earlier.

Similarly, pointing to the exact connection between humor and Jews is difficult. We do, however, have evidence that Jews have occupied a central place in American comedy. A study conducted in 1975 by S.S. Janus found that eighty percent of the most successful comedians in the United States were Jewish.[45] Examples of Jews in American comedy are far-ranging, from Vaudeville to radio, television, and stand-up. More than fifty years after Janus's research, there are still plenty of Jews in prominent and visible positions in the comic industry.[46] There has been no similar research done in Israel (and it would not make much sense with the lack of representation that Arab-Israelis and other non-Jews receive in the society), but during its short life-span, a very rich comic tradition has flowered in Israel, ranging from newspaper satire to stand-up comedy and late-night television.

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[44]Even England has had its share of very successful comedians Jewish background or faith including Peter Sellers and Sacha Baron Cohen. One would assume though that Gervais is familiar with the many American comedians of that particular background.

[45]I am currently unaware of a more recent analysis of this sort.

[46]See Brook and Abrams.

We should, however, be mindful about generalizations. Not only is comedy elusive and difficult to define, it is just as difficult to define Judaism, today and historically. As mentioned earlier, the question of "who is a Jew" has baffled and continues to baffle scholars. Moreover, it is a bit problematic to define what is Judaism, since there are many "Judaisms," many ways to practice the religion, and many ways to count one as a member of the faith or the group. Then again, this research does assume some sort of connective tissue that still exists and binds all these various disjointed and contingent Judaisms. Furthermore, doubling down on the problems of definition will keep us completely bogged down by a debate that might be productive for the understanding Jewish identity, but clearly not helpful for this dissertation. A famous Jewish joke asks, "Why are there two synagogues in every town?" To which the answer is: "there is the one you go to, and the one you wouldn't be caught dead in." Thus, Judaism and its humor are well-aware of its own penchant for argumentation, but even in the fictional world of this joke, there seems to be an understanding that these Jews still attend synagogue. So Jews do agree on and share some things.[47]

Because of the resounding saliency of Jews in comedy in the twentieth century and our tendency to be slaves to the moment, one might assume that the ties between Judaism and comedy have existed forever, but that is not the case at all.[48] Jewish comedy scholar and folklorist, Elliott Oring suggests that, "Jewish humor is a relatively modern invention. The

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[47]This is no way to suggest that Judaism and Jewishness is defined by the practice of the religion. Quite the opposite, an important aspect of contemporary Jewish identity is that it can be defined in many ways, and some of these ways are not religious. Some are cultural and some might even political. And, of course, in Nazi Germany and Nazi controlled areas, Jews did not have the choice whether they defined themselves as Jewish or not. It was enough to have one single grandparent.

[48]In the words of literary and Jewish Studies scholar Rachel Green, "the discourse of Jewish humor effaces its own sociological and historical origins and attempts to cast itself as timeless."

conceptualization of humor that was in some way characteristic or distinctive of the Jewish people begins only in Europe during the nineteenth century" (264). Oring writes that until the end of the nineteenth century, Jews were not specifically associated with comedy or humor. Just the opposite, in fact. They were accused of lacking a sense of humor or a comic sensibility. In the late nineteenth century, a few rabbis went on record to assert that Jews possessed a sense of humor. In 1893 Hermann Adler, the chief Rabbi of London, wrote an essay defending the Jews against the accusation that they were a "humorless people," an insult levelled at them by French intellectual and semitic scholar, Ernest Renan.[49] Oring makes the compelling argument that around the same period, Western society began to view humor and laughter increasingly as an aspect of "civilized humanity" (Oring 265). Jews, who at that time wished to present themselves as adequate members of modernity, found it advantageous to demonstrate their people's capacity in this area. Oring is not the only writer to question the relationship of Jews and Judaism to humor. Dan Ben-Amos, in a much-cited essay, suggests that before the publication of Freud's *Jokes,* "the actual existence of humor among the Jews was in question" (113).[50]

It is correct to be skeptical of some sort of innate, birth-right link between Judaism and humor. At the same time, perhaps we should not take heed of potentially ill-intentioned suppositions made by outsiders of the Jewish community. If some wish to argue that it has been only in modernity that a link between Judaism and humor is established, they are ignoring some interesting cultural and religious associations that are at the very least provocative. Even before we discuss the overrepresentation of Jews in comedy in the last

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[49]See Oring 264.

[50]Ben-Amos uses most of the essay to challenge's Freud's famous contention that the defining characteristic of Jewish humor is self-mockery. More about that shortly.

hundred plus years, it seems significant that two of the great modernist philosophers and some of the first to address humor at relative length, Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, were themselves Jewish. One even finds that throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, in addition to practitioners of comedy themselves being of Jewish background, a disproportionate percentage of the writers on the topic (not on Jewish comedy or humor per se) were and are of Jewish ancestry.[51] What might it say about Jewish identity that it has given rise to such a rich comic culture and such deep interest in understanding the realm of the comic.

One thing that writers often do when they want to point to some sort of Jewish essence is turn to Jewish biblical texts. There are all kinds of problems with this approach. First, it assumes religiosity or knowledge of these texts on the part of Jewish identity, and second it assumes an ahistorical continuity of identity throughout thousands of years. Then again, it is reasonable to assume that some aspect of Jewish identity has been maintained and even required as basic maintenance and therefore some level of familiarity exists for Jews with their own mythology. I especially mean this with regard to artists and comedians who have referred to themselves as Jewish or who use Jewish identity as part of their performance. We must, however, proceed carefully, and in the words of Josh Lambert, with "resolute anti-essentialism" when we discuss any group, perhaps especially Jews (more about that later). With that in mind, there does appear to be a clear difference between Judaism and Christianity with regard to the comic. We know, as John Morreall writes that, "[I]f Jesus is to be our model, then there seems no place for humor in our lives. Judging from the Gospels, Jesus' attitude toward life was uniformly serious. He is never spoken of as

[51]Including Theodor Reik, Peter Berger (before conversion to Catholicism), Avner Ziv, Elliott Oring. And many more.

laughing" (126). Conversely, a certain notion of laughter is a key concept very early in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) with the story of Abraham and Sarah—the first couple of Jewish ancestry. Relatively early in *Genesis,* after God has already established a covenant with Abraham, we read the following:

> 15 And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall* her name *be*.
>
> 16 And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother* of nations; kings of people shall be of her.
>
> 17 Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall *a child* be born unto him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?
>
> 18 And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!
>
> 19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his seed after him. [52]

God, all-knowing, hears what Abraham says in his heart and in response to Abraham's laughing, tells Abraham to name his son Isaac, or in Hebrew "*Yitzhak*" ("he who will laugh").[53] Laughter shows up again, when God's messengers come back years later and tell Sarah that she will give birth:

> 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

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[52]*Genesis,* Chapter 17.

[53]It is important to note that scholars such as A. E. Speiser have suggested that the meaning of "Yitzhak" did not have the same meaning of laughter that it holds now. Its precise meaning has been debated. This scene, as well as a scene in the next chapter in which Sarah is laughing, is used by critics as anecdotal material to the early relationship of Judaism to humor. We should note, however, that the most famous interpreter of the Tanakh, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki), writing in the eleventh century, does say with regard to the name that it was given "some say after the name of laughter."

> 12 And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: 'After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'
>
> 13 And the LORD said unto Abraham: 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old?
>
> 14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son.'
>
> 15 Then Sarah denied, saying: 'I laughed not'; for she was afraid. And He said: 'Nay; but thou didst laugh.'

Sarah's laughter here could be the result of nervousness, as laughter does not only occur as a reaction to the comic, but nevertheless it is quite unique to find in a religious text a dialogue engaged with the concept of laughter. But most importantly it is a laughter that is a reaction to an incongruity—old age tends to rule out the birthing of a child. It is also laughter as the result of the incongruity of God's interaction with mere mortals. Ted Cohen suggests that the Tanakh's descriptions of life's absurdities and incomprehensibilities leave one with no other option but laughter: "I believe that the Hebrew Bible presents one conception of decency in which the fully human, fully acceptable response to the mystification of the world is laughing acceptance, a kind of spiritual embrace" (51).[54] There is indeed a laughing sort of acceptance here, but also a unique irreverence that must seem unfathomable to most people religiously inclined. Laughing and questioning God seems rather blasphemous. But this kind of attitude can be said to be a staple of Jewish humor in the twentieth century. It is not just the irreverence, but possibly the very nuanced and deliberate use of language to mark irony and cynicism that we find in the Tanakh and probably even more so in the Talmud that has become associated with Jewish humor as well. David Brodsky finds that "language play"—that he specifically compares with Groucho

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[54]As was discussed in Chapter 2, incongruity is one of the most popular and established tools of humor and comedy.

Marx's words—"can be found in Jewish humor stretching as far back as the *Talmudim* and Midrashic literature some 1,500 years earlier" (13). Brodksy also refers to an eye-opening passage in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 30 b) that tells of a rabbi who would start the teaching of a legalistic concept with something humorous (*Bedihuta*).[55]

This finally leads us to various characteristics that have been associated with Jewish comedy.[56] These characteristics are not a prescriptive determinant of the texts or individuals that will be discussed in the next chapters. For that, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the qualifications follow the very simple definition of Jewish humor by Avner Ziv in the 1980s: "Jewish humor is humor created by Jews and reflecting some aspect of Jewish life" (vii). And recently, similarly put by Jeremy Dauber, who states that Jewish comedy needs to satisfy "two conditions": 1) "Jewish humor has to be produced by Jews; 2) "Jewish humor must have something to do with either contemporary Jewish living or historical Jewish existence" (xii-xiii).[57] These basic definitions, while far from perfect, are a good marker for the artists and comedy I will discuss in the thesis, but right now I would like to discuss certain characteristics or aspects of Jewish humor and comedy that have coalesced in scholarship over the years.[58] A deeper look into such aspects would offer clearer

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[55]Brodsky adds: "This is not to suggest that Marx Brother's humor comes from any direct study of rabbinic literature. Nor is it to suggest that such humor is unique to the Jewish people…. Nevertheless, to the extent that Jewish culture has been steeped in classical rabbinic texts, it has been steeped in midrashic hermeneutics." (15)

[56]It is important to once again note that these characteristics have been deduced by various experts by looking mostly at Ashkenazi Jewish culture, in Eastern Europe and the United States.

[57]I would like to point out here how Dauber's definition is a great example of how, as I discussed in Chapter 2, the difference between the categories of the comic often get muddled rather indiscriminately.

[58]Beginning with we could say with Freud's book on jokes, which, although is not specifically about Jewish humor, ends up addressing the matter in important ways.

parameters of their themes and methods. Unfortunately, my space is limited and the complexity of such distinctions would require a much longer analysis. There are, however, different notions and ideas that scholars of Jewish comedy have written about and analyzed including: 1) absurdity—the result of the absurd life of the Jews throughout history; 2) humor through tears—the dark past has led to a lot of gallows humor; 3) intellectual and linguistic humor—Jews have a long tradition of textual analysis and pontificating over biblical and Talmudic texts; 4), storytelling and joke-telling—following the story-filled Jewish texts, jokes are central to Jewish humor; 5) audaciousness and irreverence—Jewish humor manifests quite often the quality of chutzpa, as no subject and topic is off limits; 6) social critique and *Tikkun Olam*—according to some Jewish humor follows certain utopian aspects found in Judaism and tries to better the world.[59] It should be noted that most of the scholars of these topics, as well as the topics they often address, are of Ashkenazi Jewish background. Whether that sort of bias and worldview impacts their analysis is not part of this dissertation. It is simply currently a historical fact that the majority of the research into these matters is of Ashkenazi origin and also explores mostly Ashkenazi individuals and cultures.

There are not the only features that have been written about. Peter Berger smartly adds that "the distinctiveness of Jewish humor is not explained by its subject matter," and that its uniqueness lies more in its use of tone. And Freud may be responsible for what has been canonized as the most salient and unique aspect of Jewish humor in his influential book on jokes, which may not be specifically about the Jewish people, but like so much of his

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[59]*Tikkun Olam* is concept taken from Lurianic Kabbalah (what is now the popularized form of Kabbalah, i.e. the umbrella term for the very long tradition of Jewish mysticism). Tikkun Olam means "repair the world). As part of the creation and maintenance of the world in this system, good deeds and charity help to repair a broken world.

oeuvre, the author's Jewish identity figures deeply in his analysis (no pun intended).[60] In the book, Freud distinguishes between "innocuous jokes," or jokes that have no underlying meaning, and "tendentious jokes"—jokes that actually speak to something else. According to Freud, Jewish jokes are an example of the latter variety, and they capture the tendency of Jewish humor for masochistic thinking. Jewish humor's uniqueness, Freud deduces, lies in the fact that that Jews like to make fun of themselves:

> A situation particularly favorable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one's self, or put more circumspectly, against a person in whom that self has a share, a collective person, that is, one's own people, for example. This determinant self-criticism may explain to us how it is that a number of the most telling jokes—of which we have given plenty of examples—have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories invented by Jews and aimed at Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by outsiders [*fremden*] are mostly brutal comic anecdotes, in which [the effort of making] a proper joke is saved by the fact that to the outsider the Jew counts as a comical figure. The Jewish jokes originating with Jews admit this too, but they know their real faults and how they are related to their good points; and the share the raconteur's own person has in what is being criticized creates the subjective conditions of the joke-work that are otherwise difficult to set up. By the way, I do not know whether it often happens in other instances that a people should make fun of its own nature to such an extent. (106-107)

In scholarship on Jewish humor, Freud's argument has been noted as one of the most lasting and influential characteristics of Jewish humor, bolstered by countless popular examples, perhaps most famously by Groucho Marx's maxim, that "I would never want to belong to any club, that would have someone like me for a member."[61] and given even further

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[60]Judaism is addressed in very significant ways, in perhaps more than any other of Freud's texts, aside from *Moses and Monotheism*.

[61]There are various versions of this line. I chose the one that Woody Allen uses in the beginning to Annie Hall. Allen also credits Freud in addition to Groucho Marx, but he is incorrect when he/Alvy claims that it can be found in Freud's work. The spirit yes, but not the actual quote.

notoriety by Woody Allen's opening to *Annie Hall*, his ode to Jewish self-deprecation, with his version of that phrase. This aspect of Jewish humor has always stood out (and Freud's influence on the field cannot be discounted either) because it is difficult to find how it fits into the different theories that have been developed about humor in general. It definitely does not fit into the category of the"superiority theory" of humor. It does not immediately strike one as falling under "relief theory," or under the umbrella of "incongruity theory." This aspect of Jewish behavior or identity therefore seems to lie outside of the theorized, and has consequently become synonymous with Jewish humor. But there have been writers who have challenged Freud's argument. Dan Ben-Amos dedicates an entire article to challenging Freud's argument, in which he claims (in bad faith in my opinion) that there is, of course, always the theoretical possibility that future studies will discover a Jew who mocks himself, "After all, masochism is not a psychopathology from which Jews are exempt. Yet this conceivable situation hardly confirms the notion that self-mockery is the distinctive quality of cultural and historical changes that occur in the humor of the Jews" (13).[62] Ben Amos is, to my mind, discounting many examples and at the same time not offering examples from other cultures to point to the lack of uniqueness in this category. One way to explain this tendency towards self-deprecation, but to excuse Jews from masochism, is to recognize it as a consequence of Jewish historical circumstance. Jews throughout history, and in certain periods more than in others, have lived in small, tight-knit communities with strong group identification and peer similarity. Thus, when one wished to mock a neighbor's or a friend's stupidity or misery, as is at times the case with humor, one was

[62]One ideological reason for trying to reject Freud's contention, and this is conjecture on my part, is that within a Zionist framework there is a tendency to denounce Jewish attitudes and behavior that precede the more self-determinative and muscle-Judaism of Zionism. Thus anything that intimates lack of resolve is discounted.

figuratively making fun of oneself, because these individuals shared so much of the same basic characteristics.

Even though masochism and self-flagellation by the already oppressed sounds contradictory, it can be a complex example of simultaneously beating the oppressor to the abuse and also the unfortunate internalizing of the oppressor's view of oneself. Just like many of the other characteristics of Jewish humor listed earlier, the humor of masochism associated with Jews appears to be connected to a Jewish past of pain and suffering. The most obvious examples being the development of gallows humor as a reaction to an all too often confrontation with life and death situations, for which relief in the form of humor was needed. For a while now, viewing Jewish history through this prism has been known as the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history," a phrase coined by the eminent Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron who in 1963, in a now-famous essay, argues for a new understanding of Jewish history:

> All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant "lachrymose conception of Jewish history"—a term which I have been using for more than forty years—because I have felt that, by exclusively overemphasizing Jewish sufferings, it distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution and, at the same time, it served badly a generation which had become impatient with the "nightmare" of endless persecutions. (240)

Baron makes a lot of strong points in the essay, which lays out a path for research that looks at Jewish history outside of victimhood. His positive spin on Jewish history has probably contributed to Jewish identity and its vibrancy in the last fifty years. As a result of Baron's influence, we are often asked today to resist notions of othering and victimization in Jewish history. And if we indeed focus on the relatively recent history of Jewry in the United States, we can surely say that it has been one of unbridled success and influence. Similarly, the Israeli experiment with all its political problems and historical mistakes should still be

considered a success for the Jews. Historically, Jewish life in America and Israel has surpassed Jewish life during the golden age of Spain and life in Germany after emancipation in 1871 and before that other thing. But success, I would argue, does not mean full acceptance or a life free of prejudice and othering. If anything, the last few years and especially the current medical crisis underway has exposed oceanic fractures in the cohesion of American society. It has also shown how even modern liberal societies can revert back to fascistic and authoritarian tendencies and seek out scapegoats to blame. And, somehow, the Jews always find themselves in these situations as targets of conspiratorial talk, hatred, and violence. This, in my opinion, means that the comedian who identifies as Jewish and even the one who does not, but is, may still live under the pressure of othering. As the promise of the American dream beckoned there was hope for a new kind of relationship between groups of different races and religion. But despite that hope, it would seem that even if Jews are far from being othered as they were, there is a sense that once again, Jews find themselves in spaces of liminality. And perhaps this may be a return to a kind of lachrymose view of Jewish history, or in our case, our somewhat lachrymose present, but as far as the Jewish creators of comedy are concerned this is a very familiar place.[63] When Larry David begins *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—a show that is both a celebration of and a denunciation of celebrity culture and success—with a close-up of his tent-pant, he is pointing to his sexuality as something that is a social construction, yet a mirage. His newfound success, he signals to the audience, is based on a faulty premise of virility. As the show will address numerous times, throughout its almost twenty years of existence, this illusory virility is tied to Larry's Jewish identity, just as he, with a serious schmear of

[63]There is also most likely a generational difference between the comedians of today and those of the 1940s to 1980s. This project addresses comedians of different time-periods and generational and different contexts will be addressed.

ribaldry, tells the owner of a Palestinian Chicken joint, who asks him: "you're a Jew, yes?" "Yes, I am a Jew, a big Jew, BIG."[64]

The related contention that this dissertation is making is that Jewish comedy produced by Jews is fascinated if not obsessed, as is the case with some artists, with sex and sexuality. Whether this is true, as with all things Jewish, this has been a matter of a bit of debate. Jeremy Dauber recently identifies this as one of the characteristics of Jewish comedy: "Jewish comedy is vulgar, raunchy, and body-obsessed" (xiv). Peter Berger however, as a member of an earlier generation, strongly disagrees, as we can recall from Chapter 1: "Jewish humor contains almost no scatology and remarkably little sexuality" (88). There is a kinship, I believe, between Freud's argument that Jews laugh at themselves and a comedy that discusses sex and the body. After all, the sex and the body being discussed, narrated, and analyzed belongs to Jewish bodies. Thus, the "lots of complaining" and "the weight of the world on your shoulders" that Larry David points to in his conversation with Gervais, is just as applicable to matters of one's own body and its various sexual functions as it is to the amount of money one has or, in Tevye's case, does not have in the bank. There is something very earthly and corporeal in such complaining and obsessing over one's sexual mores or bodily shortcomings, which pertains to another aspect of Jewish humor. As Robert Alter claims, ironically, the destitute situation, "One of the grimmest stretches in Jewish history," in which Jews lived in the shtetls of Eastern Europe, yielded an immense culture of comedy. The uniqueness of this comedy, Alter writes, is that it "typically drains the charge of the cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities" (26). While this humor exposes the "travesties" of everyday suffering as insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe, the "draining of comic

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[64]This aspect of Jewish American masculinity will be discussed again in Chapter 5.

significance" can also engender a kind of existential sense of the significance of earthly pleasures, reliance on practicality, and perhaps the import of the corporeal. Even though one cannot completely deny the importance of God in Jewish theology, the rabbinical period (1st century-6th century), partly out of necessity (the destruction of the Temple), partly out of self-importance and legacy building, yielded a Judaism that put both texts, and the readers of those texts, i.e. men, in the center. This is an idea that is associated with the Talmudic midrash of the "Oven of Akhnai" (Tractate *Bava Metzia* 59a-b) where the rabbis opt for rabbinical jurisdiction and majority rule over the powerful relationship that their leader, the great Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hurcanus shares with God. The midrash concludes with the rabbis united against Godly miracles and personal connection to God (both of which Rabbi Eliezer was able to muster), because they claim "it is not in heaven." By "it" they are referring to the Torah. The Torah, according to this view, may be an extension of God, but it is their responsibility to give it meaning. In arguing in favor of rabbinical authority, the Rabbis are signaling for a future of Judaism in which text, interpretation, and earthly interpreters take precedence over Judaism's destroyed cultic center and home. This recalls Mel Brooks's *The Producers'* Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel) repeated pleas to Leo Bloom (Gene Wilder) (who perhaps not surprising, in a somewhat Jewish pun is an accountant who has come to check the former's "books") not to judge his sexual turpitude:

Bialystock: You have exactly ten seconds to
change that disgusting look of pity
into one of enormous respect.
Look at my investors now. Voila!(gestures at pictures).
Hundreds of little old
ladies stopping off at Max Bialystock's office
to grab a last thrill on the way

to the cemetery.[65]

This is also evocative of the earthly existentialism and absurdity of Albert Camus' Sisyphus, an earthly hero if there was ever one,

> I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (116)

And Bialystock, the producer of drama and pursuer of earthly pleasures, knows like one of Camus' other absurd men (the Don Juan, artist, and actor) and their commitment to the lived life, that "That's it baby, when you got it, flaunt it."[66]

3.2 The Jewish Bawdy: It is a Matter of Torah

There is a midrash (b. *Berachot* 62a) that has been referenced quite often in discussions of Jewish sexuality.[67] The midrash points to the lengths that disciples are willing to go for the sake of learning (even follow their teachers into restrooms). Rav Kahana, we are told, even surpasses that particular eagerness:

> Rav Kahana lay under the bed of Rav who was carousing and speaking frivolously with his wife of sexual matters; afterward, [Rav] had intercourse with her. Rav Kahana said to Rav: "You appear to me to be like a hungry man who has never had sex before, for you act with frivolity in your lust." He [Rav] said to Kahana: "Are you here? Get Out! It is improper for you to lie

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[65]See *The Producers.*

[66]Ibid

[67]Both Boyarin and Biale discuss it.

> under my bed!" [Kahana] said to him: "This is a matter of Torah and I must study."

Clearly, as is par for the course in the Talmud, there are a few lessons to be learnt from this passage. First, learning from your Rabbi is paramount. Second, in all matters of life there is value in education. Third, and the most obvious yet sneaky lesson, is that very explicit matters of sex are also "Torah." In other words, matters of intercourse qualify essentially as law or religious practice. The meaning of Torah ("תורה" in Hebrew) points to the two meanings of instruction: learning and following an order.

Another aspect of this midrash that we are perhaps not meant to learn from, but we can nevertheless appreciate, is that it is clearly told in the comic key. The last line of this lascivious little anecdote is not only a lesson, but also a punch line. Just like great punchlines, it contrasts the listeners expectation with a surprise that is funny, not simply for its sheer surprise, but because its surprise reveals something that makes complete sense within the framework that the story or the joke set up.[68] Oring describes this is as a key aspect of humor, what he calls, "appropriate incongruity:" "Humor, I have argued, depends upon the perception of an appropriate incongruity; that is, the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous" (1). When one delves more deeply into the Talmud, one is surprised to find many midrashim that read more like comic anecdotes than serious and argumentative legalistic interpretation of Jewish life, as is allegedly their *raison d'etre*.[69] In the specific midrash above, the openness about such behavior is noteworthy, as it is not the kind of

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[68]This is reminiscent of Kant's famous description of the comic as "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."

[69]The plural form of midrash.

behavior or even description of behavior that one might expect from texts that are meant to instruct on religious matters, and not the kind of behavior that one would expect to be associated with learned Rabbis and their disciples. These stories and their characters were based on real individuals (even if the tales certainly did not confine themselves to historical accuracy, as they were written to highlight and teach). Why then are these intellectual leaders portrayed in such a light? One logical conclusion is that the Rabbis themselves, who indeed believed that such legal pontificating and explication was crucial to the survival of Judaism, did not find such literal discussion of sex at all inappropriate. There is nothing truly surprising about this, considering that the Tanakh states in the first chapter of Genesis that procreation is a commandment from God:

> וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים: פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל הָאָרֶץ
>
> And G-d blessed them, saying: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth'.

And if it is so commanded from God, there is nothing wrong with the Rabbi's desire for perfection. And whether conscious or not, the clear comedy at play here was not beyond the pale either, as we can recall from the Babylonian Talmud's evocation of humor as a tool in Jewish learning.[70] With regard to the first, contrary to assumptions about religion and piety in general, Judaism abounds with references to or examples of the centrality of sexuality, relationships between the sexes, and the body as a sexual object.

Various scholars have argued that the openness regarding sexual matters in the work of the Talmudic writers has translated to more openness to such matters in Judaism at

[70]See p. 7 above and Brodsky 15.

large.[71] In fact, if we follow Daniel Boyarin's analysis in his important book *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, we could potentially make the argument that not only do humor and laughter present a marked difference between Judaism and early Christianity, as I suggested earlier, but sex as well. "What divides Christians from rabbinic Jews is the discourse of the body, and especially of sexuality**,** in the two cultural formations**":**

> Rabbinic Judaism—the cultural formation of most of the Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking Jews of Palestine and Babylonia—was substantially differentiated in its representations and discourses of the body and sexuality from Greek-speaking Jewish formations, including much of Christianity. My fundamental notion, which will be explored and defended throughout the book, is that rabbinic Judaism invested significance in the body which in the other formations was invested in the soul. That is, for rabbinic Jews, the human being was defined as a body animated, to be sure, by a soul, while for Hellenistic Jews (such as Philo) and (at least many Greek-speaking) Christians (such as Paul), the essence of a human being is a soul housed in a body. (5)

Jonathan Magonet makes a similar argument to Boyarin's that the thread that runs through the Jewish sexual discourse and its salience and visibility in modernity is rooted in the Talmudic period's openness in matters of sexuality:

> The Rabbis of the Talmudic period were open to consulting with their contemporary "experts" on any subject when formulating their debates and decisions. The greatest available knowledge was sought so that their decisions could be true reflections of the human reality created by God. Nor were they squeamish in asking questions about sexual practices or acknowledging the complexity of our sexual nature. (xxi)

However, the fact that we can find a certain attitude towards sexuality and the body in the thinking of the Talmudic rabbis does not necessarily mean that such thinking is translatable to the modern age, nor does it mean it has migrated to larger culture. Therefore Magonet

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[71]See Boyarin's "Different Eves" chapter.

goes further than pointing to rabbinical doctrine and cites numerous leading and pioneering writers on sex and sexuality, who come from Jewish backgrounds including: Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger, Magnus Hirschfeld and Wilhelm Reich. We could add other popular taste makers Erica Jong and Ruth Westheimer. How their Jewish identity, or in the curious and tragic case of Weininger, the rejection of Jewish identity, influenced their writing on sexuality and sex is likely a matter for a larger study than this one. What we do know from their writing is that Judaism and their Jewish identity played a role in their writings on these matters.[72]

For some Jewish comedians like Jackie Mason, the centrality of this religious and group affiliation is central, for others like Jerry Seinfeld it exists more in the background. I think that we are on safe grounds making the argument that Jewish identity has played a part in the work of the comedians and writers under discussion in this dissertation. Partly of course, the development of any kind of cultural or ethnic humor or comedy corresponds to societal and cultural changes vis-à-vis the evolution of the normative standards and intra-group standards. Thus, the Jewish comedy of the nineteenth century, in the work of Sholem Aleichem or *Mendele Mocher Sforim* (Mendele the bookseller, Sholem Yankev Abramovich) evolved from its humble shtetl, Yiddishkeit, and Lower East Side origins in the United States, and what was socially and culturally accepted then into what is socially and culturally accepted in the twenty-first century. But it is incontrovertible that throughout this evolution, comedians of Jewish backgrounds have been at the forefront of engaging with sexual discourse and by extension challenging and possibly changing norms of obscenity. Vaudeville acts that crossed over into American mainstream like the Marx Brothers may be more well-known for their creative wordplay, but often that wordplay

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[72]See Jerry Diller on the impact of Judaism on Freud's work. See Ruth Westheimer.

veered into sexual innuendo. Some of the most popular Jewish comediennes of vaudeville like Sophie Tucker and Belle Barth reveled in challenging sexual taboos with willing and, at times, unwilling audiences. And in the 1950s Lenny Bruce comes along and shows unmitigated disregard for societal norms of obscenity, making it very much the selling point of his shtick.

Not just comedians performing in clubs or sometimes on TV were at the vanguard of the Jewish bawdy. In literature, authors like Philip Roth shocked society and amused many Jews by the sheer over-the-top obscenity of *Portnoy's Complaint*. While its alleged obscenity got the book banned initially, countless Jewish readers found the book inspiring and revolutionary in how it discussed the sexuality of Jewish characters in an unvarnished and straightforward fashion. In television production as well, Jews that found immense popularity showed willingness to address issues of a sexual nature. For example, Norman Lear in his work on the groundbreaking *All in the Family*, dedicated an episode, "Edith's Problem" to menopause. Later on, in *Maude*, another one of Lear's successful prime-time comedies, the issue of abortion is addressed in the two-part episode, "*Maude's Dilemma*." And as discussed earlier, Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld explored in their show domains previously considered too risqué, if not taboo, by, at times, using clever writing to sneak the sex and the obscene by the censors and maybe even the audiences. In many other instances on *Seinfeld*, and to an even larger extent on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, sex is front and center (sometimes in many ways that perhaps would be considered insensitive and misogynistic). Even in the last few years television's most sexually progressive and sex-filled shows are produced by Jews, and in many cases, even the characters themselves are Jewish. For example, Amazon's *Transparency*, Netflix's *Big Mouth*, Hulu's very recent *Lil Dicky* (yes, as the show's title suggests, its protagonist is a Jewish rapper who names himself after his malformed and small penis and it is an ongoing theme in the show, as are other sexual

mishigas). And, of course, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, whose lead character Miriam "Midge" Maisel is meant to be a sort of amalgam of the bawdy Jewish comediennes previously mentioned of vaudeville and Catskills fame.

One could argue of course that issues of sex and sexuality are also at the vanguard of social change. And, Jews with the conscientiousness of being a minory group have also been at the vanguard of that in the United States. Lenny Bruce's work constantly addressed both. He consistently suggested that American obscenity laws and its puritan mindset coincided with its treatment of minorities, especially black people. This argument unfortunately does not explain situations in his work and the work of others where sex and sexuality are presented without a clear aim of pushing societal boundaries. But just as the comic is such a crucial domain of human existence, so is sex. And both are complex, unpredictable, and to use Bergson's description of the former, labyrinthine.

Aside from the general danger of essentializing a certain trait or attitude with a certain group, especially if it is a minority group,[73] there is a more specific and insidious danger in discussing the relationship of Jews to sex and obscenity. The association of Jews and Judaism with terms like "obscene", "lewd", "dirty" have a long and established history in the anti-Semitic discourse of the "dirty Jew." In *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture,* Daniel Boyarin outlines how Christianity, beginning with Paul and possibly most egregiously radicalized with St. Augustine railed against the corporeality of the Jews and their religion. In *Tractatus Adversus Judaeous*, St. John Chrysostom charges the following: "Behold Israel according to the flesh (1 Cor. 10:18) This we know to be the Carnal Israel; but

[73]Leora Auslander makes an important point in her essay, which is cited later that essentialization of a minority group with a certain trait is verboten only when that trait is bad. For example connecting Jazz to a shared African American past is allowed in academia, but not something that might be deemed as pejorative.

the Jews do not grasp this meaning and as a result they prove themselves indisputingly carnal" (Boyarin vii 9).[74] Over time other anti-Semitic tropes emerged that stigmatized the Jew as dirty. For example, the accusation that Jews infiltrated churches and "desecrated the host," i.e. the figurative and literal body of Christ. This sort of discourse reached a much deeper and sinister defamation with the rise of racial theory in the nineteenth century and later with the rise of Nazism that followed. Here is for example, an excerpt from a speech given by Adolf Hitler in 1920 at a NSDA meeting, entitled, "On the Jewish Problem."

> For us, this is not a problem you can turn a blind eye to—one to be solved by small concessions. For us, it is a problem of whether our nation can ever recover its health, whether the Jewish spirit can ever really be eradicated. Don't be misled into thinking you can fight a disease without destroying the bacillus. Don't think you can find a racial tuberculosis without taking care to rid the nation of the carrier of the racial tuberculosis. This Jewish contamination will not subside, this poisoning of the nation will not end, until the carrier himself, the Jew, has been banished from our midst.

The Jew, according to this, is a contaminant, a disease that needs to be eradicated. And Hitler would eventually try. Whether by unconscious osmosis or by wholesale agreement, certain Jews over the years have perpetuated this anti-Semitic trope themselves. Otto Weininger, considered one of the most virulent anti-Semites in modern history was born to a Jewish family, but converted to Christianity following the publication of his influential and controversial book *Sex and Character* (1903) in which he dedicates a whole chapter to his soon to be former religion. According to Weininger, the Jew is lustful and obsessed with sex:

> The Jew is always more lecherous, more lustful, than the Aryan man, although, strangely enough and possibly in connection with the fact that he is not really of an anti-moral disposition, he is less sexually potent and certainly less capable of any great lust than the latter. (281)

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[74]See Boyarin for a much more detailed analysis of this issue.

In his important 2015 book, *Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture*, Josh Lambert addresses this notion, while emphasizing how Jews in America have been stigmatized with "obscenity":

> a venerable, deplorable, and ignorant antisemitic tradition that has understood Jewish speech and writing as obscene. Indeed, the concept of obscenity evolved in American legal discourse in the late nineteenth century as a response to fears about the speech and behavior of Jews and others suspected of being insufficiently American and Christian.

As a result of this established anti-Semitic trope of the obscene and lustful Jew, Lambert's strongest impulse is to fight anything resembling essentialism with regard to Jewish identity and sex, ultimately arguing that,

> As inconvenient as it may be for the cultural historian, there simply is no unifying dynamic that can explain the variety of Jews' engagements with obscenity: American Jews who have engaged with obscenity from the late 19th century to the present are simply too diverse, too subject to historical contingency, too unpredictable to fit *any* single generalization. (13)

Lambert, does immediately add that "It must be acknowledged, moreover, that American Jews often engaged with obscenity—produced it, defended it, wrote about it—for precisely the same reasons that many of their protestant, Catholic, and nonreligious peers did so: to make money, to seek sexual gratification, to express anti-social rage" (14).[75] I share Lambert's instincts on this matter, and if there was one memory muscle that Jews never let atrophy, even in good times, it is being hyper aware of being libeled and behaving in any way that might be seen as unseemly. I too am mindful of the dangers of these associations

[75]Lambert also importantly addresses a 2004 essay by Nathan Abrams, which points to the many Jews who have been involved in the porn industry in the United States, an essay that received much criticism at the time for positing that problematic association.

and their perpetuation, and in general the dangers of essentialism. Yet, perhaps, there is also an element of blaming the victim for both, an alleged behavior or attitude that is really an outgrowth of an image of the Jew fabricated by anti-Semites, and for living in a culture that frowns upon sex and has tended to catalogue much art and culture as "obscene." If the openness about such matters in Jewish culture is vilified, because the culture in which Jews find themselves finds such discourse beyond the pale, that is no fault of the Jew. Furthermore, it is outside the scope of this dissertation to look into whether Protestants or Catholics have engaged on a similar level as Jews with issues of sex and sexuality. Anecdotally, in the case of comedy at least, that does not seem to be the case, but that admittedly could be the result of the disproportionate representation of Jews in comedy. A strong argument can be made, however, as I have already begun to lay out, that certain ideas and notions that are rooted in Judaism and Jewish culture could have led Jewish thinkers, writers, and especially comedians to pursue these matters in a more intense and sustained fashion. It might also be said without the risk of essentialization, that if Judaism colored the way these comedians and comediennes have discussed sex in their comedy, they do seem to have a long tradition and history to draw from. Additionally, although, Lambert does address comedy and humor to a certain extent, he primarily discusses the uses and abuses of obscenity in the wider cultural realm and largely through the prism of the American legal system. Comedy occupies a different kind of space in the realm of the culturally obscene. First, comedy, as we saw in Chapter 2, has a long and established connection to sex, so that when Jews engage with comedy on that level it does not necessarily mean that they are conjuring some kind of innate lasciviousness. Second, one of the unique aspects of comedy is that it does not operate in straight and instrumental fashion. That is a facet of what Freud was referring to in his concept of the "tendentious joke": a joke whose aim is neither innocuous nor direct. Thus, I argue that when Jews speak

of sex, they are also consciously and unconsciously speaking to other things, such as cultural and social anxieties. For example, as Boyarin and Biale have suggested, the interest of the Talmudic rabbis in sex and sexuality is not a result of some sort of unique prurience, or their desire to make Jews into libidinal *Übermenschen*, but more likely a reflection of a minority population that has been anxious throughout its existence about inter-marriage and population attrition. Moreover, because comedy may befuddle with its potential multivalency and its ineffability, it is difficult to isolate it as one specific thing. But rather it is a ubiquitous aspect of our lives. The same could be said about Jewish comedy. Its topics and characteristics are varied as are its roots. But where it does address sex and the body it may be possibly speaking to or in dialogue with certain aspects that may be unique to Jewish identity. And most definitely, in the way that it addresses these issues, it does so in a manner that is tied to Jewish identity. Some of these themes or aspects are rooted in a shared religious and cultural history. Even if Jewish identity is tenuous and contingent upon historical and cultural circumstance, it still does not negate the notion of a similar and shared knowledge that in turn can lead to a sense of Jewish sensibility. Even relatively secular Jews, a group in which I include myself and many of my Israeli compatriots, who do not regularly practice the rigors of Jewish religious practice or follow any edicts of *Halacha* (Jewish law), often engage in some forms of religious ceremony that can turn over time into cultural practice such as the meals of the high-holidays and the texts that are read in those holidays, for example the Passover Haggadah.

On top of that, we must not always be afraid of essentialism if fearing it obfuscates certain ideas and theoretical possibilities. I believe that there is a certain Jewish sensibility that informs the work of certain thinkers or comedians. This kind of thinking often receives push back by cries of essentialism. But I think Leora Auslander makes very strong points in her essay about the boundaries of Jewish cultural practice where she writes,

> I argue…that Jews are Jews not only when they say they are or when they feel they are. To say that Jews can behave like Jews, just as women can behave as women, or blacks as blacks, at moments when they are thinking about something else entirely is not to be antisemitic or to think like Hitler (as I was once told I did in a conference). My argument emerges out of the position that Judaism is a set of cultural practices and, like all other cultural practices, it is transmitted, reproduced and transformed even when the people doing so are not consciously acting as Jews. (49)

Thus, comedy like any other creative or cultural practice is embedded within certain cultural attitudes and behaviors. And it can be commentary on or a reflection of certain shared anxieties and beliefs about an individual or a minority culture's place within the larger social landscape (and it can also be a challenge to or a rebuke of one's own culture). In the case of Jews, that place has—in addition to times of solidarity with other cultures and peoples—not always been that of comfort and belonging. For if for millennia, Jews have been accused of obscenity, dirtiness, and disease, would not these issues infiltrate Jewish consciousness? This attitude towards Jews historically goes a long way to explain the narcissistic anxiety that they might experience regarding their bodies and their function in the sexual realm. So it is a danger that one must acknowledge and face moving forward with these materials. Yes, one risks the perpetuating of certain discourses that have been harmful to Jews, but it is the same discourses that, I would say, have been translated into the humor that we find in the work of many Jewish comedians. Just as Jewish humor, some have argued, has shown a proclivity for gallows humor, because of tragic events throughout Jewish history, similarly, the Jewish bawdy discourse can be a response to the historical delegitimization and stigmatization of Jewish bodies.

3.3 Jewish Anxieties and Jewish Ambivalences

When we discuss comedy and particularly bawdy comedy, we should distinguish between what it is (its characteristics and themes) and what it does or aims to do. Following

the basic principles of psychoanalysis, the surface presentation or effect of a thing might be only a veil, knowing or unknowing surface projection of a thing that does not want to be uttered or is not able to be uttered. Comedy and humor are uniquely potent in their ability to speak things in an indirect manner, as incongruity, contrast, and evasion are some of its strongest aspects. At times, comedy is able to say or discuss certain topics because underlying these things is a source of anxiety or discomfort that cannot be addressed directly. Jewish comedy is created out of the tension between things that are natural, familiar, and felicitous to Jewish identity and background, and those things that exist as possible threats to Jewish identity, thus provoking anxiety, perhaps obsessiveness, at times in the form of repetition. Not unlike a patient who struggles with PTSD, often returning to the same difficulties and anxieties that torment them.[76] On both fronts, comedy serves as a coping mechanism, the first is a reliance on the familiar, in the second, the use of comedy becomes a relief valve. The bawdy in Jewish humor can thus, on the one hand, be comedy returning to its familiar bawdy roots, and on the other be a response to certain anxieties including about Jewish bodies, about Jews as object of sexual ridicule and shame, and general anxieties about Jewish identity. Are Jews, one asks, in the twenty-first century still anxious about their identity and their place in culture? It is probably the case that any minoritarian culture, especially one with a long history of persecution, still maintains some self-consciousness regarding the stability and solidity of its identity. In the case of the Jews, such anxiety, might as well be written into their genetic history.

We consistently find the central figure in Jewish comedy—the comic hero of various narratives and works of art—to be a site of pure ambivalence, indeterminacy, and

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[76] See Cathy Caruth.

multiplicity. We often find characters that complicate and challenge the real and the fictional, the creator and his or her text, and sometimes even the difference between fictional characters and their own fictionality. The paradigmatic character of this kind is of course Woody Allen's Leonard Zelig. Zelig, the namesake of Allen's mockumentary style feature film *Zelig* (1983), who, as the narrator informs us, was described by F. Scott Fitzgerald as "a curious little man," is an everyman and a no man who tends to "create diverse impressions everywhere." He is able to assume the identity of individuals of different races and even fictional characters (see fig. 1):

Figure 1 Woody Allen as Zelig as Pagliacci

Of course, true to form, Zelig, like many other characters created and performed by Allen, looks very much like Allen himself, and sounds a lot like Allen himself, or the version of Allen that we commonly see on screen. Allen filled many of his early and most iconic movies with characters that, even though presented under different personas (like Jewish comedian Alvy Singer), nevertheless were very clearly projections of Allen himself with all his neuroses and very Jewish insecurities. Allen's character, or shtick, was already quite familiar to audiences who had come to know him from his popular standup performances.

Later in his career Allen claimed that the neurasthenic schlemiel that he embodied and portrayed, was, despite popular assumptions, not representative of the real Allen, who allegedly preferred the excitement of a poker table or a basketball game to reading the latest theory from some stuffy, possibly Canadian, intellectual. While we find this sort of identity complexity to a much lesser extent in Mel Brooks's work, in the movies in which Brooks cast himself, the character which he portrayed is regularly a more heightened version of Brooks, the Borscht Belt kid tummler.[77]

In *Seinfeld* and even more so in *Curb Your Enthusiasm,* Larry David built whole artifices on the disjunction between the real and the fictional. *Seinfeld* is a sitcom about the stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld portrayed by the real comedian Jerry Seinfeld in a manner—likely as constrained by Seinfeld's somewhat amateurish acting chops—that enhances a sense of artifice, but surrounded by talented actors who portray fictional versions of real-life Seinfeld acquaintances. Hardly anything has been said about how the show that David created after *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, whose premise felt remarkably fresh and unique at time, followed a very similar representational ambivalence: the real Larry David portraying a fictional Larry David, surrounded by fictional characters, with some well-known celebrities occasionally portraying fictional versions of themselves.[78]

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[77]Brooks famously began his "career" as a tummler in the Catskills Mountains. A tummler was often equal parts havoc creator and master of ceremonies at these resorts, a job for which Brooks, in retrospect, seems perfect.

[78]It would of course be delinquent not to mention another Jewish comedian Garry Shandling at this point, especially because of the strong relationship that he and Jerry Seinfeld shared, and the influence that Shandling's work had on American comedy at first with the underappreciated and groundbreaking *Gary Shandling Show*, and the just as groundbreaking and influential *The Larry Sanders* Show. The show, in which Shandling portrayed Larry Sanders, a neurotic under-achieving late-night host, completely penetrated through the veneer of late-night, taking us behind the clumsy and rough processes that create these shows, and switching back and forth between backstage and the live action that would be part of such a show. The guests were real-life actors and celebrities, often performing farcical versions of their own selves, who mingled and participated in backstage

All this playfulness with identity, in addition to its comedic roots in the work of the classical dramatists and later in the work of Moliere and Shakespeare, can be traced back in modernity to another deeply influential Jewish man of letters, Sholem Aleichem. Aleichem is truly the starting point for any discussion of Jewish humor in the modern era.[79] The writer known today as Sholem Aleichem, was born Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich in 1859 in Pereiaslav, in what is modern-day Ukraine. Aleichem was not only the pen-name Rabinovich chose for his short Yiddish shtetl vignettes, but is also a central character, an interlocutor for stories told from the perspective of characters like Tevye the Milkman (טבֿיה דער מילכיקער) who write letters to Aleichem, the famed writer for advice and perspective. How similar was the fictional Sholem Aleichem to the fictional Sholem Aleichem, the writer and publisher of popular Yiddish newspapers, is somewhat speculative. But we assume that he was nothing like Solomon Rabinovich, and even that is merely an assumption.

Quite similarly, almost every single artist/creator in this dissertation has built artifices in which a fascinating liminal boundary exists between the character portrayed and the creator. Philip Roth's successful and critically acclaimed career has been thoroughly colored by the notion that different characters are simply projections of himself. For decades, Roth pushed back against claims that the protagonists of many of his fictions, like Alex Portnoy, and especially, Nathan Zuckerman, were simply disguised, possibly embellished, versions of himself. Even though, publicly Roth refuted such notions, as he progressed through Zuckerman's life in various novels, Roth actually heightened rather than diminished the confusion. This pattern in the work of Jewish comedians finds its way

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and green room shenanigans of a fictional show that supposedly existed in a universe that included real shows like Jay Leno and Letterman.

[79]In our case, Aleichem is not highlighted because his work usually stayed within the familial and did not predominantly venture into the bawdy.

even to some of today's young Jewish comedians, for example in *Broad City*, which I will be discussing in chapter 5, Jewish comedians Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, portray fictional versions of themselves and their adventures in New York City.

This fictional notion of identity is also part of the work of the artists discussed in the Israeli section of this dissertation. Uri Zohar, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 6, used his very public life and his acting chops to create and embellish—or at times completely challenge and diffuse—aspects of his own identity as the prototypical "new Jew" of Israel. The work of Hanoch Levin, which I discuss in the Chapter 7, does not bring exactly that same playfulness, in part because, as will be discussed in that chapter, it manifests a kind of transition that took place over time in Israeli culture and still does with regard to older notions of Jewish identity. But Levin's drama quite consciously uses the playwright's background and life to challenge audiences and to destabilize notions of a singular and stable Israeli identity.

What we see in the work of these various Jewish comedians, whose work also quite often discusses sex and sexuality, is a basic point of view which assumes that identity is founded on incongruity and ambivalence. Subsequently, a lot of Jewish comedy has been created by ambivalence, which I would argue is related to the incongruity and ambivalence that exists at the heart of Jewish identity. It is commonplace to think of the Jew as an "historical other" disenfranchised and persecuted as such. But this notion has already been complicated and nuanced in the writings of sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, who describes the Jew, not as the commonly viewed "outsider" but as a "stranger":

> The stranger is thus being discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a

> particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself. (402)

The "stranger" implies a more precarious instability than that of a pure "other." Zygmunt Bauman builds on Simmel and further complicates the notion that the Jew is an "other;" he writes:

> The Jew is ambivalence incarnate. And ambivalence is ambivalence mostly because it cannot be contemplated without ambivalent feeling: it is simultaneously attractive and repelling, it reminds one of what one would like to be but is afraid of being, it dangles before the eyes what one would rather not see - that the settled accounts are still open and the lost possibilities are still alive. It is an insight into the truth of being which all ordering bustle is trying hard, though in vain, to hide. (146-147)

Bauman discusses in more detail how Jews have become "ambivalence incarnate" in modernity as Jewish existence and identity evolved throughout history. But a glimpse into Jewish religious tradition also presents a strong case. Jews may have good enough reasons in modernity to maintain a sense of ambivalence and fragility regarding their emancipated but not truly equal place in society. Nevertheless, this aspect of Jewish identity may have even deeper and more essential roots. First of all, the Tanakh essentially starts with the story of a couple of displaced migrants Adam and Eve. And throughout the text, especially in the first two books, *Genesis* and *Exodus* we encounter various stories of ambivalent and mixed identity. In chapter 27 of *Genesis,* Rebecca conspires with Jacob to fool his father, Isaac into believing that Jacob is his hairy-limbed older brother and effectively steal a blessing that is given to the first born. In another cornerstone story of Jewish mythology, Joseph returns the "favor" to the brothers who sold him to slavery and by extension to his trickster father, when he toys with his brothers and disguises his identity and newfound wealth and power when they come to Egypt seeking refuge from famine. And there is, of

course, the character who is the most emblematic of Jewish identity and its ambivalent complexity, and that is Moses. In *Exodus*, Moses, born a Hebrew slave is destined to be murdered after birth like other males, is saved by his mother, and sent on the Nile in a wicker basket. Moses is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter who raises him as her own, while his mother, Yocheved, serves as his nursing maid. He grows up in the lap of luxurious Egyptian royalty, but the text clearly intimates that he is aware of his real identity:

> Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that, and seeing no one about, he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? Moses was frightened, and thought: the matter is known! (*Exodus* 2:11-14)

Biblical and literary scholar Ilana Pardes draws an analogy between the duality of Moses's biography and identity, and the "non-autochthonous biography of Ancient Israel." For Pardes, the starting point of Israelite and eventually Jewish identity is a doubled and ambivalent one in that the people of Israel were first conceived in Canaan with God's covenant with Abraham. However, they truly and only become a people and a nation in the process of their escape, their migration, from Egypt to Canaan under Moses's leadership.

Another important aspect of the ambivalence of Jewish identity is woven into the same *Exodus* narrative. When God first appears to Moses in the guise of a burning bush and informs him of the destiny that He has chosen for him, Moses at first responds "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" And later adds, "what if they do not believe me and not listen to me but say: "The Lord did not appear to you" (*Exodus* 4:1). Moses is really not quite the leader one would anticipate for such a task, "But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or

now that you have spoken to your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (*Exodus* 4:10). Moses is thus the embodiment and possibly source of a certain aspect of Jewish identity that will remain a staple throughout history. On the one hand God's chosen people, since God chooses them to become his so-called children. On the other hand, despite their status as the chosen people of God, they are also a people who struggle with insecurity and self-confidence. Even though God chooses them, they lack faith in God and themselves. Moreover, the same God who chose them, does not spare them difficulty and pain. Thus, they will become torn between a sense of entitlement and an ongoing sense of failure and displacement. The visceral gap between the two will be cemented as part of Jewish identity and Jewish history. For was there ever another group of people who begin an annual holiday meal (the Passover Seder):

"בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל עָם וְרוֹמְמָנוּ מִכָּל לָשׁוֹן וְקִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו".

("Blessed are You, G-d, our G-d, King of the universe, who has chosen us from among all people and raised us above all tongues, and made us holy through His commandments.")[80], yet, without fail, simultaneously suffer great pains and tragedies throughout history, in a manner that would seem to belie said "chosenness" and specialness. The twentieth century being thoroughly expressive of this complex antinomic duality: six million killed by the Nazis, the vexed problems of Israeli nationhood; and meanwhile, still without fail, Jews recite and celebrate texts that tell them that despite oppression, they are God's chosen people.

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[80]See http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/shabat/pesach/hagada-2.htm for Hebrew version and https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/661624/jewish/English-Haggadah-Text.htm. This is the recitation for weekdays, not when the holiday falls on a shabbat (Saturday).

These peaks and valleys of selfhood are a cornerstone of modern Jewish comedy. And thus historically, as Jews saw their own self-worth ebb and flow in response to their biblical texts, they often found themselves on the outside of inclusion, if not always complete outsiders. Even though historically some periods have been better than others, Jews still quite often remain occupiers of a liminal identity. The complex incongruity of Jewish identity is not only the result of its own self-worth but also a reflection of the self-worth of the Jew in relation to those around him. There is a clear link between one's concept of self and the internalization of the gaze of the other. It is not surprising that a philosopher deeply steeped in Jewish tradition like Martin Buber would develop a whole ethics based on man's relation to the other.[81]

As described earlier, different ideas have been suggested as to the proclivity and manifest inclination of Jewish culture towards humor and comedy, from their embeddedness within textuality and literacy to their ingrained, and possibly ancestral irreverence towards authority. But I contend that Jews have been so congruent for an age that celebrates the incongruity of comedy, because they find in this state of incongruity a natural ally: an ancient, yet modern friend. How is sex and the body related to this incongruity and ambivalence? I would argue that a lot of the bawdy discourse that we find so common in Jewish comedy is related to incongruity and ambivalence and the possible anxiety that is conjured in a world that better understands and seeks straightforwardness and wholeness, no matter how much it may lack it, indeed, perhaps all the more it may lack it. A primary reason for this is that for the Jew an important site upon which the discourse of incongruity and ambivalence takes place is the body and sexuality. As Gilman clearly

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[81]See Buber's *I and Thou*.

expresses it, one of the basic frontiers upon which Jewish difference is established is on the Jewish body:

> The construction of the Jewish body in the West is absolutely linked to the underlying ideology of anti-Semitism, to the view that the Jew is inherently different. But different from what? We must fill in the blank. The difference of the Jewish body is absolute within the Western tradition; its counterimage (from the comments of Paul, Eusibius, and Origen on the "meaning" of circumcision) is the "Christian" body that eventually becomes secularized into the "German" or "English" body with the rise of the modern body politic. Thus it is of little surprise that the image of the Jewish body shifts from the rhetoric of religious anti-Judaism to the rhetoric of the pseudoscience of anti-Semitism. (223)

The caricatures of Jews in modernity is widely known. Those images of the Jew and his big, hooked nose have been widely circulated at least since the eighteenth century. And of course, much earlier than that the Jew was singled out in Christian representations by cloven hoofs or protruding horns, so as to associate the Jew with a Christian understanding of the devil. The bodily differences of the Jews subsequently become modern fables reinforced by authors and playwrights. The most famous being Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice,* whose famous soliloquy speaks to the supposed ignorance of the actual physical similarity of the Jew:

> Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

Therefore, the body and its sexual exploits, which is obviously an important aspect of ones sense of self becomes a site upon which a lot of comedy, is "cathected." Freud and the critics that followed him in discussing Jewish identity, have mostly ascribed to the lachrymose

historical model and have thus found the Jewish body torn, displaced, or even incinerated. But even in a post-lachrymosity historical model there is something that still stands out about this abstraction of the Jewish body. Perhaps, at the risk of reiterating St. Augustine, as long as Jews differentiate themselves physically, they will stand outside of the universal order of mankind. But this incongruity can be a deep reservoir for comedy, whether that comedy is simply the presentation of incongruity or the performance of indirect anxiety. More importantly, maybe the fault lies with those who wish to extinguish difference. Standing outside of the homogenizing and perpetuated standardization of human existence does not have to be illegitimate. One's carnality can be, not only a site for the comic, but also, perhaps, a site for hopefulness, as this Jewish bawdy joke suggests:

> Q: How do you know that the Jews are an optimistic people?
> A: They cut half it of it off before they know how long it's going to be.

CHAPTER 4

THE JEW'S BODY OR THE JEW'S BAUDY: PHILIP ROTH, AMBIVALENCE, IDENTITY, AND COMEDY

"When he is sick, every man wants his mother, if she's not around, other women must do. Zuckerman was making do with four other women."

- Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*

"In fact, one reason the novels to be read during the first semester are all concerned, to a greater or lesser degree of obsessiveness, with erotic desire is that I thought that readings organized around a subject with which you all have some sort of familiarity might help you even better to locate these books in the world of experience, and further to discourage the temptation to consign them to that manageable netherworld of narrative devices, metaphorical motifs, and mythical archetypes. Above all, I hope that by reading these books you will come to learn something of value about life in one of its most puzzling and maddening aspects. I hope to learn something myself."

- Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire*

4.1 Prologue: Philip Roth's Sexy Prototypes

When Philip Roth passed away in 2018 at the age of eighty-five, the critically-acclaimed and often controversial author was eulogized across the globe. One of the more surprising and touching tributes to the author came from Salman Rushdie, who, in his commemoration of Roth in the Jewish weekly, *The Forward*, notes to only a passing acquaintance with Roth in real life, but confesses to a deep and lifelong admiration for the author.[82] Rushdie poignantly touches on numerous aspects of Roth's work and particularly the impact it has had on his own writing. The one subject to which Rushdie returns to again

[82] *The Forward* was once a daily newspaper. Recently it has completely shut down print and transferred its entire activity online.

and again is sex. Rushdie, you might say, is walking through an open door, since, if there is one topic that is most synonymous with Roth's work, it is sex. Still, one would think that a respectable Jewish newspaper might steer away from the topic.

Rushdie's take is worth exploring here. He points to *Portnoy's Complaint*, the 1969 novel that earned Roth both his deserved literary reputation and notoriety, a novel amazingly brazen and unapologetic in matters of sexuality and sex, a novel that, fifty years later, still at times feels inappropriate and coarse. Rushdie has an interesting qualifier for the novel's explicit descriptions of masturbation and other sexual acts:

> Humor is what makes the book work. Without humor, Alex Portnoy and the novel itself would be unbearable. But there's humor in every line, and so instead of finding him, and it, unbearable, we love him. After half a century, his power is undimmed.

The estimable Rushdie invites us to think about the entanglements between humor or comedy and sex (unfortunately he does not offer his own theory of the case) and how it manifests itself in Roth's fiction. The unavoidable but welcome conundrum that Rushdie presents us with is whether such entanglements are prescriptive. Obviously, sex in literature is not always entangled with comedy, but is this always the case in Roth's fiction? Is sex in Roth's fiction, as Rushdie suggests, only bearable when it is "domesticated" or tamed by comedy? This is a somewhat strange claim, as one does not often think of comedy as a palliative.[83] But is it in this case? The sex infused complexity that is Philip Roth's comic

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[83]So that there is no confusion. The relief of Freud's famous "Relief Theory" does not point to an actual relief as in a palliative, but rather a relief that happens on the level of the economy of the psyche which is always in a battle between urges and defense mechanisms. Comedy in fact offers a "relief" in that it lets the energy subsumed by defense mechanism be saved when he brings ideas usually pushed into the unconscious into consicousness.

oeuvre can help resolve this question and others that were posed in the general introduction.

4.2 Appropriate and Inappropriate Decisions

Jewish American humor covers a broad range of individuals, from Borscht Belt "Shtickers" to late night comedians. Since the second great wave of immigration which brought a large Jewish population from Eastern Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth century, the impact and salience of Jews in American comedy and entertainment has been a remarkable and a deeply important aspect of their emergence as assimilated Americans.[84] As noted in the introduction, a study conducted in the 1970s found that approximately eighty percent of well-known American comedians were of Jewish descent. To my knowledge, there is no similar study that tracks the representation of American Jews in comedy today or at earlier periods in American history.[85] However, the presence of individuals of Jewish background in various arenas that are related to comedy or are comedy-adjacent is still very strong today. In addition, even though the United States seems to be going through a period of rising xenophobia and anti-Semitism, Jewish identity has never been more visible in popular culture and comedy than it is today, with the popularity of shows like *The Goldbergs, The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Schitt's Creek*, *Broad City*, and the return in the last couple of years of Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.[86] This represents

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[84]See Steven Roos, Renov and Brook ix.

[85]The assumption being of course that Jews became more a staple of American comedy as Jews became increasingly assimilated into American culture.

[86]On Yom Kippur, October 9, 2019 The New York Holocaust Museum was defaced with anti-Semitic stickers and messages and more recently the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting. The ADL has tracked this rise. https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/antisemitic-incidents-hit-all-time-high-in-2019.

the strengthening of an ongoing trend that Henry Bial argues began in the 1990s.[87] Where then does one start when there are so many influential and critically acclaimed Jewish artists whose work falls within what we generally refer to as comedy or humor? For many of the creators and writers of these shows, whether knowingly or not, Philip Roth has been a forefather. I would even argue that Roth has contributed to the very understanding of American Jewish identity, both by Jews and non-Jews, for good and possibly for bad. Each artist is unique; the possible relationship between their work and the work of others is to some degree always a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, another reason I begin this dissertation with the work of Philip Roth is not because of his original theme and scope, but rather because in addition to being a Jewish artistic force of influence that needs to be reckoned with, there is something emblematic in Roth's work of a certain Jewish comic disposition and comic representational modality, of which we will find traces throughout this dissertation.

4.3 Philip Roth: The Terrible Yid

Philip Roth's eminence looms large in both American literature and American comedy. Arguably, there can be no understanding of American comedy and humor without addressing his work. Very few Jewish Americans have had the level of success in their fields that Roth has had (very few Americans of any stripe or denomination for that matter). While Roth did not receive the coveted Nobel Prize before his death in 2018, a literary career that explored various themes, ideas, and genres, earned him an impressive range of

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The Goldberg's-- Despite its name it took until its 57th episode for The Goldberg's to acknowledge the fact that the family is Jewish. https://jewlicious.com/2015/12/the-goldbergs-finally-celebrate-hanukkah/

[87]See Bial 3.

literary awards. Born in 1933 in Newark, New Jersey to second generation Eastern European Jews, Roth began to develop an interest in literature and writing as an undergraduate at Bucknell University. His first and only short story collection *Goodbye, Columbus* was published in 1960 and for it the young Roth received the National Book Award. Thirty-five years later, in 1995, he was again the recipient of the National Book Award for *Sabbath's Theater*. And two years later, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *American Pastoral.*[88] In 2005, Roth's work received the rare honor of being collected in a Library of America edition. While it is not remotely controversial to note that Roth's work has focused on Jewish themes and characters, during his long career, his work transcended his humble Newark and Jewish origins, as he tackled other issues such as race in works like *The Human Stain*. British author Howard Jacobson told the BBC after Roth's death in 2018 that Roth was a writer who belongs to the grand tradition of American literature:

> I don't half-envy him having America, it's such a terrific thing for a writer of stature to be in the right place at the right time. It's a big subject. Whenever he wrote about himself, he also wrote about America. Never a sense in which you could feel this was just this story, of this particular man, with his passions and so on who happened to be here. Every novel about his character, was also a novel about America. I don't think you could make a distinction, the Jewishness, the Americanness, the maleness, they all cohered in his books, which is what made every one of them, even the smallest of them, even the ones that don't work well— everyone is a little masterpiece.[89]

Roth's long and exemplary career presents another dilemma: which titles does one focus on when dealing with such a prolific writer who wrote many novels that fall under the

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[88]Roth received many other prestigious literary awards during an exceedingly long and decorated career.

[89]Howard Jacobson, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCinws3ReRw 10.6.2019

banner of comedy? Taking into consideration limitations of space and scope on our limited journey, I will focus on, or at least discuss at some length, a few works, but inevitably will not address every single work that may be relevant to this inquiry.[90] The novels that have been important to this inquiry are the novels that speak to the central themes that have preoccupied Roth throughout his career, and as I will be maintaining throughout this chapter, these themes also correspond to some of the central arguments that this dissertation makes. The novels portraying Roth's most famous alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman, have also been left out of this chapter. The Zuckerman novels do generally fall under the umbrella of Roth's comic work, but they are quite often sustained by long periods of melodrama and seriousness. All in all, with such a wide corpus, certain decisions of scope needed to be made. I will however return to one of Zuckerman's novels in chapter 5, when I address the important work of Jewish female comedians.

The prominent German Jewish Philosopher Walter Benjamin was very fond of the term *sternbild* ("constellation" or "star-image"), i.e. a grouping of ideas or themes that conveys the complexity of their interaction. The concept helps an inquiry transcend the singularity of one idea and recognize how the essence of any idea always coheres into existence through its relationship with other concepts. In other words, one can address a specific aspect of a writer's or an artist's work, while ignoring other aspects, but that often diminishes both aspects and their inter-relationship. And while there is a single-minded focus on certain ideas in Roth's work, they undoubtedly exist via their interaction. For Leland de la Durantaye, Roth's thematic constellation is made up of "three intertwined themes: sex, Judaism, and the relation of fact to fiction" (304). Elaine Safer suggests that the

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[90]For example, I concede that *Sabbath's Theater*, perhaps Roth's most lascivious work featuring perhaps his most lecherous character is missing here.

"subject matter of the later novels is the comic handling of fictional systems themselves. The novels engage in postmodern experimentation with multiple narrators in terms of their comic consciousness of their own fictivity" (101). Durantaye and Safer offer compelling arguments in their discussion of Roth's work, but a corrective is needed here. I would argue that Roth's comic constellation, the one that we find in many of his comic-minded novels is as follows: 1) Sex; 2) Judaism; 3) identity. And the gravitational pull that holds these three aspects together is literature itself. "Judaism" and "Identity" are, of course, entwined quite often in Roth's work, but also exist as separate categories with their own unique pull. Especially the notion of one's identity, whatever it may be, and its ongoing struggle against the oppressive forces of society (or even just of mothers) is quite central to Roth's work. Under the umbrella of "literature," or perhaps "literariness," we often find the relationship of fact to fiction. Roth brings to his work, especially the comic ones, a deep awareness of the notion of fictionality. The playfulness Roth exhibits between author identity and character identity is subsumed within the larger thematic category of identity and subjectivity. Just as deliberate self-consciousness of the film medium holds the films of Woody Allen together, so does a very well-wrought awareness of fictionality binds Roth's narrative, and quite often also unbinds them. The mistake that Durantaye and Safer make is that they view fictional awareness itself as a subject. But it is not so much a subject, as it is a construct or a stratagem that enhances the import of those other categories and also enhances the comic possibilities of the novels. Roth invites this confusion, of course, because of the self-consciousness with which he imbues his fiction. Indeed, over the course of his career, Roth increasingly highlighted the play on fictionality in his novels, but already very early in his career we find Roth playfully or frustratingly employing strategies of literary self-awareness and deceit.

As discussed in the introduction, we consistently find the central figure in Jewish comedy (what we might describe as the comic hero of various narratives and works of art) to be a site of ambivalence, indeterminacy, and multiplicity. We often find narratives that complicate and challenge the real and the fictional, that play with the identity of the authors or creators, and, at time, even question the fictionality of fictional characters. Almost every single artist or creator discussed in this dissertation has built artifices in which a porous boundary exists between the character portrayed and the creator. Philip Roth's successful and critically acclaimed career has been thoroughly complicated by the notion that different characters are simply projections of himself. For decades, Roth pushed against claims that the protagonists of many of fictions, like Alex Portnoy and especially Nathan Zuckerman (who first makes an appearance as a young ambitious writer in *The Ghost Writer*) were simply disguised and possibly embellished versions of himself. Even though publicly Roth pushed against this idea, as he portrays Zuckerman's life in different novels, he heightens rather than diminishes the confusion. Such playfulness or narrative trickery adds a layer of possible truthfulness to the fiction and the essence of the characters who are allegedly based on real individuals. Meanwhile, it places some of the blame for the actions in the text, not on the characters, but on the author. Thus, the author, who was killed off by poststructuralism, actually returns from the dead and consequently so do his real world concerns—in Roth's case, the complex issues of Jewish identity and by extension minority identity in the United States. Henry Bial argues in his book *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*, that research into Jewish creators can perhaps offer "a model for theorizing the representation of other minority groups in American mass culture—a model based neither on questionable essentialism nor on a politics of victimhood" (5-6). Similarly, Roth's investigations of Jewish identity through narrative

strategies of obfuscation can speak to the general difficulties of minority identity in the United States.

4.4 Roth and Jewish Identity

If there's a specific issue or theme that seems to cut across Roth's work, that both hangs over and lies between the crevices of other ideas and concerns, that is the issue of identity and subjectivity. While these abstract and intertwined categories loom large, we find them specifically crucial with respect to Jewish identity in the United States. Of the more than thirty novels that Roth has written, fewer than five do not directly depict central Jewish characters or Jewish themes. And while there have been other very successful American Jewish writers in the second half of the twentieth century, none of them have chosen Jews (and by extension Jewishness) as their subject matter as thoroughly and with as much vigor as Roth. This ties in very clearly to Roth's investment in the particularities and nuances of identity and subjectivity in America. But Roth has investigated the vagaries of identity in other interesting ways. His work has also been interested and invested in matters of race in America as evinced most famously in *The Human Stain*. Dean Franco has even argued that *Portnoy's Complaint* is "about race, not sex," [in the words of the emphatic title of his article, "It's About Race, Not Sex (Even the Sex is About Race)]": "besides the novel's overt intergenerational conflicts, *Portnoy's Complaint* is also informed by and responsive to the politics of race and the ethics of cultural recognition" (86). And Brett Ashley Kaplan follows Franco's lead in a recent book, and ties Jewish identity and anxiety regarding it, to race relations in the United States and even to the Israel-Palestine conflict.[91]

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[91]See Kaplan 1.

It is clear that from the very beginning of his career Roth imagined himself as a different kind of writer and especially a different kind of Jewish writer. But this did not deter admirers like Harold Bloom from situating him within the Jewish tradition. Bloom writes that as a chronicler of Jewish identity Roth "knows that Freud and Kafka mark the origins and limits of a still emerging literary culture, American and Jewish, which has an uneasy relationship to normative Judaism and its waning culture" (1). Bloom argues that there is a crucial difference between Roth's "Jewish" writing and some of his predecessors:

> Roth indeed is a Jewish writer in the sense that Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud are not, and do not care to be…. his absolute concern never ceases to be the pain of the relations between children and parents, and between husbands and wife, and in him this pain invariably results from the incommensurability between a rigorous moral normative tradition whose expectations rarely can be satisfied, and the reality of the way we live now. (2)

Bloom's enthusiastic support of Roth's early career betrays a certain myopia and old-fashioned sense of what a Jewish writer should write about and what his or her themes should be. Undoubtedly, one of the things that Roth has done throughout his career is negotiate and redefine the possible spaces for a Jewish American artist in the twentieth century. More than that, I would argue, through strategies of self-awareness and doubling, Roth has also negotiated—on the pages of his novels—the possibilities for what an American Jew can and cannot be. A counterpoint to Bloom's suggestion that the Jewish writer needs to be the writer of Jewish family melodrama is provided by Roth himself in *The Professor of Desire*, when the novel's so-called "professor of desire," David Kepesh, gets acquainted with his department's poet-in-residence and resident Don Juan, Ralph Baumgarten. An East-Coast Jew like Kepesh, Baumgarten, one of the many spiritual and, at times, physical doubles that exist in Roth's fiction, rejects Kepesh's fascination with the fact

that despite having a terribly melodramatic and tragic background, Baumgarten has chosen not to engage in his art with these matters:

> I ask him, "How come you've never written about your family, Ralph? "Them?" he says, giving me his indulgent look. "Them," I say, "and you." "Why? So I can read to a full house at the Y? Oh, Kepesh"—five years my Junior, he nonetheless enjoys talking to me as though I am the kid, and too, something of an unredeemable square—"spare me the subject of the Jewish family and its travails. Can you actually get worked up over another son and another daughter and another mother and another father driving each of us nuts? All that loving: all that hating; all those meals. And don't forget the *menschlichkeit*. And the baffled quest for dignity. Oh, and the *goodness*. You can't write that stuff and leave out the goodness. I understand somebody has just published a whole book on our Jewish literature of goodness. (138)

Baumgarten acts as a foil that expresses Kepesh's own struggle towards invididuality and debauchery and away from the historical binds of Jewish identity that for Kepesh mean the overwhelming confines of traditional Jewish identity. In Baumgarten, he finds affirmation and inspiration to become the so-called "professor of desire." Both are also an expression of the desire and attitude of their "triplet" and creator, Roth, who has acknowledged repeatedly that sex is central to life. As he told Rita Braver in response to her comment that "there aren't a lot of writers who write with as much candor and humor about sex, over the years. Why has that been such a recurring topic for you?": "[T]he sex is important, and sex plays a big part in people's lives, plays a huge part in their imagination, and therefore it is a subject for writing."[92]

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[92]See Braver.

4.5 Sex in Roth's Novels

In addition to Roth's reputation in American letters, there is also Roth's reputation as a novelist perhaps too invested in sex and the sexual.[93] Relatively recently, even one of Roth's more ardent admirers, Keith Gessen seemed to reach a point of exasperation with Roth's treatment of sex. In a review of Roth's *The Dying Animal* (2001), Gessen begins by calling it "something far closer to an essay" which is "naturally about sex."[94] But then he adds: "And here I must stop myself–it is so easy to make fun of Roth. Sixty-eight years old and again with the sex."[95] Gessen is not wrong; there are very few Jewish writers who prove the point, the argument behind this thesis, more than Roth.[96] Roth built his career and reputation as the *enfant terrible* of American Jewish literature, because of the central role that transgression, provocation, and taboo with regard to sex play in his fiction. This does not mean that every single Rothian novel is raunchy or attends to that specific discourse, but many do, and as has been noted, his reputation and notoriety were defined by the subject. Still, in a certain way, I would argue that sex in Roth's novels has been talked about, but also avoided. On the one hand, sex as a theme has been used a gateway for discussing "Philip Roth, the misogynist," whose work, as Bernard Avishai suggests, on today's campuses can be studied—as he was allegedly told by a young professor of Women's Studies—only "with the precautions one takes examining any other biological hazard" (4).

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[93]Of course, similar thing could be said about Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan—that they too were invested in sex.

[94]The novel that wraps up the David Kepesh trilogy, which I will discuss later.

[95]See Gessen. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/professor-desire/

[96]Other contemporary Jewish writers, most notably the British-Jewish writer Howard Jacobson come immediately to mind, but Roth was in fact one generation earlier than Jacobson, and is indeed known as a sort of literary father figure to Jacobson.

As Derek Parker Royal writes in the introduction to a special issue of *Philip Roth Studies* entitled "Roth and Women," one of the criticisms that

> one would encounter concerning Roth fiction concerned Roth's treatment of women in his fiction and his apparent (or assumed) personal feelings towards them. Accusations of unfair and unbalanced gender representation, even to the point of misogyny, were not uncommon in the reviews and the literary criticism published throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Whether the charges were overt or merely implied, many readers expressed their concern with the kind of women found in Roth's fiction and, by association, what these representations suggested about the male subject (especially the Jewish American novelist male subject).

On the other hand, sex has also been part of a larger narrative of "Philip Roth, self-hating Jew" who has faliciatated and encouraged the goys and their long tradition of associating Jews with dirt and scum. The self-hating accusation has focused not only on sex, but sex added certain contours to the argument.

These dual negative approaches towards sex in Roth's novels is further complicated—and this admittedly is a theme that runs throughout the dissertation—by the fact that sex is often tied to comedy and humor, and thereby they both devalue each other: comedy being seen as an unserious genre, and sex as an unserious topic. And yet, perhaps Roth, just like this dissertation, is trying to reclaim the Jew, the Jewish body, and sex, and to argue that it is acceptable for the Jew to have desire: After all, "*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?"* So, in other words, maybe there is nothing degenerate about Alexander Portnoy's wish to "put the id back in the yid."

In sum, matters of sex, the body, and the complexity of identity and fictionality are at the very heart of Roth's comic vision. Roth even hints at this in his early work, which has not been necessarily associated with such issues. For example, in "The Conversion of the Jews," a story included in Roth's award-winning collection of stories *Goodbye Columbus*, Roth, with

tongue firmly lodged in cheek, boils down millennia of theological debates about the difference between Christianity and Judaism (their premise, dictates, and most importantly patent incongruity) to a question about sex. In the story, a precocious smartass, Ozzie Freedman has taken exception to the dogma espoused by his teacher, Rabbi Binder, regarding Jesus Christ, who, according to Judaism and the Rabbi was "just a man" and not the "Son of God." Ozzie climbs onto the roof of the synogogue and threatens to jump if Rabbi Binder, the other kids, and even his mother do not reject the notion that it is not possible that Jesus was born to a God and virgin:

> "Do you believe God can do anything? Ozzie leaned his head out into the darkness. "Anything?" "Tell me you believe God can do anything? There was a second hesitation. "Then: God can do anything."
>
> "Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse"
>
> "He can"
>
> "Tell Me?!
>
> "God," Rabbi Binder admitted, "Can make a child without intercourse"
>
> "Momma, you tell me"
>
> "God can make a child without intercourse, his mother said."

Is there anything more emblematically ambivalent and ambiguous than the relationship of sex to the Holy Trinity? Furthermore, is there anything more Jewish than the relationship of Jesus and his mother? One can easily imagine the guilt laid at Jesus's feet by Miriam/Mary: "I literally had to have sex with God to have you, and you have no respect for our religion."

"Epstein," another story that is attuned to matters of libido and the body, leaves readers very much in the dark as to the exact nature of the thing that propels the story and unravels the seemingly idyllic life of the middle-class Jewish businessman Lou Epstein. Facing a mid-life crisis and professional uncertainty (he does not know who will take over his packing business since his only son died from polio in childhood), Epstein is awakened

to sexual impulses by the sex noises produced by his daughter and her schlubby boyfriend, as well catching his visiting nephew and their young neighbor in the act. He then liaisons with the neighbor's attractive mother and afterwards finds a rash that is quickly discovered by his wife, a humiliation that likely causes him to suffer a heart attack. The rash, crucially remains to the very end of the story an ontological mystery. As Epstein is carted off to the hospital, his wife passionately tries to pull him back into the fold:

> "You hear the doctor, Lou. All you got to do is live a normal life."
>
> "Epstein opened his mouth. His tongue hung over his teeth like a dead snake.
>
> "Don't you talk," his wife said. "Don't you worry about anything. Not even the business.
>
> "Our Sheila will marry Marvin and that'd be that. You won't have to sell Lou, it'll be in the family."

The story ends unresolved. Will the marriage last? Is Epstein's mid-life crisis over? And, more importantly, what is the mysterious rash, the mysterious mark on Epstein's skin? Is it a naturally occurring event or the consequence of sexual transgression? Sex, as is often the case in Roth's work, is the propellant of comedy, but it is also symbolic of the struggle of the Jewish male to assert independence in a world in which he is constantly prodded to do better. All he must do, as his wife suggests, is live a "normal life," and by "normal," she means a normal Jewish life. This is as we shall see, also the case with Alexander Portnoy, and is exactly the thing from which both try to escape, echoing Baumagarten's proclamations in *The Professor of Desire* that he cannot stomach "All that loving: all that hating; all those meals. And don't forget the *menschlichkeit*. And the baffled quest for dignity" (140).

4.6 *Portnoy's Complaint*: How Much Can a Jew Take?

It is only fitting that *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel that is a meta-reflection on Jewish identity and to some degree on Jewish comedy, is the first text to be covered in this dissertation. *Portnoy's* may not be all the things that Roth's vociferous and numerous naysayers say about it, but as a novel mostly in the comic tradition that is about sex, it is, as far as its Jewish self-loathing and its narrator's (possibly also its author's) obsessional sexual worldview are concerned, an emblematic representative of a lot of the art in this dissertation, including its problematic (to say the least) attitude towards women. Not only was Roth's novel timely in 1969—a time of sexual revolution and upheaval in American culture—it also captured something truly emblematic and symptomatic of the "condition" of Jews in America at the end of the 1960s. It is unsurprising that young Jewish Americans at the time found the novel nothing less than a singular breakthrough. Bernard Avishai writes of a friend who would call him in college to read out passages from the novel.[97] Ruth Wisse recalls how when she was a graduate student, a friend brought to a party a section from the yet-to-be-published *Portnoy's Complaint* (published in the *New American Review*) and she and her friends found themselves "(laughing) harder than we ever had (maybe ever would again) at this shpritz of stand-up comedy delivered from a horizontal position" (43).

As he had already done in *Goodbye, Columbus*, especially in the title story of that collection, Roth conveys in *Portnoy's* a certain restlessness at work in the young Jewish American imagination. The baby boomers' restlessness and dissatisfaction with their parent's generation's old traditional ways swept over America at the time, and Roth in *Portnoy's* gives voice to its very Jewish variant. Noted Israeli poet, Haim Nachman Bialik famously said in the 1920s that a Jewish nation state would be realized when such a nation

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[97]See Avishai 3.

would have its own Jewish prostitutes, Jewish thieves, and a Jewish police force, and similarly Jewish American literature truly came out as Jewish when it had its own sex-obsessed, unrepentant, but still neurotic, protagonist.

While we have seen that Roth was telegraphing his interest in sex in short stories like "Epstein" and "The Conversion of the Jews," not many readers were prepared for the onslaught of explicit sexual imagery and rhetoric that Roth conjures up in *Portnoy's Complaint.* The exploits of the novel's namesake, Alexander Portnoy, are told in the first person, in what seems like a frantic Jewish primal scream addressed to his mostly invisible therapist, Doctor Spielvogel. The novel's unique narrative point of view and setting makes room for a lot of extremely personal information, since one does open up in a much more personal and frank way to a therapist. It also opens the door for an uninhibited id to speak about itself in such a way. While Roth had considerable success before the publication of the novel, especially for a writer his age, *Portnoy's* cemented Roth's fame and notoriety. Six years after its publication in 1975, the novel had sold almost half a million hardcover copies and three and a half million paperbacks, and was translated into many languages, probably as Avishai suggests "where you did not have to explain the term 'neurotic'" (3).[98]

The explicit discussion of masturbation and sexual exploits within the very specific context of a Jewish family unit was essentially the reason for the fierce criticism coming from Jewish critics. Even in Israel the novel became a sensation, and not necessarily in a positive way. The great Kabbalah scholar and friend of Walter Benjamin Gershom Scholem delivered a very harsh critique of Roth's "revolting book," writing:

> Here in the center of things stands the loathsome figure whom the anti-Semites have conjured in their imagination and attempted to portray in their

[98]Statistics are courtesy of Avishai's book as well.

> literature, and a Jewish author, a highly gifted if perverted artist, offers all the slogans which for them are beyond price…. This is the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying. I dare say that with the next turn of history, which surely will not be long delayed, this book will make all of us defendants in court. Not the author who revels in obscenities, but we will pay the price.[99]

Roth's relationship to his Jewish identity, but more so his relationship to Jewish American intelligentsia, had been fractious from the start. Even though at the very beginning of his career the more conservative members of the Jewish community found much to loath in Roth's *Goodbye Columbus,* he was viewed quite favorably by the Jewish literary intelligentsia. However, after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint,* Roth's reputation sank. This culminated in the December 1972 issue of the Jewish magazine *Commentary*, in what Mark Shechner describes as a "double-barreled attack," when Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz, the magazine's literary leaders, mercilessly took Roth to the figurative "Jewish shed" and let him have it. In his essay, Howe recalls how he was an early Roth supporter: "the work of a newcomer still in his twenties, *Goodbye Columbus* bristled with a literary self-confidence such as few writers two or three decades older than Roth could command." But about *Portnoy's Complaint* Howe writes that "the cruelest thing anyone can do with *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice." Roth's literature, according to Howe, simply does not rise up to the possibilities inherent in literature: "Roth appears indifferent to the Keatsian persuasion that a writer should be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts."[100]

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[99]See Scholem. https://blog.nli.org.il/en/philip_roth/

[100]See Howe.

In the pages of the same magazine, the novel generated a fierce back and forth between Roth and Golda Meir's biographer Marie Syrkin, who in a letter to the magazine and in response to Irving Howe's scathing essay about Roth, writes that *Portnoy's Complaint* with its "unrelieved picture of Jewish grossness, chicanery, lechery, hypocrisy," even with "concessions for artistic probity," "remains […]a distillate of something describable only as plain and unadulterated anti-Semitism." Syrkin adds that "the two crudest and most venerable stereotypes of anti-Semitic lore—the Jew as sexual defiler and malevolent destroyer with a supporting cast of cheats and vulgarians—move in a Jewish ambivalence whose authenticity is guaranteed by appetizing borscht, wonderfully mimicked intonations, and comic folkways" (8-9). As a response to the entire debate surrounding his book, Roth penned an oft-quoted essay, "Imagining Jews," in which he posits a direct challenge to the older and established Jewish literati and puts into context the key problems with their censuring of his text:

> In an era which had seen the avid and, as it were, brilliant Americanization of millions of uprooted Jewish immigrants and refugees, the annihilation as human trash of millions of Europeanized Jews, and the establishment of survival in the ancient holy land of a spirited, defiant modern Jewish state, it can safely be said that imagining what Jews are and ought to be has been anything but the marginal activity of a few American-Jewish novelists. The novelistic enterprise—particularly in books like *The Victim*, *The Assistant*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*—might itself be described as imagining Jews being imagined, by themselves and by others. Given all those projections, fantasies, illusions, programs, dreams, and solutions that the existence of the Jews has given rise to, it is no wonder that these three books, whatever may be their differences in literary merit and approach are largely nightmares of bondage, each informed in its own way by a mood of a baffled, claustrophobic struggle. (*Reading Myself and Others*, 279)

This response points to what is crucially at stake in Roth's novel and that is the representation of Jews, and who controls how Jews are represented and depicted. And sex (while amusing, uninhibited, and often very comical) is clearly an aspect of this deep

representational issue, as described by Roth in a response to a question from Walter Mauro regarding whether Roth "desecrated pornography" in *Portnoy's Complaint*:

> I don't think I "desecrated" pornography but, rather, excised its central obsession with the body as an erotic contraption or plaything—with orifices, secretions, tumescence, friction, discharge, and all the abstruse intricacies of sex-tectonics—and then placed that obsession back into an utterly mundane family setting, where issues of power and subjection, among other things, can be seen in their broad everyday aspect rather than through the narrowing lens of pornography. (6)

We should also note that Howe's claim in 1972 that Roth is not able to live with uncertainty and ambivalence might be a consequence of Howe's bias for a very specific kind of European and American literature, whose expansive and often wordy scope cannot of course avoid the creation of ambivalence and contradiction. There was also no way in which Howe could have anticipated the work that would come after 1972, which is guided by a deep ambivalence regarding narrative and how stories are told. There is no direct indication for this, but Roth's evolving experimentalism might have in part been his strategy of getting back at Howe (in addition to vindictively lampooning Howe as the self-important critic Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson*). Regardless of any impure motive on Roth's part, we cannot avoid how central ambivalence and incongruity are to Roth's comic novels and, furthermore, how obviously present they are in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the novel that Howe had grown to despise by 1972.

The novel's portrayal of sex still inflames many today, as many still miss the novel's central argument. David Brauner argues that this notoriety is not only deserved but also lasting: "[*Portnoy's Complaint*] still outrages many readers though, in my experience of teaching it to undergraduates, due more to its misogyny than to the obscenity that excited so much indignation at the time. Of course, it delights many others." For Brauner, partially due to its inflammatory aspects, "its rhetorical complexity—in particular, its juxtaposition

of comic and psychoanalytic discourses—tends to go unremarked" (47). Brauner, like Avishai, finds the central humor of the novel its satire of Psychoanalysis. The problem with this argument is the invisibility of Doctor Spielvogel. Portnoy's long monologue happens within a psychoanalytic context, but there is no therapy happening here, which is partly the point.[101]Although the process of psychoanalysis is not depicted thoroughly enough to be the subject of satire in the novel it can be argued that certain theoretical premises of Freud's work are. This is the case not simply because of some sort of Oedipal framework that the novel's critics point to, but more because it speaks to a vital understanding of Freud's project. As discussed in the introduction, a certain incongruity exists at the very heart of Jewish identity and this, as first highlighted by Freud, provides the essence of Jewish humor. An incongruity is immediately created by the ambivalent circumstances of the Jews throughout history. On the one hand, there is a heightened sense of self-worth, and on the other hand, a feeling of low self-worth that comes from the attitudes towards Jews by those who have viewed Jews as others. This, according to Freud, causes the Jewish people, at least in their production of jokes, to make fun of themselves to a larger extent than other groups. It is not surprising that such an explanation would appeal to the father of psychoanalysis. The argument, after all, suggests an instance of a defense mechanism in action. To defend their egos, the Jews masochistically engage in a form of a purification of the self that tries to prepare the ego for the onslaught of the other's gaze. But there is something more insidious at play here in that, throughout history, the Jew perhaps has incorporated some of that gaze

[101]Brauner's argument in the essay: "His monologue, hilarious though it is, in an agonized plea to be released from the role of the comic butt to be given some serious relief, but is itself continually ridiculed by a comic discourse, which in turn is subjected to psychoanalytic deconstruction and so on. The novel derives its momentum from a dialectic between those two discourses, or, to put it another way, exhibits an unresolved tension between two impulses—to treat psychoanalysis comically, and to treat comedy psychoanalytically" (48).

into his or her self-consciousness. This, according to Sander Gilman, is the root of Jewish self-loathing and the cornerstone of the self-hating Jew:

> Self-hatred results from outsiders' acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group—that group in society which they see as defining them—as a reality. This acceptance provides the criteria for the myth making that is the basis of any communal identity. This illusory definition of the self, the identification with the reference group's mirage of the Other, is contaminated by the protean variables existing within what seems to the outside to be the homogenous group in power. This illusion contains an inherent, polar opposition. On the one hand is the liberal fantasy that anyone is welcome to share in the power of the reference group if he abides by the rules that define that group. But these rules are the very definition of the Other. The Other comprises precisely those who are not permitted to share power within the society. Thus outsiders hear an answer from their fantasy: Become like us—abandon your difference—and you may be one with us. (Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* 2)

Howe and Syrkin may be correct that *Portnoy's* participates or speaks to a tradition of self-loathing that has roots in anti-Semitic discourse, but what they miss is its very essence, which is its awareness of itself as representation. The novel is thus not a satire of psychoanalysis, as Avishai suggests, or a satire of Jewish identity, as Brauner maintains, but rather a satire of the Jewish joke itself. This is not because of the novel's jokes or the novel's Jewishness, but because a joke is always a condensed representation, a fleeting depiction of its meaning and also of its intent. That is, of course, why Freud found so much in common between the joke and the dream. When asked by George Plimpton if *Portnoy's* "was influenced by the nightclub act of Lenny Bruce," Roth famously retorted, "not really, I would say I was more strongly influenced by a sitdown comic named Franz Kafka and a very funny bit he does called 'The Metamorphosis'" (18). There is a rather porous boundary that separates the comical and the nightmarish, which is precisely the boundary where Kafka's stories so often reside, or as Roth articulates: "I had heard somewhere that he used to giggle to himself while he worked. Of course! It was all so *funny,* this morbid preoccupation with

punishment and guilt. Hideous, but funny" (19).[102] One person's joke is another's nightmare. For a minority like the Jews, they can be one and the same. Such ambivalence, which exists within Jewish identity, magnifies this duality.

Literature, of course, is not written as a series of Jewish jokes. Yet, in the case of *Portnoy's Complaint*, literature can be seen as one long story with many self-loathing punchlines that make complete sense within a framework of Jewish identity throughout history. And that is essentially what critics of *Portnoy's Complaint* seemingly missed when they were throwing their trenchant accusations at the author and the novel: in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth is not only telling one self-loathing, comic anecdote after the other, but rather he is, via Alexander Portnoy, narrating one long Jewish joke. As, in fact, he himself maintains:

> A kiss from me *would change the world!* Doctor! Doctor! Did I say fifteen? Excuse me, I meant ten! I meant five! I meant zero! A Jewish man with his parents alive is half the time a helpless *infant*! Listen, come to my aid, will you—and quick! Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! (111)

Portnoy's rejection of Jewish identity is a rejection of Jewishness as constructed via the Jewish shtick of Borscht Belt comedians. In Howe's and Syrkin's rejection of Portnoy, there is essentially a rejection of the self-loathing aspect of Jewish humor, which is ultimately a misrecognition of the gaze. The self-loathing in Jewish humor, if it does indeed exist, is a product of circumstance, not an essential component of Jewish identity (even though, over millennia, it might have solidified as such). A problem and an additional incongruity comes in the form of the historical exigency for the likes of the *Commentary* crowd: just as Jews are

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[102]See Roth, "On Portnoy's Complaint," in *Reading Myself and Others*.

finally fully making inroads into full acceptance in American society, Roth not only reaches back into history and the Jewish closet and drags out the skeletons of Jewish self-loathing, but he does this within the framework of comedy, that most unserious of genres. But Roth, as we have discussed, was even then, and proved himself to be even more so in the decades to come, a non-traditional writer interested in breaking the rules of literary representation. He therefore not only wants us to understand the novel as a representation of Jewish identity, but also to consider it on the level of representation itself. This representation entails the comical and incongruous existence of Jewish identity, the feeling of being God's chosen people, but also the pariahs who would roam the earth endlessly punished, so it seems, by the same father who chose them. Portnoy, as such, as a "joke" is caught between these two extremes. On the one hand, he is extremely talented and successful, as he likes to tell us (as well as his therapist and his mother):

> "Mother, I'm thirty-three! I am the assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the City of New York! I graduated first in my law school class! Remember? I have graduated first from every class I've ever *been* in! At twenty-five I was already special counsel to a House Sub-committee—of the United States Congress, Mother! Of America! If I wanted Wall Street, Mother, I could be on Wall Street! I am a highly respected man in my profession." (110-11)

On the other hand, he cannot stop pursuing the most non-intellectual of pursuits, that of the flesh.[103] One of the things that Freud admires about the Jewish joke is its "democratic nature." Elliot Oring writes that "Jewish jokes may be coarse and uniquely self-critical, but they are rooted, according to Freud, in the Jews' perception of their own good qualities—in a sense of self-worth and self-esteem—that decisively differentiate them from the brutal

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[103]In this Roth also speaks to competing narratives of becoming in the lives of American children of immigrants who are torn between familial expectation of excellence, and a desire for self-exploration and fulfillment.

comic stories told by anti-Semites" (118-119). And not only must an archetypical Jew, like Portnoy, be torn because he is a man interested and qualified in the higher realm of mind, but in him exists an underbelly, as it were, of a complete and utter obsession with matters of the flesh, an incongruity that does not really makes Portnoy a unique Jew, but rather a somewhat emblematic Jew. The Jewish religion and therefore Jewish culture have developed over millennia in a much less hierarchical structure than other religions. Even though modern strands of Christianity embrace a direct relationship to God through belief and Judaism requires constant vigilance and performance of prayer and ritual, Judaism challenges the hierarchy between the everyday and the religious. In fact, the everyday ritual of prayer and practice, which involves the body in various ways, is the religious. The human body and the "religious" are the same. *Portnoy's Complaint* and its seeming obsession with the body and the sexual stages an awareness of that which has been suppressed, and thus stages the very dialectic at the heart of Judaism and Jewish identity.

What then turns comical in the novel is the essence of such a value system: a world without hierarchies, without clearly defined good and bad, or at least, a world in which the boundaries between sacred and profane exist only as arbitrary lines that one is inclined to cross and betray. As Jules Chametzky writes:

> As a people, Jews have always performed this negotiation between sacred and profane. The forms and evidence for this have been various: it is in the Sacred Text from the beginning—…—the people of Peretz, with feet in the mud and their brows touching heaven—whose everyday Yiddish made way for but was peppered with the language of the holy. (21)

Not only is Jewish existence a negotiation between the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, what I would call "vertical ambivalence," it is also a "horizontal ambivalence," in other words, an ambivalence of place and geography. It is not difficult to understand historically how for a people without a concrete land or home (aside from yearning and

praying), the ambivalence of existence can turn into the constant negotiation of borders and boundaries between self and place and self and other.[104] For example, the Passover Seder and Yom Kippur saying of "next year in Jerusalem" (*L'shana Hab'aa b'yerushalaim*"). Jewish identity—always torn and ambivalent about time and place. Hence, Jewish identity and minority identity in general, requires that one become adept at crossing boundaries, and even more significantly, adept at recognizing the boundaries and what their violation would entail. According to Alexander Portnoy, the curse of Jewish ambivalence is brought upon the Jew already in childhood:

> Doctor Spielvogel, it alleviates nothing fixing the blame—blaming is still ailing, of course, of course—but nonetheless, what *was* it with these Jewish parents, *what*, that they were able to make us little Jewish boys believe ourselves to be princes on the one hand, unique as unicorns on the one hand, geniuses and brilliant like nobody has ever been brilliant and beautiful before in the history of childhood—saviors and sheer perfection on the one hand, and such bumbling, incompetent, thoughtless, helpless, selfish, evil little shits, little *ingrates,* on the other (119)

The remarkable thing about the novel is that it manufactures a sort of built in self-critique, through its self-awareness, which is once again analogous to its essence as the representation of a joke. In the final part of the novel, Portnoy reports on his attempts to recuperate part of his Jewish identity by a visit to Israel and the conquest of Israeli women. The second woman whom he lusts after is the true analyst in the novel (unlike the invisible Spielvogel) for she reprimands Portnoy for his unhappiness and exposes what he is, while she also reveals a deeper understanding of the comic underpinnings of Jewish humor, and specifically, how it contrasts with Zionist ideology:

> "The way you disapprove of your life! Why do you do that? It is of no value for a man to disapprove of his life the way that you do. You seem to take

[104]David Biale in *Jews and Eros* elaborates on this.

> some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. I don't believe you actually want to improve your life. Everything you say is somehow always twisted, some way or another, to turn out "funny." All day long the same thing. In some little way or other, everything is ironical, or self-depreciating?"
>
> "Self-deprecating, self-mocking"
>
> "Exactly! And you are a highly intelligent man—that is what makes it even more disagreeable. The contribution you could make! Such stupid self-deprecation! How disagreeable!"
>
> "Oh, I don't know" I said, "Self-deprecation is, after all, a classic form of Jewish humor"
>
> "Not Jewish humor! No! *Ghetto* humor!" (264-65)

As such, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Roth's work as well, particularly because of how it so often brings to the fore Israel and Israeli identity in the later novels, is the bridge that links the comic representation of Jewish identity in the United States to the one in Israel (still the world's two largest Jewish communities). It parallels the kind of comedy that has emerged in the two contexts. We might think of it as the bridge that connects the notion of the Jew as a representative of profane disharmony, existing somewhere in the gap between order and disorder, what might be called Jewish difference, and the Zionist and later Israeli ambition towards wholeness and order, which is also an ambition to resist being mere representation, an urge and drive towards the solidity of identity.[105] Here the work of Polish-Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman can provide insight. In an imortant essay, Bauman uses Polish-Jewish critic Artur Sandauer's concept of "allosemitism," which "refers to the practice of setting the Jews apart as a people radically different from all the others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them and special treatment in all or most intercourse—since the concepts and treatments usefully deployed when facing or

[105]We will see this in the Israeli context in the work of Uri Zohar in chapter 6.

dealing with other people or peoples, simply would not do." Bauman adds that the reason for such allosemitism (not just anti-Semitism or philo-Semitism) is that,

> the Jew is ambivalence incarnate. And ambivalence is ambivalence mostly because it cannot be contemplated without ambivalent feeling: it is simultaneously attractive and repelling, it reminds one of what one would like to be but is afraid of being, it dangles before the eyes what one would rather not see—that the settled accounts are still open and the possibilities are still alive. (146-47)

Bauman claims that the "the abstract Jew" is the emblematic subject of postmodernity and the enemy of rationality, as "the Jew" signifies the "impossibility of order," which the world of reason and its instrumental rationality fight for: "ambivalence is what all ordering activity is sworn against and hopes to eliminate" (148). Postmodernism, of course, contends that the ambition for order is doomed to failure. Perhaps all of literature and art posits such an argument as well. This important discussion of Jewish difference is still being played out in Jewish intellectual circles. However, it is important to note that Roth is not exactly arguing that "Jews" are an idea, but that this so-called "abstract Jew" is also flesh and blood. Alexander Portnoy, the "Jew," wants exactly that—to be more than an idea:

> And instead of crying over he-who refuses at the age of fourteen ever to set foot inside a synagogue again, instead of waiting for he-who has turned his back on the saga of *his people,* weep for your own pathetic selves, why don't you, sucking and sucking on that sour grape of a religion. Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being.

Therefore, the drive in the novel and its reluctant Jewish superhero towards the bawdy could be likened to the drive to escape one's essence as mere representation or concept—a drive whose ultimate failure often yields many moments of incongruent comedy and humor.

4.7 David Kepesh: Visible Ambiguities and Ambivalences of the Flesh

In 1972 Roth introduces another alter-ego of sorts. David Kepesh is a professor of comparative literature who enjoys somewhat modest success in academia, but his main interests lie not in literature, but rather in the opposite sex and in pursuing his libido's objects of desire (or it might be said, as might be the case with all literature, Roth's interest for him is such). Kepesh's philosophy is articulated while he is thinking about an introduction to one of his courses:

> In fact, one reason the novels to be read during the first semester are all concerned, to a greater or lesser degree of obsessiveness, with erotic desire is that I thought that readings organized around a subject with which you all have some sort of familiarity might help you even better to locate these books in the world of experience, and further to discourage the temptation to consign them to manageable netherworld of narrative devices, metaphorical motifs, and mythical archetypes. Above all, I hope that by reading these books you will come to learn something of value about life in one of its most puzzling and maddening aspects. I hope to learn something myself. (184-85)[106]

The series of novels, which explores different periods of Kepesh's sex-filled and sex-driven life, begins with the most fantastic and strangest texts of Roth's career, *The Breast* (1972). This novella is set in a later period than the next Kepesh-centered novel that will follow it, *The Professor of Desire* (1977). The third novel, *The Dying Animal* (2001), which focuses on an older Kepesh, now in his early seventies, depicts a character whose biography does not always match the Kepesh who was given much biographical detail in *The Professor of Desire.* Considering the fact that in *The Breast* a comparative literature professor by the name of David Kepesh turns into a woman's breast and stays in such a form until the end of

[106]As an aside, this is clearly one of the most (if not the most) reflexive and "meta" moments of this dissertation. The dialogue between Portnoy and the Israeli soldier a close second.

the novella, it is somewhat surprising that he emerges out of that "nightmare" or "hallucination" in *The Dying Animal* as if that incident did not even happen. It is important to note here that although Kepesh suspects that the entire incident is a delusion, the novella resists this interpretation for himself, as well as for the reader. There is in fact something very comic about the way in which that entire period is erased from consciousness and a new Kepesh is born again *in The Dying Animal*. Then again, comedy is the genre that eschews norms and expectations. Furthermore, this is Roth's fiction, and the notion of a stable identity is scarcely assumed. Thus, since no mention is made, in this case, to the previous incident, we might as well assume that we are dealing with a different "David Kepesh."

The series, which begins with the aforementioned strangeness of *The Breast* (a text that was written almost immediately after the uproar generated by the debauchery and lewdness of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969), can be read, as can Kepesh's character, as a commentary, at times cynical and sarcastic, on the very topic of sex in literature.[107] In addition to this, Kepesh's profession gives cover for Roth to inject theoretical reflection and commentary on earlier novels, themes, and even commentary on those novels. As Debra Shostak argues, this self-reflexive commentary as a strategy is a crucial aspect of Roth's work:

> Roth seems to view the enterprise of fiction-making as a multidimensional and many-voiced dialogue. The writer talks to himself, through a diverse population of fictive avatars, in order to pry out the many selves he inhabits and embraces and thus sketch out a host of counterlives. The books talk to one another as countertexts in an ongoing and mutually illuminating conversation, zigzagging from one way of representing the problems of selfhood to another, often by conceiving of such representations in terms of

[107]In 1971 Roth published *Our Gang*, a takedown of the Nixon era, that is partly satirical, but not really comical.

> oppositions and displacements—of attitude, or belief, or character type, or genre, or tone. (3)

At various moments, the trilogy feels like a long response to the crazed cultural backlash that *Portnoy's Complaint* generated. Roth challenges and provokes his critics and produces a text that is blatantly much more sexual. If in *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth had at least tried to engage with the difficulties of the Jewish family, *The Breast* engages almost exclusively with itself. And Kepesh, a wanton breast, only really wants others to engage (sexually) with him/it. If the reaction to *Portnoy's* and the public outcry lambasted Roth as a sex maniac who inevitably brings shame on the Jewish community with his sexual perversities and shamelessness, producing something like *The Breast* was not going to pacify Roth's detractors. It goes without saying that it is not just any body that Roth exposes, but in most cases, and especially those of a bawdy and sexual nature—a Jewish body. Even though the Jewish body is really like any other body, it really is not. The Jewish body is much more of a semantic interaction of constructions, attitudes, and stereotypes. As noted in the introduction, one of the dissertation's main arguments is that there might be a reason that a certain section of Jewish comedy has been attracted to the body. One such possible reason is the fact that the Jewish body is a site of ambivalence and incongruity; or in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, it is a site of difference.

In *The Breast*, Roth acknowledges that he is, in some idiosyncratice way, paying homage and appropriating Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." Kepesh, the comparative literature professor, does not wake up to find that he is a bug, but rather a female breast, which he describes as, "A phenomenon that has been variously described to me as a 'massive hormonal influx,' 'an endocrinopathic catastrophe,' and/or 'a hermaphroditic

explosion of chromosomes'" (13).[108] As he sits and contemplates his new future as a breast, he reminisces longingly and mournefully on his once being a man of sexual desire and needs. He eventually finds new sexual desires and ways to accommodate some of them with his girlfriend, Claire. Kepesh's not-to-be-missed Jewish identity is mostly implied by his claim that he is able to adjust to the *mishigas* of "being a mammary gland," because of his "upbringing in a typically crisis-ridden Catskill hotel" (31).

Throughout the novel, Kepesh complains that he is being watched and monitored, initially by some interested parties in the medical community who find his newfound situation a scientific curiosity. But as the novel progresses, it appears that the notion that he is being watched by strangers is not just medical in nature. But rather, it is entwined with concepts of performance to some kind of nefarious and unknown audience: "or was the display largely for the benefit of my great audience, to convince them that, appearances aside, I am still very much a man—for who but a man has conscience, reason, desire, and remorse" (41). The performance at play here, with the story's obvious inspiration from the "sit down comic" Kafka, is the performance of identity, that is, as various critics have suggested, an essential part of Jewish identity in the United States. Jewish identity, in other words, carries with it an awareness of being surveilled, for which one must develop strategies of performance.[109] It is often said of Freud's theory that it is a consequence of a very specific Jewish environment and views of Jewish life and identity.[110] It is not surprising then, that Erving Goffman, the author of *The Presentation of the Self*, who popularized the

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[108]As he later notes he "out Kafkaed Kafka" (82).

[109]Vincent Brook and Henry Bial discuss this to some length in their books.

[110]See Frosh.

idea that the individual engages with the other through a performance of identity, also came from a Jewish background.

It is difficult not to find in Kepesh's obsession with performance Roth's commentary on those critics that have looked at his work with jaundiced eyes, like Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz. While in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth wrote about Jewish identity and young Jewish men's struggle against it honestly (if at times obscenely), all that the great Jewish intellectuals were able to see was a man consumed by his sexual fantasies. All they could see, in other words, is a man figuratively turning himself into a (female) phallus.[111] *The Breast* is thus not only Roth's "Metamorphosis," but also an absurdly eroticized "Letter to his Father." In his legendary letter, Kafka writes to his dominant and domineering father:

> If you sum up your judgment of me, the result you get is that, although you don't charge me with anything downright improper or wicked (with the exception perhaps of my latest marriage plan), you do charge me with coldness, estrangements and ingratitude. And, what is more, you charge me with it in such a way as to make it seem my fault, as though I might have been able, with something like a touch on the steering wheel, to make everything quite different, while you aren't in the slightest to blame, unless it is for having been too good to me. (116)

Thus, just as *Portnoy's Complaint* functions as a long self-aware joke, there is something of that Jewish comic sensibility of self-deprecation in *The Breast,* with an even more amplified othering: first, by the hidden scientists in the novel that are secretly judging and analyzing Kepesh, and second, imagined othering by the Jewish intellectuals who did not "get the joke" of *Portnoy's Complaint.* Preempting, in retrospect, this specific audience's othering of his

[111]Perhaps "The Penis" as a name for the book would have been too on the nose.

work, Roth goes further in belittling himself and his literature before them, by going to the absurd lengths of turning a character into a wanton breast creature.

The transition into a breast is at its most basic level embedded within the paradigm of identity. The desire for sex and, in turn, the symbolic metamorphosis into "sex" is simply a natural outgrowth of the unique problem of an utterly alienated personality, as the lecherous Jewish comparative literature professor tells us:

> What alarmed me wasn't the strangeness of my desires in that hammock but the degree to which I would be severing myself from my own past—and kind—by surrendering to them. I was afraid that the further I went the further I would go—that I would reach a point of frenzy from which I would pass over into a state of being that no longer had anything to do with who or what I once had been. It wasn't even that I would no longer by myself—I would no longer by anyone. I would have become craving flesh and nothing more. (43-44)

And now, he is but a breast, singular in its identity and its desires. That is perhaps what Roth's readers or Kepesh's audience have reduced him to. They surely have reduced him from the multiplicity and complexity of Alexander Portnoy to being, in his own words, "craving flesh" (44) or, to put it in less literary terms, a boob.

The novel brings us to question who this absurd Jewish joke is on. It is really difficult not to read the text, as well as the entire Kepesh series, as an ironic literary commentary on the very idea of comedy in the form of a novella-length self-deprecating joke. For why choose a professor of literature as the narrator of his own ridiculous and sex-bound adventures? Kepesh's background manufactures awareness and insight into this kind of fantastic ridiculousness, as only a professor of literature could. And, if a reader might be tempted to feel genuine sympathy for Kepesh's newfound state, Roth intervenes and drives home the comic essence of his predicament when Arthur Schonbrunn (Kepesh's graduate school advisor, former department chair, and current Dean) finally arrives at the hospital to

visit his mentee. Immediately, Kepesh begins to run future employment ideas by his former colleague and now boss, but Schonbrunn cannot hold himself back from laughter:

> Giggling—not because of anything ludicrous I had proposed, but because he saw that it was true, I actually *had* turned into a breast. My graduate school advisor, my university superior, the most courtly professor I have ever known—and yet, from the sound of it, overcome with the giggles *simply at the sight of me.*
>
> "I'm—I—David—" But now he was laughing so, he couldn't even speak. Arthur Schonbrunn unable to speak. Talk about the incredible. Twenty, thirty seconds more of uproarious laughter, and then he was gone. The visit had lasted about three minutes. (51)

The key aspect of this incident is that Schonbrunn is overcome with giggles, "simply at the sight" of Kepesh. In this way, Roth associates Kepesh's Dean with the same mysterious and insidious audience of critics who have developed an opinion of Roth/Kepesh on the most superficial of levels.

The relationship of visibility and Jewish identity is critical here and I will return to it throughout the dissertation. Jewish identity and its various neuroses of acceptance and assimilation are intimately tied to the ways in which Jews were seen and have been seen on the most basic of visual levels. Even the way Jewish identity has constructed itself is tied to how it has been viewed by others. More specifically to our inquiry, Freud's insistence that Jewish humor's defining characteristic is that Jews make fun of their "own character" is the result of the ego's incorporation of the negativity that arrives from the gaze of the non-Jew. There is not, therefore, something inherently pathological in the implied masochism of the Jewish joke, when the Jew decides to humble himself or herself before the other's already punishing and judgmental gaze. It is not coincidental that it is Schonbrunn's gaze that convinces Kepesh that he must be delusional (that he is, in other words, not seeing the

world as is, but manufacturing a fictional world) because Schonbrunn could not possibly react in such a way, as he tells his therapist Dr. Klinger:

> "I said, "curiously, it's Arthur Schonbrunn's visit that convinces me I'm on the right track. How could I ever have believed that Arthur would come here and laugh? How could I take so blatantly a paranoid delusion for the truth? I've been cursing him for a month now—and Debbie too, for those idiotic records—and none of it makes any sense at all. Because if there is one person in the world who simply couldn't lose control like that, it's Arthur"
>
> "He is beyond the perils of human nature, this Dean?"
>
> "You know something? The answer to that is yes.
>
> He is beyond the perils of human nature" (58-59)

We are indeed dealing with a case that goes beyond "the perils of human nature" because of the fictionality of the Jewish joke. It is not human nature per se that is at stake with comedy, but rather the unmasking of human nature that hides itself in the proceedings of civilized decorum. Comedy reminds us, especially Jews, that one is always on the cusp of becoming a joke—either as a breast or a cockroach. And Kepesh actually suggests that the entire crisis here is a crisis of fictionality:

> "Did fiction do this to me? "How could it have? Asks Dr. Klinger. "No, hormones are hormones and art is art. You are not suffering from an overdose of the great imaginations." "Aren't I? I wonder. This might well be my way of being a Kafka, being a Gogol, being a Swift. They could envision the incredible, they had the words and those relentless fictionizing brains. But I had neither, I had literary longings and that was it. I loved the extreme in literature, idolized those who wrote it, was virtually hypnotized by the imagery and the power—" " And ? Yes? The world is full of art lovers –so?" "So I took the leap. Made the world flesh. Don't you see, I have out-Kafkaed Kafka." "Klinger laughed, as though I meant only to be amusing. "After all," I said, "who is the greater artist, he who imagines the marvelous transformation, or he who marvelously transforms himself?" (82).

Jewish people, the novella suggests, with their vigilant performance of identity, their trying to measure up to some imaginary abstract Jewishness created by false othering, become the

masters of creating fiction—a fiction of the self. And in doing this, they are participating, and perhaps complicit, in the perpetuation of the fiction that is the "abstract Jew." For "the Jew" has throughout history been a site of difference, and a fiction, a floating signifier, upon which meaning has been inscribed. In that sense, in the essential and basic way that Kafka could not be or did not want to be his father, or what his father wanted him to be, he wakes up one day as a bug. And Roth, via Kepesh, is suggesting, if he cannot measure up to some notion of "goodness," partly because said goodness is already a work of cultural fiction, he might as well live out his baser and more fundamental desires. Thus the baser, flesh-driven instincts of Kepesh, a man made of sexual flesh, is appropriate as a comic response to one's own fictional identity as a Jew.

The novella ends with Kepesh's insightful evocation of one of Rainer Maria Rilke's best-known but still abstruse poem, "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Especially relevant to some of Roth's themes is the poem's mysterious, open-ended final lines: "for here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life" (89). Maimonides or "the Rambam" (Rabbi Moses ben Mimon, as would be more appropriate in our context) famously articulated the stakes of living ethically in the world. Between *Rosh Hashana* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), Jews make penance for the sins they have committed throughout the year in the hope that they will be inscribed in *Sefer Ha-Chaim* (The Book of Life). The Rambam goes much further and argues that not only should Jews be penitent during those days, but rather "every man," he claims, "needs to see himself the entire year, as if he is half innocent and half guilty [on the scale of deeds]." If man sins "just a single sin, he has doomed himself and the world to guilt and has corrupted it."[112] Therefore, every Jew must realize that a single act can tip the scales. Kepesh's comical situation, he

[112]See Rambam *Halachot Teshuva* ch. 3; Halacha 4.

implies in his final lines of the book, is also the tragedy of the Jewish condition and its inability to escape the other's judgemental gaze.

The Dying Animal concludes the trilogy somewhat later in Roth's career with a trenchant awareness that the crux of the trilogy, if it was not already obvious to readers, is sex. Roth makes this obvious with an epigraph from the Irish novelist Edna O'Brien, "The body contains the life story just as much as the brain," and the lines that end the first section of the novel, "the decades since the sixties have done a remarkable job of completing the sexual revolution. This is a generation of astonishing fellators. There's been nothing like them ever before among their class of young women" (8-9). Even though *The Dying Animal* is a novel of harsh realities and consequences, which concludes with Kepesh's young object of desire needing a mastectomy for breast cancer, it clearly conveys that while the novel is a sex-filled remorseless confessional, it also resides within the semantic and generic field of comedy.

Kepesh's main object of interest is a former student of Cuban American heritage, Consuela Castillo, and Kepesh's patented seduction of her points to the intersection of sex and comedy:

> She thinks, I'm telling him who I am. He's interested in who I am. That is true, but I am curious who she is because I want to fuck her. I don't need all of this great interest in Kafka and Velázquez. Having this conversation with her, I am thinking, how much more am I going to have to go through? Three hours? Four? Will I go as far as eight hours? Twenty minutes into the veiling and already I'm wondering, what does any of this have to do with her tits and her skin and how she carries herself? The French art of being flirtatious is of no interest to me. The savage urge is. No, this is not seduction. **This is comedy [bold added]**. It is the comedy of creating a connection that is not the connection—that cannot begin to compete with the connection—created unartificially by lust. This is the instant conventionalizing, the giving us something in common on the spot, the trying to transform lust into something socially appropriate. Yet, it's the radical inappropriateness that makes lust *lust*. (16-17)

Given decades to ponder his previous work and reactions to it, Roth, I would argue, here comes to realize the fine line that separates sex and comedy and the affinity that humor and lust share. With comedy, as with lust, there is a deep element of radical inappropriateness. And not in the sense in which lust and sex sometime overlap with humor. But rather, comedy, like the obscene, functions by its departure from the normative, by its departure from that which is seemly. This awareness is akin to the fine line that exists between comedy and horror. The cycle that began with Kepesh turned into a breast, turns Conseula, under Kepesh's gaze, into nothing but a breast. While Consuela at the end of the novel is purportedly the "dying animal" referenced in the title, the joke or possibly the tragedy of the novel is that we, or more specifically men, are "animals."

Animals have a bad reputation. They represent a coarser atavistic part of human subjectivity, but as such they are actually a constitutive part of the human comedy, which is importantly different from divine comedy, and is always a comedy of the flesh, of men and women up to earthbound and flesh bound mischief. And, sex, of course, as Jonathan Boyarin argues, is the one domain in which man and not Gods reign:

> The Rabbis understood the human being as a body, sexuality was an essential component of being human, while in Platonized formations, one could imagine an escape from sexuality into a purely spiritual and thus truly "human" state. The rabbinic insistence on the essentiality of the corporeal and the thus the sexual in the constitution of human being represents then a point of resistance to the dominant discursive practices of both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures of late-antiquity. (35)

4.8 Conclusion: Men are Animals

Various philosophers and thinkers have pondered whether laughter is exclusively human. Even if animals laugh, we often assume that our human ability to reflect on our actions and make sense of them yields our ability to laugh and to laugh at ourselves. But

perhaps humor and comedy are not a part of our higher brain function but our most basic and elemental sense of being. Philosopher Simon Critchley seems to think so:

> If humor is human, then it also, curiously marks the limit of the human. Or better, humor explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier that separates humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable…. Humor is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories. We might even define the human as a dynamic produced by a series of identifications and misidentifications with animality. Thus, what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human. The fact that we label certain comic genres in animalistic terms, like "Cock and Bull" or "shaggy dog" stories is perhaps revealing. (29)

We simply may have made the mistake of thinking that animals do not laugh because they lack our sense of self-awareness. Yet, the opposite can be true as well. In fact, perhaps we laugh because we are much more like animals than we would like to acknowledge.

As intimated by Critchley, laughter and comedy live on that incongruous liminality between enlightened reason and debauched carnality. We may then find in Roth's investigations of our carnality a scant but powerful residue of what has been part of our very basic human essence. That is, sex in comedy can (not that it always does) remind us of our place in the universe. By disordering, it orders. For the ambivalent Jew it allows him or her to catch moments of identification and identity as ephemeral threads of ambivalence and incongruity, which is all one can hope for, perhaps, for the clumsy, disordered stranger.

CHAPTER 5

THE JEWISH COMEDIENNE AS SEXUAL PARIAH

"These then were two very genuine experiences of my own. These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first-killing the Angel in the House-I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved."

- Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women"

"There is in the middle of *Lucinde* a short chapter called '*Eine Reflexion'* (A reflection), which reads like a philosophical treatise or argument (using philosophical language which can be identified as that of Fichte), but it doesn't take a very perverse mind, only a slightly perverse one, to see that what is actually being described is not a philosophical argument at all but is—well, how shall I put it?—a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse. Discourse which seems to be purely philosophical can be read in a double code, and what it really is describing is something which we do not generally consider worthy of philosophical discourse, at least not in those terms—sexuality is worthy of it, but what is being described is not sexuality, it's something much more specific than that."

- Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony"

"And Sarah said: 'G-d hath made laughter for me; everyone that heareth will laugh on account of me.'"

- JPS Tanakh, Gen. 21.6

5.1 Preface: Anxiety Men and the Renegade Girls

In the previous chapter, we looked at the work of Philip Roth. Many of his novels are exemplars of what we might call "the Jewish bawdy," i.e., novels whose Jewish sensibility is unquestionable and which also partake quite often in the bawdy and the prurient in general. We saw how over the course of a long and varied career Philip Roth destabilized notions of "the Jew" by creating ambivalences regarding the Jew's relationship to embodiment and sexuality, and, even more importantly, although it is less appreciated, via the ambivalence that he created in his fictional universes. Without a doubt, Roth centers his fiction on "the

Jew," and more specifically on the male Jew. Also, it is no secret that Roth does not have a good reputation when it comes to the treatment of women in his fiction. Roth has been accused of misogyny because of the kind of bawdiness in his works. These accusations have, at times, gone further than just indictments of his fiction as androcentric, or worse, misogynistic, and have proceeded to indict Philip Roth, the Jewish American writer, as an alleged misogynist. Dan Synikin basically views Roth's "bad men" characters as completely interchangeable with the author and writes in a column immediately following Roth's death that, "Roth, the lecherous white male author *par excellence*, asks us to grapple with the very questions that many have asked about Roth and his legacy, the question of whether we should study bad men or banish them altogether."[113] Brett Ashley Kaplan, an academic enthusiast of Roth's writing, notes:

> It is definitely frustrating to be a feminist reader of Roth, and it is difficult to enjoy the jouissance of his writing and simultaneously be so distraught by the representations of women. Many of the major female characters (most of them are not Jewish) are flattened, nicknamed, and objectified—it can be hard to celebrate the gems. I feel tossed between the utter joy of the prose (whatever else you might want to say about Roth, you have to hand it to him: he could write!) and the melancholia of seeing women debased. (68)

We would require a dissertation of its own to attempt to parse out the differences between "the Author" and the author, specifically regarding the ethical responsibility of the real-world author to the fictional world. But no doubt such discourse continues to hamper Roth's reputation.

My own opinion about Roth's attitude towards women is that the fiction itself and its under-explored experimentations makes the boundaries of representation rather fuzzy. I

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[113]See Synikin.

tend to agree with Kaplan who adds that, "Once you dig up the granular nuances of the text you'll see that, yes, there's a lot to object to, but there is also a complex critique of troubling depictions embedded in the novels—their latent content might surprise you. Looking closely, there are through-the-looking-glass moments that counter the quick dismissal of Roth as a 'misogynist'" (68-69). Many of the men in Roth's work are clearly not good men and when women are described from their point of view, it is not surprising that they are not depicted kindly. Roth wrote from a narcissistic and masculine point of view, very much in the mold of what French feminist scholar Hélène Cixous describes in her acclaimed essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa":

> I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (879)

However, there is one scene that jumps off of the page when one is reading Roth's fiction, and, at times, becomes somewhat numb to the shallowness with which some of the women are depicted. In *The Anatomy Lesson,* the third installment of Roth's Zuckerman series,[114] the now, quite successful author is encroached upon by a different kind of woman, Diana, a very young and quite assertive college student, who "looked like someone who'd seen it all and emerged unscathed, a woman of fifty who'd been lucky" (89). Almost for the first time, both

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[114]The first three were bound together in *Zuckerman Bound* in 1985, which also included the novella or "Epilogue", *The Prague Orgy.*

Roth and his alter-ego Zuckerman indicate a seeming awareness of the problematic men that women deal with, "What she'd seen and survived were the men. They'd been in pursuit since she was ten." When Zuckerman asks her "what have you learned?", she fires back:

> Everything. They want to come in your hair, they want to beat your ass, they want to call you on the phone from work and get you to finger yourself while you're doing your homework. I'm without illusions, Mr. Zuckerman. Ever since I was in seventh grade a friend of my father's has been calling every month. He couldn't be sweeter to his wife and his kids, but me he'd been calling since I'm twelve. He disguises his voice and every time it's the same damn thing: 'How would you like to straddle my cock. (89)

In the few pages that Roth affords Diana, which corresponds to some degree to the scant time that Nathan Zuckerman generally affords most women, the young college student provides some of the most revealing and incisive reading of Zuckerman's fragile ego and a general understanding of the economy of the battle of the sexes. Through her, Roth voices some of the most brutal assessment of Zuckerman's insecurity and pettiness, which is in most cases tied to his Jewish identity. When Zuckerman hands her a letter to be typed and sent to *The Times* in response to a scathing critique of one of his novels by the literary critic Milton Appel (who haunts Zuckerman's ego and imagination over the course of the entire novel), Diana responds:

> I refuse to type this letter, Nathan. You're a crazy man when you start on these things, and this letter is crazy. 'if the Arabs were undone tomorrow by a plague of cheap solar power, you wouldn't give my books a second thought.' You're off your head. That makes no sense. He wrote what he wrote about your books because that is what he thinks. Period. Why ever *care* what these people think, when you are you and they are nobody? Look at you. What a vulnerable, resentful mouth! Your hair is actually standing on end. I never read any books by him. They don't teach him at school. I can't fathom this in a man like you. You're an extremely sophisticated, civilized man—how can you be caught in a trap by these people and them upset you to such a degree? (94)

Diana spends a few pages eviscerating Zuckerman for his insecurities. Not many women in Roth's oeuvre are given a landing to posit such too-hard-to-handle truths.

Although explicitly not Jewish, Diana suggests a kind of kinship to the truth-telling, quick-witted, and raunchy comediennes of the time, the most noteworthy of which, such as Joan Rivers, Sandra Bernhard, and Roseanne Barr, were Jewish.[115] Diana's punk and sexually transgressive spirit is clearly in the mold of many outspoken Jewish comediennes, whose irreverent and unrepentant comedy has celebrated independence, sexual transgression, and political outspokenness, and who have often offered an ironic contrast to the neurasthenic comedy of their male Jewish counterparts. With a strong sense of independence, these comediennes were never ashamed to profess their femininity, without sacrificing their power.

Diana's character is important in a couple of ways, neither of which necessarily absolve Roth from androcentrism or misogyny. On the one hand, through her, Roth is giving voice to a kind of open sexuality and a no-holds-barred Second Wave Feminism of the rising Jewish comediennes of the time. Speaking in the way she does, Diane shows very little regard for propriety and decorum that one might expect of women in "polite" society. On the other hand, Diane, as a character, also represents the other side of the coin of depictions of sexually liberated and potty-mouthed women. Yes, she indeed displays power and agency, a strong and irreverent voice, and she is as raunchy and as transgressive as she wishes to be. But ultimately, one could ask, is her sexuality interpolated, as Louis Althusser would say? Is not the fact that her power is cloaked in sexuality instrumental to

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[115]One might conjecture that Diana's "ultra-privileged Christian-Connecticut" background may have been required, so that Roth would stay away from various stereotypical attitudes that are associated with Jewish women.

representations of women as sexual objects? This is, I would argue, one of the key dilemmas that one deals with when looking at the immensely long and substantial tradition of Jewish comediennes in the United States, a tradition which has been marked by a decidedly sexual and feminist discourse, or in other words, has been really raunchy.

The current project deals with the bawdy, which as I have repeatedly argued, has been a staple of Jewish humor. It is either curious or interesting, but without a doubt significant that the bawdy has been an even more significant throughline in the work of the most successful and popular Jewish comediennes in twentieth and twenty-first-century America. It was perhaps not until the sexual revolution that American society began to fight its puritanical streak in matters of sex and the body. Yet, to this day, American culture has never fully emancipated itself from its puritanical and patriarchal roots. But for some reasons, the comedy of Jewish comediennes has, from almost the very beginning of their taking the stages of vaudeville or the large dinner halls of the Catskills, been a corner of resistance to America's puritanical spirit, and as Joyce Antler writes, "helped shape the contours of American comedy" (125).

5.2 Jewish Comediennes: Medusas in the Attic

The raunchiness of Jewish comediennes in the United States is neither my discovery nor a trade secret. And recently, Amazon Prime's *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* has brought it back into the figurative limelight. When critics describe certain Jewish comediennes of the last twenty years—such as Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer, and Niki Glazer, as raunchy, dirty, and controversial—they often treat them as a historical aberration and fail to place them within a long history of twentieth-century Jewish comediennes whose comedy and performances were just as, if not more, libidinal and lascivious than the performances of their Jewish male counterparts. If one looks at the history of comediennes in the United

States, one finds, just as in the case of men's comedy, an immense over-representation of Jewish women.[116] Within that category, probably the most successful of the lot, including the vaudeville sensation Sophie Tucker, the late-night star Joan Rivers, and the politically engaged Sarah Silverman, are best known for their proclivity towards matters of sex.[117]

Some of the earliest scholarship on Jewish comedy immediately highlighted this issue. Since then, it is as if scholarship on the topic may be just as obsessed with the matter, as these comediennes may be obsessed with sex, sexuality, and their bodies. There has certainly been more research, proportionally speaking, on bawdy women comics than on bawdy male comics. The first academic to truly engage with the phenomenon was Sarah Blacher Cohen, who in 1987 edited a pioneering collection of essays entitled *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor.* This was one of the first books to provide a varied and engaged academic perspective on Jewish humor, which up until that point, aside from very few other texts (academic or partly academic books), languished in the realm of joke collectors and folklore retellings of Jewish lore.[118] Blacher Cohen's essay in the collection, one of the first academic analyses of Jewish comediennes, did not shy away from the obvious fact that their material was "unkosher:"

> Jewish women comedians are brazen offenders of the faith. Their behavior violates the Torah's conception of *Zniut* or feminine modesty. Rather than being shy and humble, they unashamedly bask in the public's eye, clamoring for all the attention they can get. They do not heed the Talmudic injunction: "*Isha lo tikra batorah mipnei kavod ha'tzibur"* (*Megillah 23a*; "a woman should not read the Torah out of respect for the congregation"). From their

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[116]See Antler 123.

[117]I do not mean to equate success with quality.

[118]Save Freud's joke book, which one could argue is essentially, like most of Freud's work, actually about Jews, Theodor Reik's *Jewish Wit* is probably the first book to discuss the subject. Reik's intellectual qualifications were not in question, but the book presents itself more as a philosophical thought exercise around different topics related to Jews and their humor. Avner Ziv's important and influential collection, *Jewish Humor* was only published in 1997.

> self-erected pulpits, they shock the community with their risqué sermonettes, their unorthodox learning, their bastardization of scripture. By invading the holy sphere of the Jewish male comic they usurp his audience and so diminish his self-esteem. Their humor of camouflaged aggression disturbs their spectators as well, for it clashes with the code of *edelkeit* or gentility observed by respectable Jewish women. But worst of all, the comediennes disbar themselves from performing Judaism's central commandment for women: the enforcement of the ritual of kashrut—keeping kosher, keeping clean. As creatures of unclean lips, they sully, they corrupt. (105)

Blacher Cohen's essay, just like its subject matter, was comprehensive and ahead of it time in its willingness to discuss these matters. But her essay also makes some assumptions about Jewish identity that we have since come to understand with more nuance and complexity. When she describes these comediennes as straying from Jewish orthodoxy, she not only speaks in overly general terms about these different comediennes, but also assumes that their transgressions come from transgressing a shared religious framework. But very few of these comediennes, the early or the current ones, come from such orthodox backgrounds. What is more important, and Blacher Cohen does not neglect this, is that their material was transgressive not simply in terms of Jewish *Halakha* (Jewish law) but societal norms and the manner with which women were—and often still are—expected to behave and speak. Her essay has proven to be prescient: since 1987 more Jewish comediennes have jumped into the fray to make a name for themselves in the manner that the comediennes Blacher Cohen described. It took more than twenty years for Roberta Mock and Joyce Antler to revive interest in these comediennes and their uniqueness.[119] It is not that research into women and Jewish comedy did not continue to be an important aspect of scholarship on Jewish women, but most scholarship was primarily interested in discussing the popularity

[119]Roberta Mock's book and article were published before Antler's essay, and will be discussed below.

of Jewish women stereotypes, namely the JAP (Jewish American Princess) and the *Yiddishe Momma* (Jewish mother).

Following Blacher Cohen's lead, Antler brings to the fore the great impact that these comediennes have had:[120]

> When we look at the historical trajectory of Jewish women comics, we find them in every generation in every corner of American culture. Like male Jewish comedians, they have demonstrated superb verbal skills and the masterful use of irony, satire, and mockery, including self- mockery. Their heritage as Jews especially, the Diasporic experience of living between two worlds - gave them a sharp critical edge and the ability to express the anxieties and foibles of contemporary culture. (125)

Similarly to Blacher Cohen, Antler's analysis suffers from a somewhat more traditional view of Jewish identity, from which she is commenting on these comediennes. She notes that it is their heritage as Jews and in the diaspora that gives them their critical edge. Jews' commentary as outsiders has for many years been part of the understanding of the efficacy and popularity of Jewish comedy. To some degree, some of the arguments I have presented in this dissertation agree with that framing. But it is nevertheless somewhat problematic, if not controversial in certain circles, to situate these comediennes as "Diasporic." For some of them, the diaspora more likely means some random enclave of Los Angeles, where they and their friends live while working on improv or their "5 good minutes," away from their real homeland—Brooklyn. That is not to say that their Jewish identity is not important to them. Quite the contrary, the specific contemporary comediennes that I will focus on in this chapter do not shy away from their Jewish background and have often made it quite central

[120]Antler's article was published in a special issue of *Studies in American Jewish Literature* dedicated to the legacy of Blacher-Cohen.

to their performative identity.[121] Whether practicing only aspects of their Jewish faith or simply identifying with it culturally, these comediennes emphasize their Jewish background. And when that is the case, especially in the last few years in the United States, with the documented rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, it is clear that these women are very keenly aware of their difference from the culture at large.[122] Yet, this does not mean that they yearn out of being Diasporic. For some of them, this spirit of being othered and in-between is an important aspect of their creativity and art, as I will elaborate upon.

Antler does make an important point in regard to the uniqueness of Jewish comediennes:

> Yet there is something unique about female Jewish comics that makes them distinct from male peers…. [M]any of these comedians center their humor in a specifically female - and often feminist - point of view that show- cases issues of particular relevance to women…. these comedians have stretched the boundaries of conventional thinking about comedy and about gender roles. The laughter they engender is powerful and subversive. (125)

From generation to generation, it seems not only that Jewish comediennes, who have taken to the stage, have become more prurient and unmuzzled, they have become more political in other ways as well. Perhaps outspokenness begets outspokenness. Both require a measure of bravery and the bare-minimum amount of awareness of social and political injustice. Also, it shouldn't be overlooked that there was something clearly very political in

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[121]This counters the argument made by Shaina Hammerman in her impressive article, "Dirty Jews: Amy Schumer and Other Vulgar Jewesses" that many contemporary Jewish comediennes have hidden their Jewish identity.

[122]I include "anti-Judaism" here because today's bigotry toward Jews is not only racial. Jews are seen mostly as white but certain notions have bigotedly been associated with Judaism and Jewish people.

stepping into the mostly masculine public sphere of the comedy stage, and doubly so when one was willing to express sexual desires and needs.

One might reasonably deduce that the radical nature of theses comedienne and their commitment to political engagement is the result of compounded exclusion. On one level, as women, Antler writes, "they cannot help but challenge the social structures that keep women from position of power" (258). On another level, as Jews, they often experience another dimension of exclusion to which they must respond. If as Antler and others have intimated, difference, exclusion, and inequity are the things to which the art of the outsider responds to, then it is only natural that these comediennes interrogate issues of alterity and difference, since sex and the body have throughout history been the very site upon which the difference of women from men has been articulated. One need not be versed in Freud to know that. Additionally, in the case of Jews, sex and the body have also been key sites upon which the difference of the Jew has been marked, as Sander Gilman has written:

> the construction of the Jewish body in the west is absolutely linked to the underlying ideology of anti-Semitism, to the view that the Jew is inherently different. The difference of the Jewish body is absolute within the Western tradition; its counterimage (from the comments of Paul, Eusibius, and Origen on the "meaning" of circumcision) is the Christian body that eventually becomes secularized into the "German" or "English" body with the rise of the modern body politic…. No aspect of the representation of the Jewish body in that sphere whether fabled or real is free from the taint of the claim of the special nature of the Jewish body, as a sign of the inherent different of the Jew. (223)

One important distinction is that the difference of the Jew has historically been expressed via the marked body of the male Jew, as different, inferior, as well as feminine, as a consequence of circumcision, which allegorically in early Christianity was the ironic marker

that associated the Jew with carnality.[123] What then about the body of the Jewish woman? According to Gilman, one of the reasons that there is not a similar rich tradition of discussion of the Jewish female body is because they did not pose a similar threat to the larger body politic as Jewish male body did (Gilman 224).

The history of the Jewess's and her, one would assume, Jewish body, is even more complex. On the one hand, it never became a locus of difference and exclusion, partly because women were not significant enough to become theorized sites of difference and exclusion. Yet, without a doubt, similar notions of alterity applied to Jewish women.[124] But the Jewish woman's difference brought with it another wrinkle. While they were a site of cultural difference and othering, they also ironically emerged as the opposite—as a site of attraction and fascination—in the concept of the *belle juif,* the beautiful Jewess as an exotic and essentially Orientalized sex-object with, according to Roberta Mock, "jouissance attributed to … their love of sex and food," but also as a "'danger' for their foreignness" (102).[125]

In addition to the Jewish woman's body being paradoxically marked both from outside the community as other **and** as an object of desire, there are intra-cultural aspects that we must not ignore. To various degrees, throughout history and across different Jewish denominations and traditions, women have not been considered equal to men. Furthermore, a basic understanding in rabbinic Judaism, notes Judith Stora-Sandor is that "female attraction is a threat for man. Thus, in addition to the separation of the sexes in the

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[123]See Boyarin.

[124]Gilman in his essay on Proust discusses various body parts whose alleged different shape, size, or length have been associated with Jews and Jewishness.

[125] See Robert Mock, "Female Jewish Comedians"

synagogue, modesty is demanded of women, and men are subject to a host of prohibitions" (132). In his thought-provoking book about sex in Talmudic culture, Daniel Boyarin challenges, to some degree, the view of Judaism as innately misogynist, arguing that unlike the misogyny of the Hellenistic tradition, the Rabbis valued women, while still being androcentric in their thinking. The Rabbis, whether more or less androcentric, were quite preoccupied with women, their bodies, and sex, as I discussed in the introduction. After all, it makes sense that a culture, influenced by its religious edicts, which have set such a premium on procreation as in the commmandment of "*Pru Urvu*" (Go forth and prosper) should place such specific and important cultural capital on a woman's body. Throughout most of history, after all, in most religions and cultures, the woman's body and its sexuality were utilitarian in their value. All manner of erotic discourse that we might associate with Judaism and religion is always to some degree in the service of that value. Would it then be surprising that for Jewish women, when finally able to break through and speak about the patriarchy and Judaism, waves of pent-up emotion would overwhelm their personal and cultural super-ego dams. Would any defense-mechanism have been able to stop this?

Roberta Mock's work on these issues has shown a bit more contemporary sophistication on some of these issues and has shown important and significant scholarship on the matter. In an important book published in 2007, J*ewish Women on Stage, Film, and Television*, she writes that comediennes like Bette Midler and Roseanne, inspired by luminaries like Sophie Tucker, "are performing presences that express racialized sexual difference through comedy and grotesque displays of artifice, vulgarity, consumption, and non-maternal performativity can continue to act as mediating agents between dominant culture and its abjected elements" (123). The transgressive bodily comedy of Jewish women anticipated in some ways the call of Second Wave feminists such as Cixous, who calls for art that participates in a feminist and political struggle and whose locus is the female body:

> We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex…. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end." Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord, assuring them-otherwise they couldn't come-that the old lady is always right behind them, watching them make phallus, women will go right up to the impossible. (885-886)

Cixous' own Jewish identity does not come up explicitly in "The Laugh of the Medusa," as it rarely did in much of her earlier theoretical writing, perhaps because, as implied by the urgency voiced in the essay, the struggle against the patriarch, might require a unified front of women. In some of her later writing, however, she has discussed her Jewish background more readily, noting that: "I had not noticed that deep down, exile had always been inscribed in my writing… perhaps exile, which is fundamental for me, which is primary, I resist it by doing a work of continual reuniting" (qtd. In Debrauwere-Miller 261). In the manner of Cixous' Medusa, the disrespected outcast, valued more for their function than for their essence, Jewish comediennes have taken to the stage and have used comedy for perhaps its most efficient and scathing function—speaking for those not in power.

5.3 The History of Chutzpah: The Jewish Comedienne in History

To note that the biblical Sarah is the mother of all Jewish comedy appears at first to be redundant, since all so-called "Jews" are ostensibly descendants of Abraham's wife. As is often the case, however, a woman's role in history is neglected or diminished. We should recall the origin story of Jewish comedy in *Genesis* 18, which marks the first time that a patriarchal figure (and we are talking here about the Ur-patriarchal figure—God) made

claims on a woman's body that did not go unanswered, unlike the case with Eve some chapters earlier. God, through his messengers, tells Abraham that Sarah will again bear a child. This leads to another first in history. We get more than just a response from Sarah; we get a comic and sarcastic rebuke, and an eye-roll appropriate to what we now refer to as "mansplaining:"

> 9 And they said unto him: 'Where is Sarah thy wife?' And he said: 'Behold, in the tent.'
>
> 10 And He said: 'I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.' And Sarah heard in the tent door, which was behind him.--
>
> 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.--
>
> 12 And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: 'After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'
>
> 13 And HaShem said unto Abraham: 'Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old?
>
> 14 Is any thing too hard for HaShem. At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son.'
>
> 15 Then Sarah denied, saying: 'I laughed not'; for she was afraid. And He said: 'Nay; but thou didst laugh.'

This passage is resonant in several ways. First, Sarah's immediate instinct is to reflect on her physical and sexual status. Second, the importance of Sarah's response is not in her laughter for, as the text clearly suggests, her laughter could have been the result of nervousness, but rather in the fact that she, even if only in her heart, realizes the ridiculousness of the situation and then, finally, when confronted with God, dares to deny her laughter. Not surprisingly, Sarah's laughter in this situation has occupied the thoughts and the writing of many Talmudic thinkers. After all, we have the first instance of a woman laughing, and more importantly we have it set up as a kind of rebuke of God. A chapter earlier, when God informs Abraham that "I will give thee a son of her; yea, I will bless her,

and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be of her." Abraham then "fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart: 'Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?'" But unlike the case with Sarah, God does not pursue indignantly why Abraham laughed, and Abraham does not rebuff and deny as Sarah does, when she seems to challenge God. Some Talmudic scholars and thinkers offer variations on being aghast at Sarah's impudence, while others try to find excuses for her behavior with the discussion mainly focused on the line: 'After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'" The key phrase here being "Shall I have pleasure" which in the Hebrew "Haita Li Edna" is first of all in the past tense, and translates indeed as pleasure, which Sarah then follows with "my lord being old also." Basically, Sarah is thinking and associating the having of the child with the pleasure of intercourse, a pleasure that has seemingly been relegated to her and Abraham's past. We know that after Ishmael, Abraham does not have another son with Hagar. This leads Esther Shkop to try and redeem Sarah's allegedly disrespectful laughter with the fact that her pointing out that Abraham is so old, might mean that she is being sensitive to the fact that Abraham may no longer be able to function sexually in an appropriate manner. But pleasure and joy, "edna" in Hebrew, could also be the simple fact of having a child. And that child, as ordained from God shall be called Itzhak (Isaac) as in "He who will laugh." Together with the fact that in chapter 21, after the birth of Isaac, Sarah reflects: "G-d hath made laughter for me; everyone that heareth will laugh on account of me,'" Sarah seems to associate the joy of having her son with the joy of laughter. She is also very clearly laying claim, as a point of pride, to the origin of "laughter." What we have here is that in addition to being the first matriarch, Sarah is basically the first Jewish comedienne. She is irreverent, forward, and very clearly comfortable with matters of sex. One could easily imagine, if it does not already exist, a Joan Rivers routine set up around the fact that her Husband can longer "get it up." Maybe indeed

borrowing (stealing jokes) from the ancient matriarch, in shows later in life, Rivers often explored themes of aging and sexual dysfunctionality that, as she tells her audience,

> Will Happen to all of you. Ha ha! The body drops. My breasts. I could have a mammogram and a pedicure at the same time…. You know what? This is horrible. Do you know what really drops first? The vagina. Yeah, no-one tells, the vagina drops. I woke up six months ago, I went 'why am wearing a bunny slipper?" [pause]. 'Any why is it grey?'[126]

With Sarah's sparring with God, we are barely into the text, and the Tanakh has already set up a struggle that will continue to reverberate throughout history: the patriarchy versus womanhood. Throughout history, and still in some ways today, a woman responding in such a way to the patriarchy would not have been so quickly glossed over. Possibly though, it is not truly glossed over here either. The stark contrast of the following line and the tension and silence left hanging in the air is rather telling: "And the men rose up from thence and looked out toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way." (Genesis 21:16). The story of Sodom, which will follow, is of course the story of the annihilation of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.[127]

No analysis that brings us to the present day—or close to it and to, say, the work of Sarah Silverman, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer of *Broad City*—would be complete without situating the analysis in a long tradition of Jewish comediennes who found success in the United States with comedy acts that challenged societal decorum and propriety. As with feminism, but without necessarily drawing direct parallels, we can think of the history of Jewish comediennes in the United States in terms of waves. The first wave includes

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[126]From her 2007 performance in the BBC's *Live at The Apollo.*

[127]The irony here being that one of the notorious sins of the cities was that they their sexual practices were not procreative.

performers like Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Mollie Picon, Belle Barthe, and Pearl Washington. This first wave was firmly rooted in the early Yiddish theater, vaudeville, and burlesque. The first Jewish comedienne to truly cross over into mainstream American entertainment was Sophie Tucker. Born Sofia Kalish in 1884, she arrived from Russia as a baby with her family, who settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Enamored with the theater and the celebrities who frequented her family's kosher restaurant, she left home and made her first mark in the vaudeville circuit. Tucker's early success was in the controversial singing style known as "coon shouting" which mimicked African American singing style, usually in blackface. Although Tucker protested, her producer thought she could only have success performing in blackface. So, like Al Jolson and other Jewish performers, Tucker put on the "burnt cork" and affected a singing style originating in African American culture. As many have documented, this was a fraught cultural situation.[128] There was a lot of collaboration with African Americans artists and plenty of mutual admiration, but also cultural appropriation. These acts were premised of course on the mimicry of African-American singing and performance style, and to some degree accentuating their most racial (and racist) element for theatrics. But once Tucker's unique talent was apparent, she stopped putting on the burnt cork, though some argue, her style continued to borrow heavily from African American singing styles.[129] Music historian Michael Feinstein tempers that argument, claiming that "Sophie is one of the early pioneers in modern pop singing, and she is not given credit for that. Because most people credit Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, and Louie Armstrong from the 1920s, but Sophie was actually doing that kind of singing in her

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[128]See Jeffrey Melnick and Michael Rogin.

[129]Melnick discusses the complex relationship between Jewish and African American artists and musicians of the time.

earliest recordings, which we have from 1910-1911."[130] Only later and somewhat accidently, Tucker found her true calling in a performance style that was equal parts comedy shtick and equal parts song. Not fitting the beauty standards that were expected of female performers at the time, Tucker leaned into her large physique, which she self-disparagingly described as "big and ugly," to create incongruity with her nonchalant stories of sexual desire. Antler notes that the Vaudeville and Burlesque circuits were at that time trying to tone down their image to appeal to larger crowds, but "Tucker managed to elude mass entertainment's censorship; her supposed 'ugliness' and her size permitted her to challenge social norms of femininity and 'good girl' behavior" (128).

Tucker quickly became famous for her raunchy songs. As is described in her fictionalized memoir, while on tour in Portland, in a somewhat coordinated stunt with her agent William Morris, she got herself arrested for singing her allegedly obscene song "Angle Worm Wiggle."[131] Tucker's biographer and documentarian (and co-author of the memoir) Susan Ecker says that "for the first time women were lined up to hear Sophie's new message that women can crave sex too."[132] Sophie Tucker scholar Jan Lewis remarks that Tucker "starts commissioning these songs, performing these kind of songs about sex, you know (that) she knows more about sex than anybody else, that she can teach these girls at the 'Red Hot Mommas School for Young Women;' she's gonna teach them how to be great lovers."[133] As Tucker famously recited on stage:

> Soon the school bells will be tolling, and you girls can start enrolling in the Sophie Tucker School for Red Hot Mommas where we'll teach what every

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[130] See *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker.*

[131]See Tucker, http://www.sophietucker.com/bookcdn/chapter21.html

[132]See *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker.*

[133]Ibid

> girl should know. The art of making love, how to get a man, how to hold him. I myself would do the teaching. And on graduation day, there'll be fifty million husbands shouting 'ra ra ra hooray' at the Sophie Tucker School….[134]

Tucker orchestrated her presentation as a walking and singing incongruity to comic perfection. As Barbara Walters, whose father Lou Walters owned the successful nightclub The Latin Quarter where Tucker was a regular, describes it, "for there she was Sophie Tucker rather ample, shall we say, in frame, dressed in sequins and spangles sometimes holding a fan, and out of this sort of grandmotherly-looking woman, if your grandmother, by the way happened to have yellow hair, came these very bawdy, risqué, sort of off color songs"[135] (see fig. 2).

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[134]Tucker, "Sophie Tucker School for Red Hot Mamas."

[135]See *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker.*

Figure 2 Sophie Tucker at the Latin Quarter[136]

Tucker was unintentionally a pioneer in another sense. The history of American Jewish comediennes is also the history of the troubling and challenging of Jewish gender identity and gender norms, which is, in a sense, symbolized by Sophie Tucker's life. After marriage at a very young age, giving birth to a child, and a divorce, Tucker ran away to join Vaudeville, essentially leaving her baby son with her teenage sister. By early twentieth century standards not the "motherly" thing to do. But as her biographer and documentarian Susan Ecker says "If it was a man who had to go out into the world and find a way to make money, so that he could send it home to his children, and he didn't come home, maybe once a year, perhaps, there would be no question that this is okay. This is expected this is what

[136]https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/lou-walters-latin-quarter-program-418612689

you have to do."[137]In a sense, this is the symbolic act which begins a tradition of Jewish women crossing over into public spaces that were reserved for men, whether the comic stage and its bawdy discourse or the social environment behind it—a truly underrated and difficult aspect of show business, then and today. Tucker though mastered it all with seeming ease and dexterity. For example, she had a very fruitful relationship with the Mob during Prohibition, when the Mob had a stranglehold on the nightclub scene. The story goes that Tucker would follow her performances by heading over to Al Capone's hotel room to play cards with him until the early morning.[138] Such "desecration" of man-only spaces was later adopted by the likes of Fanny Brice, Bell Barth, and others, all of them leaning into discourses and environments specifically not meant for them as women.

Fanny Brice was a contemporary of Tucker's. She was born Fania Borach in 1891, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan to immigrants from France and Romania. Like Tucker, Brice began her career in vaudeville and burlesque circuits (and like Tucker her talent got her into *The Ziegfeld Follies*). She then became a famous radio entertainer with her brat-like character "Baby Snooks." Her career took a turn when, following Irving Berlin's advice, she learned a Yiddish accent, which became her trademark. Her act was not without detractors within the Jewish community, to whom she responded later in her career by saying, "In anything Jewish I ever did, I wasn't standing apart in making fun of the race, I was the race, and what happened to me on the stage is what could happen to them" (Sochen 49). Her detractors at the time may have not noticed that Jewish self-deprecation was a rather

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[137]See *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker.*

[138]Ibid. As far as could be gathered from the documentary, "playing cards" was not meant as a euphemism.

crucial part of the Jewish comedy diet. But more likely, it was more outrageous when a woman would step up to the microphone and seem to make fun of her own people.

Belle Barth, born Annabelle Salzman in East Harlem in 1911, began her entertainment career straight out of high school as a singer-pianist showcasing her ability to perform standards and imitate the work of Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson. Barth worked the vaudeville circuit in the 1930s and 1940s, but her uniqueness emerged when she started to add bawdy aspects to her routines. She kept some of her most vulgar and biting bits to Yiddish, as if to make it a secret Jewish language of sex. Even by today's standards, it would not be surprising that Barth claimed the nicknames, "Hildegard of the Underworld" and the "Doyenne of the dirty line." Her 1960 album *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends* begins thus:

> I'm gonna line a hundred men up against the wall
> I bet a hundred dollars I can bang them all
> I banged about 98, I thought my back would break
> I went around the corner, got an oyster stew
> Came back and banged another two
> I'm gonna win that banging bet
> I may bang the other two yet.

The second wave of comediennes includes successful comediennes like Elaine May, Elaine Boosler, Gilda Radner. But Joan Rivers, without a doubt, stands above the rest in terms of mainstream success and bawdiness. Born Joan Alexandra Molinsky in 1933, in Brooklyn, Rivers is a kind of transition figure between the first and second wave. Like the comediennes of the first wave, her routine featured homespun tales of femininity and Jewishness, which did very well for her as a Catskills performer. But she also had experience in the newer styles of improv at the Second City in Chicago. Rivers offered audiences, at the least the mainstream ones, more moderate stories of a frustrated young women caught

between a world of traditional family values (in Rivers' case, Larchmont, NY was often referenced, as a wink to her Jewishness) and the expectations of modern life.

Antler identifies a third generation of comediennes that reached prominence in the 1980's including Sandra Bernhard, Susie Essman and Judy Gold. Sandra Bernhard's work is an important example of the bawdy. Clearly inspired by early burlesque and vaudeville, her work is a rather fascinating combination of stand-up comedy and performance art. Bernhard could have easily been discussed in more depth here, but since some pretty thorough analysis has already been given to her work, I decided to focus elsewhere.[139] Antler includes Sarah Silverman in this group, but Silverman is better understood, like Rivers, as a kind of transition figure between the third and fourth wave of contemporary Jewish comediennes in America. This fourth wave is less of a unified force and more akin to a "post" wave. Just as chroniclers of feminism disagree on whether we are currently in the period of a Third Wave or a Fourth Wave of Feminism, or a "post"-Feminism.[140] Similarly, while there is evidence that comediennes such as Silverman, Amy Schumer, Abbie Jacobson, and Ilana Glazer share a general outlook and politics, their relationship to Jewish identity is much more porous and diverse in a manner that indeed reflects a kind of "post" sense similar to the "post" of postmodernism and postfeminism, which manifests, in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, "an incredulity towards metanarratives"(xxiv). They are more invested in the interrogation of intersectional identity in the feminine and sexual spheres. They represent a generation that is, for various reasons, less invested in its Jewish identity, and more invested in the other "sectionalities" of their identity. Concomitant with the "postness" that this generation tends to represent, one of the meta-narratives towards

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[139]See Mock; Schwadron.

[140]See Gamble 36-44.

which their comedy shows a kind of cynicism is their Jewish identity.[141] While their Jewish identity is perhaps more visible and accounted for in their lives and in their performance than for any generation previously, it also suffers from a general cynicism towards the notion of an essential identity. Identity, in a postmodern context can be a kind of mask that one inhabits. However, the one thing that the masquerade, as in mask-wearing, of post-feminism and postmodernism of this new generation of comediennes cannot is shake is the body, especially the female body. Their comedy keeps returning to embodiment and sexuality. At times, but not always, this intersects with their Jewish identity.

5.4 Politics of (Non)Identity and Sex: Sarah Silverman and *Broad City*

As we have just noted, in the work of the most successful Jewish comediennes in the United States, the bawdy is much more of a feature than a bug. In fact, most of the truly successful Jewish comediennes of the twentieth century have more than fooled around with the bawdy, no pun intended; they have had serious relationships with it. Of course, even if many of them share this sensibility, this does not mean that they have all pursued a monolithic artistic approach or experience. As Cixous reminds us, there is:

> no general woman, no one typical woman…. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (876)

[141]This generation is one that is less religiously inclined in general, as atheism and secularism is on the rise especially within progressive and liberal circles. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/06/10-facts-about-atheists/

Appreciating this, while still trying to have limits to this chapter's scope is difficult. To tackle this minefield of possibilities I decided to focus primarily on three comediennes that are really two items: the stand-up comedienne and actor Sarah Silverman and the show *Broad City* (which was created, produced, and performed by comediennes Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson).[142] Silverman, the older of the three, has developed a robust career, and is generally viewed as the Jewish heir-apparent to Joan Rivers' bawdy throne.[143] She has had a hugely successful and controversial 2005 stand-up special *Jesus is Magic,* appeared in her own show on Comedy Central, and more recently has been performing in movies. Glazer and Jacobson are generally known for their successful Television series *Broad City,* which ran on Comedy Central for five seasons between 2014-2019.[144] My focus, in their case, is really on the show, of which sex and the main characters' sexuality and sexual exploits are indelible aspects.

Just as importantly, these comediennes, in their shows and performances, never avoid, skirt, or gloss over the Jewish identity of their "characters." On the *Sarah Silverman Program*, Silverman is ostensibly portraying a version of herself who is also called Sarah Silverman. On *Broad City*, the two comediennes portray versions of themselves that are called Abbi Abrams and Ilana Wexler. In both cases the Jewish identity of the characters is a central plot point, rather than an implied possibility, as has sometimes been the case on American television in the fifty years prior to their arrival on the comedy scene, with the

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[142]Before that the show has a short run as youtube.com channel. Glazer and Jacobson are really known for their show, more than their other artistic pursuits, which had previously included mostly improv work.

[143]An argument could be made for Sandra Bernhard in this category, but Silverman's crossover success is closer to Rivers than Bernhard, whose had more of an avant-garde and punk edge to it.

[144]The show was adapted from their similarly named web-series with the help of *Saturday Night Live* alumna Amy Pohler.

exception perhaps of Fran Drescher's *The Nanny*. Surrounded today by so many comics who self-identify as Jewish, like Seth Rogen, and television shows where Jewish identity is central, such as *Mrs. Maisel* and *Transparent,* it might seem surprising that not too long ago, in *Seinfeld*, which is now regarded as a thoroughly Jewish show, the Jewish characters' Jewish identity was for most of the show only implied. The show's co-creator, Larry David later "corrected" that when in his HBO show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* he immediately makes sure that audiences know that he, Larry David, or, at the very least, "Larry David" of the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* fictional universe, is Jewish. Sarah Silverman in her show and *Broad City* in theirs, immediately make the Jewish identity of their protagonists knowable and refer to it quite often.

There is another similarity between *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Sarah Silverman* and *Broad City* and this is something that was highlighted in the introduction and is part of the reason that I decided to focus on these comediennes. More than the other Jewish comediennes noted above and the ones working similarly in the bawdy, Silverman, Glazer and Jacobson feature something that runs as an important thread throughout the work of many Jewish comediennes and almost all the artists I discuss in this dissertation: their comedy sets up situations that infringe on the stability of identity or the stability of identity is infringed upon, played with, and problematized. Sarah Silverman's stand-up comedy highlights a complex and nuanced playfulness with her real identity. She very clearly posits a performative identity in her routine, while also remaining seemingly true to her real-life identity. Similarly, Abbi and Ilana of *Broad City* at the very least give the impression of interchangeability with the Abbi and Ilana of the real world.[145] This

[145]Bernhard's comedy fits this notion as well in some her work, but not as thoroughly as these three women.

playfulness of identity not only allows for certain comic possibilities such as irony and incongruency, it is also related to the haphazard complexity of Jewish identity. Furthermore, it is without a doubt clear that even when they are at their most ridiculously outrageous and bawdy, these comediennes have important things to convey to us. They may not always be successful. At times, the madness gets in the way of the method, but they nevertheless, more than previous generations, try.

Silverman's and *Broad City's* comedy reflect contemporary changes in American Jewish culture and identity. In earlier iterations, Sophia Kalish/Abuza, Annabelle Salzman, and Joan Molinsky became Tucker, Barth, and Rivers. Was this completely necessary? History tells us that indeed it was because Jewish identity was still an obstacle to full societal acceptance well into the 1950s, as depicted in Elia Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement*. Many Jewish entertainers changed their names to better fit the elusive promise of Israel Zangwill's utopian "melting pot" ideal, which Jules Chametzky, correctly notes was always a bit "ambiguous and confusing" and never truly resolved such questions like "does everyone gets melted into it—including those who were already here, not to say the dominant WASP?" (9). Sarah Silverman, Abbi Jacobson, and Ilana Glazer not only remained Silverman, Jacobson, and Glazer, undoubtedly Jewish surnames, but Silverman also kept her name in her performance character as well and the other two kept their first names and chose similarly-sounding Jewish last names for their characters— Abrams and Wexler. One might argue that in the information age, passing, as many Jews of previous generations did in Hollywood and presumably elsewhere, would be impossible anyway, but while some still de-emphasize their Jewish identity, very few put their Jewish identity as front and center as these three comediennes.

There is another difference between these comediennes and the old guard that again reflects cultural changes in the United States. It can undoubtedly be said that Tucker,

Barth, and Rivers' comedy had political and social significance in the world: Tucker empowered women to feel at home in their diverse bodies and demanded that they awaken to their needs as sexual beings; Barth told women that libido is not the exclusive property of men; and Rivers emphasized women's independence. But none of them were activists in these matters (at least at the height of their career). For these early success stories, pushing for explicit political change as first or second-generation Americans, Jewish, and female, could have cost them their careers. Silverman, Jacobson, and Glazer, however, often speak in explicitly political terms. All three have been involved in political campaigns and have been outspoken about various issues. They are, after all, the benefactors of at least two waves of feminism, the second of which was perhaps just as disproportionally Jewish in its intelligentsia, as comedy has been in the United States. For these three comediennes, it is as if the two paths of feminism and comedy, both with emphatic ties to their Jewish background, converge in their work.

5.5 The Jew as Pariah: Hannah Arendt and the Jewess's Political Body

One of the arguments, maybe even the underlying premise of this dissertation, is that we should be more aware of the political dimension of comedy. Or, put differently, we should take the political dimensions of comedy more seriously, as various books about comedy have suggested. The fact that throughout history, in philosophy, academia, and the culture at large, comedy has been given short shrift in comparison to tragedy is not a secret. This dissertation gloms on another element to comedy that tends to drive it further from respectability—the bawdy. For many it is easy to see how satire can be political and thus important or how comedy that deals with what we would consider things of import in our daily lives has value. But comedy that is lewd, raunchy, what you might call "blue"—if you were a Catskills comedian working in the 1950s—well then that's a different matter

altogether. Yet, as I have discussed, the raunchiness of the bawdy is, first of all, the truest and most authentic form of comedy, and the closest to comedy's roots.[146] Furthermore, the bawdy and its discourse of the body, sexuality, and sex has a very clear political viability in the so-called real world of politics, for both men and women. This is even more the case for women, as throughout history the bodies of women and their sexual significance have been instrumental in women's subjugation and degradation. Thus, it is of no surprise that to fight back, to resist subjugation and objectification, women have pushed against patriarchal domination in these arenas. This does not only make immediate sense; it also makes political sense. While this dissertation does not want to make many claims regarding the import and centrality of sex and sexuality in an individual's life, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the physical cages in which our consciousness wakes up every morning, with its dilapidating skin, its creaky bones, and painful joints, and most importantly our gendered and sexual encumbrances, might weigh on the way we view and understand the world. The significance of this for women, for Jewish women, is that—to use a phrase recently popularized by political discourse—in attempts to "reclaim their time," Jewish women have a steeper mountain to climb. First, they must struggle against a world that diminishes them because of their sex and gender, and second against a world that diminishes them for their Jewishness. When we understand this, it becomes less surprising and less anomalous that Jewish comediennes have so often turned to the bawdy, to the body, their body, and its sexual signification.

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[146]We should however be somewhat careful when we begin to hold up alleged authenticity as a virtue, as Walter Benjamin cleverly articulates in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Crediting the original with too much power over the meaning of concepts obfuscates both the almost near impossibility of our reading of bygone eras, and the way historical change operates in the creation of meaning.

Hannah Arendt is not the only philosopher to mostly ignore comedy and humor in their writing. Even those who have written more than the prodigious German philosopher have reserved their judgements on the topic. What is fascinating and relevant for our current pursuit is that the one place where Arendt seems to come closest to shedding some light on her views on the matter, albeit in a rather tangential and circuitous manner, is her essay "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition." By the time of the essay's publication in 1944, a relatively new but already robust tradition of comedy produced by Jews was already established. Arendt, however, does not discuss this tradition directly and an analysis of comedy or humor is nowhere the stated goal of the essay. The essay is about how the promise of emancipation for the Jews was never fully fulfilled, and instead of a complete and unblemished acceptance into society, they found themselves subjects of a liminal space of sorts:

> That the status of the Jews in Europe has been not only that of an oppressed people but also of what Max Weber has called a "pariah people" is a fact most clearly appreciated by those who have had practical experience of just how ambiguous is the freedom which emancipation has ensured, and how treacherous the promise of equality which assimilation has held out. In their own position as social outcasts such men reflect the political status of their entire people. It is therefore not surprising that out of their personal experience Jewish poets, writers, and artists should have been able to evolve the concept of the pariah as a human type. (276)

Even the first line of the essay, probably unintentionally, sounds somewhat like a description of the attitude of a Jewish comedian: "When it comes to claiming its own in the field of European arts and letters, the attitude of the Jewish people may best be described as one of reckless magnanimity" (275).[147] Also, it is difficult to avoid the fact that in her

[147]The expression "reckless magnanimity" conjures up memories of Rodney Dangerfield and Don Rickles or even more so Sholem Aleichem's peculiar sensitivity to the characters that he would address.

analysis of three out of the four individuals she turns to in order to exemplify her argument (Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka, and Charlie Chaplin), she is clearly focused on an underlying comic spirit in their work. Heine is obviously not known as a comedian, but Arendt chooses to specifically remind the reader of him essentially giving life to the concept of the *schlemiel* in a section entitled "Heinrich Heine: the Schlemiel and Lord of Dreams." As for Chaplin, the one non-Jew discussed in the essay (although at the time there were quite a few rumors about the possibility of some hidden Jewish background), Arendt suggests that his films were inspired by the ordeals of modern Jewish identity: "While lack of political sense and persistence in the obsolete system of making charity the basis of national unity have prevented the Jewish people from taking a positive part in the political life of our day, these very qualities, translated into dramatic forms, have inspired one of the most singular products of modern art-the films of Charlie Chaplin" (286).[148] From these examples, Arendt poses two paths of action for the Jewish artist, who through no fault of their own find themselves as outsiders. The first and according to Arendt less favorable path is what she refers to as the path of the "parvenu," an upstart of sorts who is willing to shed her or his Jewish identity in order to move up in the world. The second is to become a "conscious pariah," that is one who is willing to accept the condition of a pariah, living in the liminal spaces of the society which has shunned her or him, and from that vantage point become a thorn in society's side.[149] In 1944, Arendt did not have the foresight or perhaps the desire to project some of these ideas into the spheres of sex and gender, but the notion of the

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[148]See Pearse. Arendt also discusses Bernard Lazare, the French writer and critic.

[149]The women who take the risk of challenging such a tiered obstruction into public life embody that notion of the pariah, especially those who succeed. For if we are to define the pariah, as "A member of any low caste; a person of no caste, an outcaste." And "A member of a despised class of any kind; someone or something shunned or avoided; a social outcast" then such a person, lacking in power needs some serious chutzpah to challenge those in power.

"conscious pariah" is incredibly resonant with Jewish comediennes in the United States. For not only do they, as Arendt suggests, partake of that pariah mentality as Jews, but they also partake in it as ascendant women trying to rise up in a world, which historically had them acquiesce to second-class status, as subordinates colonized by patriarchy, which, in the words of Kate Millett, "tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25).

An extremely important aspect of the pariah figure is that the pariah is explicitly not an absolute outsider but is instead still very much part of society at large. Pariahs are, nevertheless, relegated to a lower social status and their horizon is severely diminished. This idea resonates significantly with the description of "the stranger" given by Arendt's German compatriot, Georg Simmel, the influential sociologist and academic outsider[150] in his landmark essay "The Stranger," in that the stranger is not "the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather is the person who comes today and stays tomorrow" (402).

The concept of the "conscious pariah" is embodied in the comedy of Silverman, Jacobson, and Glazer. They transgress, though not only for transgression's sake. Rather, from their liminal position, speaking without transgression is an impossibility. For the pariah may indeed have a unique vantage point, and one that offers a unique comic perspective, but the pariah still speaks as a member of society. Furthermore, the conscious

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[150]Never offered a full professorship or chair of sociology, though he influenced both Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger

pariah has a unique role to play in our modern neo-liberal world, which is a world embedded in hypocrisy. It declares as its foundation and ethos concepts such as equality, freedom, and inclusivity, but simultaneously presents, especially to the female pariah, a world that clearly belies such promise. In such a modern world of hypocrisy, the pariah, if given the chance, must turn into a rebel who will hold the world to its promises. The pariah, the rebel, and the transgressor become in such a world almost interchangeable and can really only be understood in the context of implied hypocrisy. As Simmel would have it, the stranger's distance renders what is close distant, while his/her closeness renders what is distant close.

5.6 Sarah Silverman and the Limits of Irony

The Comedy Central Roast of actor James Franco was with without a doubt the most Jewish roast in recent memory. Not only was the dais made up of mostly Jewish actors and comedians, but Jewishness was also brought up by many of roasters. Franco, who is Jewish on his mother's side, is close friends with some of the most popular and visible Jews in Hollywood.[151] The dais included Franco's longtime friend and collaborator Seth Rogen (the Roast Master of the night), actors Jonah Hill, Nick Kroll, Andy Samberg, and comedians Sarah Silverman, Aziz Ansari, Natasha Legerro, Bill Hader, and, of course, roast mainstay, "Roast Master General" Jeff Ross. With more than half the dais made up of visible Hollywood Jews, Nick Kroll (who was a much lesser-known comedian at the time)[152] comes up to the

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[151]The actor celebrated his Bar Mitzva in 2015 at the age of 37, in what was either a public parody or a fundraiser or both. https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/27050/1/james-franco-had-a-bar-mitzvah-and-this-is-what-happened

[152]In the years since the Roast, Kroll has had immense success with the Broadway show *Oh Hello, On Broadway* and the Netflix show *Big Mouth,* which is now in its fourth season. The latter,

podium after Seth Rogen's introduction and begins by gesturing to the crowd: "Ladies and Gentlemen, give it up for Seth Rogen. Seth Rogen is so Jewish…" and as if awaiting a call and response repeats, "Seth Rogen is so fucking Jewish," and then immediately adds "anyway, I am excited to be here tonight." This was just the beginning of an evening replete with references to Jews and Jewish identity. When it was Sarah Silverman's turn at the podium, she did not disappoint, but she did surprise. By that time, Silverman had already built a successful stand-up comedy and television career on three intersecting pillars: her Jewish identity, her attractive femininity, and a transgressive and raunchy, pull-no-punches comedy that was also politically engaged.[153] She had had several successful comedy specials already and a three-year run with her show the *Sarah Silverman Program*. She and Leggero, the only women in the group, were also the only two whose comedy was at that point steeped in sex. It was no secret, to Silverman, the dais, or the audience that Silverman's comedy reveled in politically incorrect raunchiness. Approximately ten years earlier, the relatively short-lived Jewish culture and comedy magazine *Heeb*, displayed on its cover a controversial image of Silverman, seemingly naked, behind a white bed sheet with a hole in the middle through which Silverman's cleavage was strategically shown (see fig. 3).

"inspired" by Kroll's puberty is a thoroughly raunchy comedy that reimagines puberty as the setting for an unrelenting struggle between id and socialization.

[153]In 2008 she campaigned for Barak Obama and more recently she has been a very vocal supporter of Bernie Sanders.

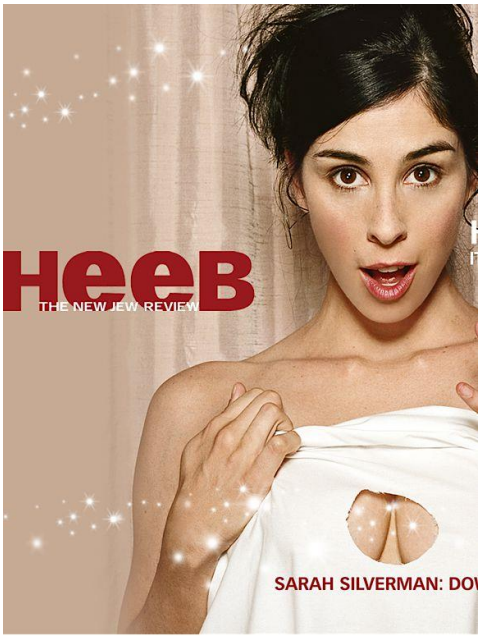

Figure 3 Silverman's cleavage

Inside the magazine, as part of a short item entitled, "Sarah Silverman – Unfit Mother? Unfit Jew? Just ask her Dad," that describes the comedienne as an "actress and a political activist," perhaps an even more provocative image appears (see fig. 4).

Figure 4 Thoughtful Jewishness?

The second image captures the seductive Jewess in a moment of reflection regarding her said Jewishness. Holding quite large scissors, she ponders, "Should I or shouldn't I adhere to the somewhat mythical notions of Orthodox Jews performing sex through a hole cut out into a linen?" Those who have a wide knowledge of Silverman's act and politics, might have wondered, "What is Silverman, the feminist and political *engagé*, planning to do with those scissors?" (the Jewish woman comic as castrator/castratrix).

During the roast, Silverman does not waste much time to remind everyone of her reputation and immediately says: "Can't tell if this is a dais or the line to suck Judd Apatow's balls," referring of course to Apatow's heavy involvement in the career of different members of the dais. She then adds "It's so Jewy. What is this, the Comedy Central audit of James Franco?" And in what seems like a moment of ad-libbing, she goes after Jonah Hill quite hard, after he, moments before, had made a rather snide, ageist jokes about her age and appearance: "Jonah is such Jewy dick, you have to watch his movies through a hole in a sheet." Silverman, however, saves her most raunchy lines for the only other woman on the dais: "Natasha Leggero, everybody. I love Natasha so much. This is Natasha's first roast. She is like a little Chihuahua, 'cause she is teeny tiny, and she's feisty, and filled with Mexican DNA." Silverman pauses, letting the audience laugh, but then jumps back in, "Just to be clear, when I say 'filled with Mexican DNA,' I mean she is filled with the cum of Mexican people. (pause) Like from tons of Mexican gentlemen coming inside her vast vagina. (pause) And, also, from her guzzling cum. (pause) Just didn't want there to be a misunderstanding." The audience laughs, but if one listens carefully, there are also some uncomfortable and cringing "ohs," caused presumably by the joke's built-up raunchiness. When the camera catches a glimpse of Leggero, the look on her face, is one of unexpected cringe. In a night full of innuendo and sexual overtones (often related to rumors about James Franco's rather fluid

and self-advertised sexuality), Silverman's radical raunchiness stood out. It is not that such humor was surprising coming from her, but rather that the subject, the butt of the joke was another person, and specifically a woman, and most importantly, not Silverman herself. Silverman, in her comedy, just like one of her idols, Joan Rivers, notoriously and very much in keeping with a long tradition of Jewish self-deprecatory humor, usually places herself as the Jewish butt of the joke. This moment, therefore, was a surprise and I will return to its significance later on.

There is no straight-line connecting Joan Rivers to Sarah Silverman. It is more of a jagged line that becomes more infused with activism, feminism, and has stopped along the way at certain crucial sites of influence, such as the work of Sandra Bernhard, who in her movies, like Silverman, alternated between sketches, recordings of her stage work, and an occasional song. Unlike Bernhard, who drew inspiration from earlier burlesque and cabaret, Silverman's songs usually sound contemporary. In contrast to both Rivers and Bernhard, Silverman's Jewish background is placed front and center, almost as a centerpiece of her identity. Within the first minute of her very successful and controversial 2005 stand-up movie, *Jesus is Magic*, Silverman tells the audience that she is Jewish, by employing an incendiary staple of her stand-up routine at the time: "I was raped by a doctor, which is (pause) so bittersweet, (pause) for a Jewish girl." To complicate things even further, she follows this story with another story that tells the audience that she knows that they think that as a Jewess, she is an outsider, or even worse, a sinner: "I wear this Saint Christopher medal (twirling her necklace) sometimes. (pause). Cause my boyfriend. (pause). I'm Jewish, but my boyfriend is Catholic, and it was just, it was cute the way he gave it to me, he said if it doesn't burn through my skin, it will protect me."

Silverman's comedy, within the framework of the pillars mentioned earlier, has established a comic aesthetic in which she makes fun of herself, but that self is an alter-ego,

also named Sarah Silverman, also a Jewish woman, and a cross between a female *schlemiel* and a klutzy JAP, who lives at a somewhat undefined ironic distance from the real Silverman. Most analyses of Silverman's comedy emphasize its ironic distancing. The argument is that Silverman creates a hyperbolic klutz-like persona from which she can criticize certain social mores and attitudes. In an impressive article about Silverman's ironic methodology, Lacy Lowrey et. al. argue that Kenneth Burke's concept of "perspective by incongruity" offers insight into Silverman's humor. As they note, while Burke's concept points to two contrasting and incongruent verbal messages, Silverman's comedy employs an "ironic persona" which allows her to espouse "controversial opinions and perspectives," that "when the onstage ironic persona that Silverman develops is contrasted with the potentially offensive content of her humor, and the resulting incongruities that surface provide alternate perspectives not only on the significant social topics Silverman discusses, but also on the use of this foundational rhetorical strategy" (72). They note the dangers of such a technique when, "audiences may have a difficult time discerning her authentic opinion from over-exaggeration." Irony, these writers suggest, is a common practice of comedians, and Silverman "sets herself apart by relying on the audience to recognize the clear distinction between the childlike character she has cultivated and the very adult themes throughout her performance" (72-73).

What Silverman understands better than some of her readers or commentators is that she is only allowed to be ironic because of the tangled weave of contemporary Jewish identity and its closets full of stereotyping, stigmatizing, and ostracizing. The ironic distance that she creates affords her the space to tackle difficult issues of patriarchy and identity, including Jewish identity. Importantly, Silverman is allowed or able to be ironic only to the extent that the "Jew" is permitted or even expected in comic discourse to pursue self-disparagement as a performance technique, in a setting in which the audience views the

"Jew" or the "Jewess" in a certain way. In this case, there are two assumptions: first, that the Jew is a carnal creature and the Jewess, who connotes sexuality, doubly so; and second, that a Jew would ostensibly do anything for the money (implied by her terrible interaction with a doctor—allegedly a Jewish woman's ideal mate or son). Yes, the joke of course only works if one is in on the joke. However, it truly only works if the Jew **is** a site of comedy and perhaps ridicule. For Jews to be funny in certain jokes, it helps if one holds certain attitudes and views towards Jews, from which Jews themselves are not exempt (for how could Jews not internalize some of these attitudes and views after millennia of ridicule and worse). Let us consider the hole in a sheet image from *Heeb* magazine. For the irony to work, multiple levels of knowledge are expected, beginning with rumors regarding sexual intercourse in the Hasidic community. That alone would really only be an understanding of the most basic level of irony, pointing to the alleged incongruity of the Jews with the rest of society. Additional knowledge could add complexity to the joke, such as the fact that Silverman views herself as a politically engaged feminist, and therefore, is only making fun of the alleged custom, or jabbing at what people think of her as a Jew and as a woman. Furthermore, whether this practice has been debunked or not, the notion it implies is that outwardly the Jewess is only allowed to be as sexual as the culture permits, but beneath layers of tradition and patriarchy, the Jewess is actually a sexual carnivore.

All this puzzle-like complexity is to some degree Paul de Man's point in his lecture on irony, "The Concept of Irony," where de Man gives American critics, especially Wayne C. Booth, a gentle ribbing about their certainties regarding the process of irony. Irony is interesting according to a postmodernist like de Man, because when boiled down to its essence (a bit like one of de Man's other favorite concepts, allegory), irony is epistemological conundrum. And epistemology, as we know, can be a slippery slope in postmodernity. As with all things postmodern, there are implicit dangers, but also

opportunities. Silverman's ironic method is clearly reliant on a knowledgeable and relatively informed and sophisticated audience to discern the real from the staged, and the truth underlying the irony. More importantly though, there is political underhandedness employed in such a tactic. It brings the audience themselves into the fold. Almost as if combining the Jewish mother and Jewish American Princess stereotypes, the guilt and the laziness, in this one instance of her generally anti-stereotype joke-work, she is gesturing to the audience, "You figure it out, I've done all the work already." By extension, a political dimension emerges, as the audience is not immune to the criticism. Quite the contrary, often to get the joke, as I suggested earlier, the audience reveals its complicity in a system of exclusion and othering of women and Jews. For Cixous, women write from a position no man has, making the signifier her own. If writing is to write yourself then maybe a certain kind of women's speech can enable women to hear themselves into being.

5.7 *Broad City* and the Escape from Jewish Identity

About half a generation younger than Silverman, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer's comedy is definitely, like all art, a reflection of new cultural and social attitudes and trends. Although Silverman's hyper-sexuality is underpinned by a strong feminist imperative, it is still mostly within the boundaries of hetero-normativity. *Broad City*, however, reflects a newer acceptance of complex sexual identities by the mainstream culture. To be sure, in her work in the 1980s and 1990s, Sandra Bernhard had already played with sexual identity, but at that time this was part of her transgression into the taboo and controversial. In the case of *Broad City*, polysexuality and non-traditional relationship structures are mostly accepted and part of the New York City landscape that the two characters Jacobson and Glazer portray, Abbie Abrams and Ilana Wexler, inhabit and navigate with various degrees of success. *Broad City* was a web-series, until Amy Pohler approached the couple and helped

them adapt it into a show on Comedy Central. The show had a good run of five seasons while receiving generally very good reviews.

There is an interesting paradox at play in this cultural moment that the show consistently taps into. Liberal society has become more open to the queering of gender identity and sexual identity. Gender and sexual identity can be fluid and open to all kinds of hybridity, multiplicity, and complexity. At the same time, the female body and female identity have never been as thoroughly the property of women. The ability, of course, of women to employ a much broader field of identity and behavior, in fact speaks to this moment, when feminism is contesting the patriarchy much more than before, especially regarding the boundaries of the female body. We have both an expansion of what a woman can be, while at the same time, women are speaking to boundaries of and authority over women's bodies more than ever before. Such complexities can make for all kinds of comic mishigas, incongruities, and complications, as is often the case in *Broad City* where Abbi plays the "straight" (but definitely not straight) woman to Ilana's free-spirited and liberated jouissance. The other cultural moment that the show speaks to is a much more accepted and visible Jewish identity. Judaism and Jewish identity had a kind of renaissance in the mid aughts. *Heeb* Magazine told the world that being Jewish is cool. Movies like *The Hebrew Hammer (2003)* and *You Don't Mess with the Zohan (2008)* introduced new and unfamiliar examples of "muscle-Jews" into American discourse. And Ruth Bader Ginsburg showed everyone that being a Jewish woman and a feminist is cool. *Broad City* exhibits a similar energy of reclaiming Jewish identity. Quite often the claim to a Jewish identity is the root of the comic adventures. From this perspective, starting with the notion that being a Jewish woman is cool and powerful, the show feels emboldened to create a kind of inclusive and participatory culture that posits an earnest but often problematic and privileged utopian imaginary.

"On *Broad City*," Jonathan Branfman writes:

> the beautiful Jewess trope helps Jacobson and Glazer blend markers of dirty masculinity, with alluring femininity, producing "queer-glamour." American media often portray queer (noon-normative) gender performances including female masculinity as monstrous. Abbi and Ilana's Jewess queer glamour repackages female masculinity as fun and alluring, challenging pressures on women to censor "masculine" traits, desires, and bodies. (844)

Broad City is the latest and arguably most powerful comic iteration of the American Jewess as the negative image to the long lineage of the American Jewish masculinity of Jacobson and Glazer's fathers' generation. The essence of these men, at least as portrayed in film and television, is a kind of anxious neurasthenia as modeled by Leo Bloom and his "blue blanket" in Mel Brooks's *The Producers*, and as a cultural ego immersed in feelings of failure, as captured in the immortal words of Max Bialystock to the neurotic accountant who just arrived to look at his books:

> Bloom, look at me ... look at me!
> I'm drowning. Other men sail
> through life. Bialystock has
> struck a reef. Bloom, I'm going
> under. I am being sunk by a
> society that demands success, when
> all I can offer is failure.

Jewish masculinity in America, as regularly depicted in Philip Roth's novels, is mired in a failure to measure up and the constant reminder of such failure, which we regularly see displaced into the sexual realm in Roth's work (as well as in Woody Allen and Larry David's work). *Broad City*, whether on purpose or not, rejects the association of Jewish identity with failure and inadequacy. It suggests that Jewish femininity can be a reversal of such notions.

For example, Larry David's life as depicted in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (one of Broad City's biggest inspirations), is one of immense success. As the former producer and creator of *Seinfeld*, he has immense wealth, a beautiful wife, and a carefree life. But the first shot of the show, the first shot of Season 1, Episode 1 is of Larry's illusory pants (see fig. 5).[154]

Figure 5 Larry David: I got nothing

Larry finds it amusing that his new pants bunch up at the crotch area when he sits, suggesting that he might be erect. The entire point, as he tells his amused wife who asks, "What do we have here?" is that he is not erect. It is a mirage. This illusory virility will come to haunt him later in the show, when the pants bunch up again and a friend of his wife thinks she inspired it, which will lead to Larry once again renouncing his virility: "Nancy! It didn't happen. If it happened, I would give you credit for it, but it didn't happen. I know when I get these things and how they happen."[155] *Broad City's* opening offers quite a different image. The first shot of the show is a close-up of a big purple vibrator, then

[154]See Theresa Novellino's interview with the Glazer and Jacobson in bizjournals.com.

[155]See "The Tent Pant," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

immediately a zoom out to reveal Abbi sitting in front of her computer holding it (see fig. 6). Then we cut to Ilana sitting energetically in front of her laptop and logging on to a video call with Abbi (see fig. 7). The vibrator immediately tells us that we are no longer in the domain of the libidinally challenged Larry David. And after a few minutes of conversation, Ilana's webcam angles down and we see that she was boisterous because she was straddling her very casual boyfriend, Lincoln, throughout the conversation (see fig. 8).

Figure 6 Purple vibrator

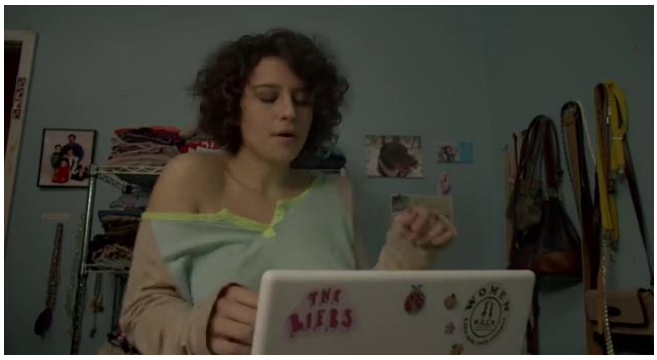

Figure 7 Ilana logging on

Figure 8 Lincoln and Ilana in bed

Abbi, as the straight character to Ilana's rowdy firebrand, has some questions:

> Abbie: Oh my God! Is that Lincoln?!
>
> Lincoln: Yeah!
>
> Abbie: (anxious) Is he inside of you?!
>
> Lincoln: (amused) Yup
>
> Ilana: I'm just keeping him warm.

The distraught Abbi proceeds then to "lay some ground rules" about such future situations and simply informs the couple that she has no interest in "seeing that." Sex is never condemned in the show; it is almost always celebrated. Sex and sexual gratification are parts of the ongoing success stories of the show. From its first five minutes, the show tells us that women are on top, that it is women who have the upper hand as well as other parts, and that the men on the show are relegated to roles traditionally reserved for women. It is Lincoln who constantly complains about his undefined relationship with Ilana, as in this exchange immediately after Ilana and Abbi end the call:

> Ilana: That was hot. That was cool. It was like a threesome, in a way.
>
> Lincoln: Ilana, what are we doing?! Are we just having sex? Hooking up? Are we dating? What is this?
>
> Ilana: This is…purely physical.

Lincoln: Why does this always happen to me?

Similar to *Curb Your Enthusiasm* though, Abbi and Ilana's sexual exploits and sexual shenanigans are very often tied to their Jewishness. In *Curb*'s "The Tent Pant" episode, the pant incident is tied to another incident in which Larry is overheard referring to his wife as Hitler and upsetting his manager's parents. In *Broad City*'s first episode, the couple's never ending financial woes has Ilana posting a classifieds' ad on Craigslist—"we're just two Jewesses tryin' to make a buck" —which leads them to a creepy stranger's house, who wants them to clean his apartment in their underwear.

The explication of Jewish identity is taken to a new level in the two-episode conclusion to Season 3 when Abbi and Ilana take on the extremely popular Birthright trips to Israel. Instead of Birthright, the company they join is tellingly called "Birthmark." In the spirit of the show's post-Jewish feminism, Jewish identity is not a privilege, since any sort of privilege that might mark one with white privilege is verboten, and is a mark, not a right. The women never make it to Israel. They barely make it to the plane in the first episode. The following episode, "Jews on a Plane," takes place almost entirely on the plane. The episode's title is similar to the often joke-fodder movie *Snakes on the Plane* and this probably anticipates the fact that the episode takes multiple jabs at mainstream Jewish culture, attitudes, and Identity: young JAPS on the trip wanting to meet a husband, glamorization of an Ivy League education, a yarmulke-wearing trip manager who is also subcontracted with the company to work as a *shadchan* (matchmaker), and a gay manicurist who claims to be looking for a wife, "because that's the only way he'll get his trust fund." The flight's Jewish utopia becomes, from Abbi and Ilana's progressive and radical perspective, a dystopian nightmare of Jewish particularism. Their consternation with anything stereotypically Jewish is disrupted by "overflowing" femininity, when Abbi discovers that her period has started,

but her tampons are in her checked-in luggage. She can get neither sympathy, nor tampons because her fellow Jews on the plane appear completely uninterested in her women's troubles. Ilana meanwhile is busy with her "master" plot of joining, not the infamous "Mile-High Club," but the "Mohel-Chai Club," a club of her own invention, which, as she explains to Abbi, in quite a roundabout way, is actually just giving a blow job, because it is borne out of the notorious practice of "*metzitza ba-peh*:"

> Ilana: You know how a Mohel sucks baby dick?
>
> Abbie: What's a Mohel?
>
> Ilana: Honestly, are you Jewish? You're not supposed to be in this trip, if you're not.
>
> Abbie: Dude, I am sorry! What the fuck is a "mohel" and why are they sucking fucking baby dick.
>
> Ilana: A mohel is the Jewish dude who performs the circumcisions. You know like a bris. So, they don't do it in the hospital, so these rabbis do whatever they want! So, they take the detached baby foreskin, and they roll it around in their mouths with wine.
>
> Abbie: [gesturing as if she is about to throw up]
>
> Ilana: And then they suck the baby dick itself, to stop the bleeding.
>
> Abbie: What the fuck are you talking about!?
>
> Ilana: Literally Judaism!
>
> Abbie: So at every bris, someone sucks a baby dick?!
>
> Ilana: Only at the most sacred ceremonies we get to have the baby dick sucking.

Ilana eventually finds an accomplice in the trip's manager, played by Seth Green, who is the most stereotypical Jewish camp-councilor, which initially turns Ilana completely off. But when, in response to her planning to report him for his underhanded business dealings on the plane, he tells her that "If you get between me and my money, that I will not stand for," her nipples literally perk up. Ultimately, Ilana connects with her innermost JAP. The two

friends never reach the Holy Land though. A reference to her "bomb bag" under the plane is overheard by the flight attendants and Abbi and Ilana find themselves in a Border Patrol interrogation room with two thickly accented Israeli agents and are then put on a plane back home. Their Jewish identity, the episode suggests, is truly a kind of pariah existence. They are landless women of liminal existence: a pair of conscious, yet very klutzy pariahs.

5.8 Conclusion: Irony's Death Gaze

Following the example of their matriarch, it is not outlandish to claim that the Jewish comedienne's role within the history of Jewish comedy is the most thoroughly authentic one. The humor of the Jewish comedienne may show an even deeper understanding of the complex and elusive meaning of Jewish identity than that of her male counterpart. From the inception of Judaism, woman is represented as a kind of complex and multivalent being. From the point of view of the patriarchy, some would say that she is duplicitous and cunning. She is created by God as a kind of helper to man: "*Ezer kenegdo*"—a phrase that in its Hebrew meaning already suggests a kind of antonymy, "a helper against him." But very quickly she is complicit in the eating of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and mankind's exile from the garden, and thus from immortality. Sarah, as we saw, is quick-tongued, brazen and unafraid to challenge God, but also shows unquestionable devotion. Women are often not central characters, but when they act, they are impactful. Tziporah, Moses's wife, is largely absent from the text, but in one of her rare appearances, when God appears out of nowhere to attack and possibly kill Moses, Tziporah is quick to act; she "took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his (Moses's) feet and she said 'Surely a bridgegroom of blood art thou to me" (Exodus 4:24-25). Tziporah thus ostensibly

saves the entire enterprise of exodus and freedom, and therefore of Judaism. And she does this with quirky quick-thinking and brazenness that clearly connotes sexuality.[156]

The modern Jewess is also a strange site of complexity, but in a different way. As a *Yiddishe momma*, she is caring and loving, yet intrusive and whining—according to stereotype, of course. As a Jewish American Princess, she is shallow, materialistic, but also opinionated, strong, and ambitious—characteristics that are valued in society. She is a complex object of alterity, feared for its otherness but, as such, she also sparks attraction. The only stance that one can take perhaps as a Jewish woman, speaking from that complex vantage point, and under those historical circumstance, is that of irony, where complexity, elusiveness, and fleeting meaning intersect. And, is it any surprise that, ironically or not, the one thing that can anchor such complex and fleeting notions of identity is the body, one's physical cage, that which cannot be elided or discarded?

Let us, as we are nearing the end, consider a term often associated with the comedy of Sarah Silverman and *Broad City*—"cringe." "Cringe" is a term we often see bandied about in discussions of reactions to Silverman, Jacobs, and Glazer's comedy. "I can't watch it." "How can they say that? Do that?" "It makes me cringe." Most are familiar with the basic definition of the word, as in "to recoil in distaste." But the rest of the definitions from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* are possibly more revealing: "2. To shrink in fear or servility; 3. To behave in an excessively humble way or servile way; 4. To draw in or contract one's muscles involuntarily (as from cold or pain)." Does that remind you of anyone? The image of Medusa as evoked by Cixous is extremely appropriate as an analog to the political

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[156]Analyses of this strange passage in *Exodus* often point to the fact that Moses had not yet circumcised his son, because he has not fully embraced his true identity and destiny and the leadership position bestowed on him by God. That is why God finally had enough and was set on killing him, until Tziporah intervenes.

discourse engaged by the Jewish comediennes. Cixous in her essay does not point to this connection, but Medusa—a rare beauty, punished by the Gods with a head full of snakes and to isolation, since all who catch her gaze turn to stone—is more than a one-dimensional monster; she is also a mother, taken away from her children. Medusa turns her punishment into an act of retribution. It is laughter as jouissance that takes revenge upon the world. I would like to suggest that these other definitions of "cringe" may be related to an awareness of the **reversal of the gaze**. As I suggested earlier, when one is brought into the circle of irony, one is implicated and complicit in the discourse. Attentive audiences realize the spaces between meaning, between the real and the ironic. And those that do are ultimately implicated in what irony has marked. It takes a unique sort of point of view, of one, like the Jewess, who realizes that her exclusion from society is not her fault but rather the result of society's injustice. The woman for the job is an outsider still intent on consciously correcting inequities—a pariah, if you will. In a 2019 article in *British Prospect Magazine*, Charlotte Higgins asks, "Medusa was punished for being raped—so why do we still depict her as a monster?" Why then is Silverman's rape joke so outrageous and cringe-inducing? If true, then she is the victim, and she should be commended for her plucky resolve to make the best of, to ironize, a bad situation. But society usually chooses to look away from such condemnations of the patriarchy. Medusa's story is not only about looking away from her because of her monstrous snake hair and gaze, but even more so, it has now become the origin story of society turning away from the patriarchy. As Ovid quite plainly puts in the mouth of Perseus, when his hero is asked about Medusa:

> Since what you ask is worth the telling, hear the answer to your question. She was once most beautiful, and the jealous aspirations of many suitors. Of all her beauties none was more admired than her hair: I came across a man who recalled having seen her. They say that Neptune, Lord of the Seas, violated her in the temple of Minerva. Jupiter's daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. So that it might not go unpunished, she changed the Gorgon's hair to foul snakes. And now to terrify her enemies,

> numbing them with fear, the goddess wears the snakes, that she created, as a breastplate.

Medusa is undoubtedly the original conscious pariah and, in some ways, as suggested by Cixous, the original feminist. Instead of a desired beauty, she is made into a monster. But the gaze that was once turned upon her is now turned onto the patriarchy. Perseus's legendary battle with her is, of course, telling. The only way for men, i.e., the patriarchy, to look at her is via a mirror and thus essentially looking at itself. I guess some would call that ironic.

* * *

Finally, circling back to James Franco's roast, it was reported that Silverman was quite upset at actor Jonah Hill, who preceded her in the roasting order. When Hill got to Silverman in the usual set up of roasting other dais members, he said:

> Sarah Silverman—so amazing, so beautiful. I think you're gorgeous. And I think it's crazy, because everyone says she's hot for a comic, but I don't agree. She's not just hot for a comic, she's hot for someone her age. Seriously Sarah, you were my favorite comic, when I was a kid. Sarah is a role-model for every little girl out there. I mean every little girl dreams of being a fifty-eight year old single stand-up-comedian with no romantic prospects on the horizon. They all dream of it, but Sarah did it.

Silverman, no stranger to roasts, was not happy with these comments. Indeed, her expressions during Hill's takedown makes this rather clear. In an interview she did with *Huffington Post Live* after the recording of the show, she jokes about it: "When I make fat jokes about Jonah, it's funny, but when he makes jokes about being old, that's not funny." Seeming to take it in stride, she was clearly upset with the agism, as she adds, "It was good, nothing that a couple days in bed couldn't cure."

Considering this backstory, one cannot help but conjecture that, at that moment, following Hill on the podium, Silverman stored away her planned lines and reached for

something else, saying to herself, “Fuck it, they think women need to be young and beautiful. They expect me to cower into objectified femininity, but instead, I will turn the expectation of the gaze on them. They expect me to be raunchy. Let’s really see if they can stomach this, full face, head on.” She then reaches back and goes full on, foul-mouth raunchiness at Natasha Leggero with that seemingly never-ending insertion of Mexican “DNA”—making everyone, dais, audience, and patriarchy, (and thesis readers?) cringe.

CHAPTER 6

A NEW LANGUAGE OF DESIRE: COMEDY AND AMBIVALENCE IN URI ZOHAR'S *PEEPING TOMS* TRILOGY

> "Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming Out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering Heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being."
>
> - Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

> "The dreamer does not know that he is dreaming; the film spectator knows that he is at the cinema: this is the first and principal difference between the situations of film and dream. We sometimes speak of the illusion of reality in one or the other, but true illusion belongs to the dream and to it alone. In the case of the cinema it is better to limit oneself to remarking the existence of a certain *impression* of reality."
>
> - Christian Metz

6.1 Introduction

The plot of Uri Zohar's film *Metzitzim* (*Peeping Toms*, 1972) is the emblem of simplicity. It could be rather succinctly summarized in the following manner: musician leaves a show with a groupie and takes her back to his friend's shack on the beach. They have sex while the musician's prurient friends secretly watch. Musician returns home to his wife and child. Beach bum friend makes aggressive advances at groupie but fails. Married musician has fight with wife. They make up. Beach bums peep into women's stalls and generally comic shenanigans ensue. All this takes place in approximately twenty-four hours.

Yet, somehow, despite this simplicity and what appears to be uninteresting—but perhaps funny—juvenilia, *Peeping Toms* is possibly the most 'cultish' film in the history of Israeli cinema, as well as one of the most written about in the Israeli cinematic canon. More importantly, *Peeping Toms'* outline seems discordant with the more familiar characteristic

of Israeli cinema—its political nature. Israeli films tend to be political; or, at the very least, they seem to deal with issues of the state such as military, history, and the relationship of Israel with its neighbors—themes generally considered "political" with a capital 'P'. That deduction—following baseball's "eye test"—may come with good reason. As Israeli film scholar Ella Shohat writes, Israel is a "veritable palimpsest of historical influences," a country which

> [S]tands at the point of convergence of multiple cultures, languages, traditions, and political tendencies. Israeli cinema as the mediated expression of this multiplicity is necessarily marked by the struggle of competing class and ethnic discourses, of conflicting ideological impulses and political visions. (1)

Shohat concludes that "while it can be argued that all films are political—or, more accurately, have a political dimension—Israeli films are necessarily and intensely political, including, and perhaps even especially, those films which claim not to be" (6).[157]

When we consider this important context and return to Uri Zohar's *Peeping Toms* and his two subsequent and last films (which are more interesting and impactful when viewed as a trilogy), we might make the mistake of dismissing them as unserious and unimportant. Prima facie, these three films seem to be cartoon-like, comedic representations of a certain sector of Israeli life. The aforementioned *Peeping Toms* depicts a day in the life of a few beach bums from Tel Aviv's Sheraton Beach (now known as "Metzitzim Beach" after the film) who spend their time exploring their libidinal, narcissistic fantasies. The second film, *Einayim G'dolot (Big Eyes,* 1974) focuses on a lecherous, philandering basketball coach. And, finally, *Hatzilu Et Ha-matzil (Save the Lifeguard*, 1977)

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[157]Shohat is of course referring here to the forced displacement of the Palestinian population during the rise of the state of Israel.

returns to the beach and the mishigas of its libido-governed lifeguards. A deeper examination, however, suggests that the movies' against-the-grain comic sensibilities open a fascinating and important window into Israeli culture.

Although scholars like Sandra Meiri acknowledge that "it is possible to consider Zohar's *Peeping Toms* as the first film of a trilogy,"[158] no credible attempts have been made to analyze the film as part of a trilogy, or, for that matter, to examine the trilogy as a whole.[159] *Peeping Toms,* in my opinion, is the most interesting of the three, and really the only film of the three that has become a cult phenomenon, yet as you will hopefully agree, there is value in viewing it as the opening salvo of a larger statement.[160]. *Peeping Toms* sets the stage for the other two films, which in turn provide essential "supplements"—to use Jacques Derrida's words— to an overall and more significant meaning. These three films, made between 1972 and 1977, were the last in Zohar's quite impressive career as an entertainer, actor, and director. During his work on *Peeping Toms*, Zohar began to explore Orthodox Judaism. Throughout those years, his interest in religion grew. Zohar had previously led a thoroughly secular, and notoriously hedonistic life, but by the time he was filming *Big Eyes*, he was rising early in the morning to lay *Tefilin.*[161] After *Save the Lifeguard* he turned completely to religion, becoming what is called in Orthodox circles as "*Baal*

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[158]HTML, no pagination.

[159]Perhaps with the exception of filmmaker and film scholar Renen Shor whose essay on Uri Zohar is an invaluable resource. But while Shor artfully covers the cinematic career of Zohar and discusses these films, he does not provide a specific thesis, but rather more of a filmic chronology with analysis. All translations from Hebrew that are not quoted from previously-translated sources are done by me.

[160]The deep philosophical and material reasons of the movie's cult status and with that the reasons why the other films have not been held in similar high esteem are sadly beyond the scope of the paper, although it merits a serious investigation, with attention given to issues of audience participation. At certain moments I may touch on some of these questions.

[161]The laying down on the body of leather-boxed scrolls as part of Jewish morning prayer.

Tshuva" (which literally translates as "owner of the answer" but more correctly means "one who has returned"). Today, the eighty-five year old Zohar is an Orthodox Rabbi with twelve children and many more grandchildren. Zohar, as he has noted since, felt somewhat lost spiritually around that time and felt that his life was at a crucial crossroad.[162]

Was it in religion that Zohar found the answers to the questions that he poses in the trilogy? As Zohar's final cinematic expression, the trilogy clearly expresses his disenchantment with certain aspects of what Shohat has called the "Zionist master narrative."[163] In these films Zohar, the leading voice in Israeli modernist or "New Sensibility Cinema" (a term coined by filmmaker and film scholar Judd Ne'eman) of the 1960s, raises difficult and important questions regarding the character and masculinity of the Jewish Israeli male and his role in society.[164] Zohar accomplishes this, I explain below, because of and not despite his filmic aesthetic, which sometimes appears comically unorganized, juvenile, unserious, and too overtly sexual. In part, Zohar achieves this as a result of the unclear and ambiguous boundaries that he sets up between the real and the fictional, between his life and the diegesis of his films, which he creates by casting himself, friends, and family in recurring roles in all three films, and through other filmic techniques.[165]As you may recall from my introduction, this playfulness with identity, the creation of a liminal ambivalence between the fictional and the real appears to be a staple of many Jewish comedians in both the United States and Israel.

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[162]Zohar discusses some of these issues in a revealing lecture hosted by Chazaq Organization in 2014, which can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS3wFpkA_80&t=570s

[163]See Shohat's entire first chapter.

[164]See Ne'eman.

[165]Zohar often noted that the reason he cast himself in leading roles was because he was "the cheapest actor he could find."

Zohar's cinematic ambivalence situates his work in a larger discourse: the discourse surrounding ambivalence and ambiguity that has characterized Jewish existence throughout history. As discussed earlier, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has pointedly defined the Jew as "ambivalence incarnate" partly because, as he explains,

> Jews were not an ethnic minority in any one of the nation states but dispersed all over the place. But neither were they locally residing members of a neighboring nation. They were the epitome of incongruity: a non-national nation, and so cast a shadow on the fundamental principle of modern European order: that nationhood is the essence of human destiny. (153)

It is important to understand that the Jew in Modern Europe not only aroused ambivalence from the perspective of onlookers as the paradigmatic "other," but self-reflexively as well. An ambivalent feeling towards oneself has historically been part of Jewish identity. For the Jewish people were endlessly caught between being the projected and hated "other" and their historical consciousness of being God's "chosen people."[166] David Biale has even suggested that this ambivalence fostered Jewish survival throughout history:

> If they had possessed real power on the scale of the ancient empires, they probably would have gone the way of the Assyrians and Babylonians. But if the Jews had not developed a myth of their centrality, they would likely have vanished like other small nations. Relative lack of power combined with a myth of power was perhaps one of the keys to Jewish survival in antiquity. (147)

In his last three films, Zohar provides, it seems to me, an emblematic representation of a new form of Israeli masculinity that sought to shed its diasporic Jewish past and its more recent Zionist identity, thereby constructing, in a sense, something simultaneously incipient, ambiguous, and ambivalent. In my view, this mostly overlooked ambivalence

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[166]See Sander Gilman book-length analysis on Jewish self-loathing.

gives Zohar's trilogy its unique status in Israeli cinema and culture. The films comedy and its engagement with sex and sexuality, lead to a celebration of a kind of indeterminacy, especially with regard to Jewish masculinity in Israel. Since its inception, Zionism has tried to sculpt a new image of the Jewish male: strong both physically and morally, sturdy and muscular. This "new Jew" was meant to be the antithesis, as Daniel Boyarin has described, of the male-gendered "sissy" Torah scholar.[167] But in the Peeping Toms trilogy Zohar investigates new ideological and representational possibilities for this Israeli male, most of which are neither aesthetically nor ideologically pleasing, and often accost Israeli cultural sensibilities. In contrast to Zionism's vision of masculinity, for Zohar the Israeli Jewish male is still a problematic construct of contradictions and imperfections, perhaps because he is a son of a nation, a "motherland" whose very existence is itself rather paradoxical and uncritical.[168]

6.2. Uri Zohar in Context

> "In the moon there is no hole. Any normal person knows that the moon is complete and has no hole. But *Hole in the Moon* is a film. And if *Hole in the Moon* is a film then it could show a hole in the moon; and this is the reason for the film's title. If *Hole in the Moon* were not a film, it would not have been given this name, since then the moon would not have a hole."—Uri Zohar [169]

For Israel, it makes sense that film, the medium perhaps best suited for the distillation of public discourse, has been political. Even before Israel's establishment in 1948, cinema played an important role in the shaping of popular opinion about-Palestine

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[167]See Boyarin.

[168]"Land" as well as "nation" (*Adama* and *Uma* respectively) are feminine gendered nouns in Hebrew.

[169]See Shohat 188.

around the world. Describing the literature that came out of Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, writer Yosef Haim Brenner wrote:

> Most of the writings from *Eretz Israel*… are written from one and a single point of view: that of national hope…. What they have in common is that they are all "Zionist" in the narrow sense of the word, and that all of them have one standard: the social standard…all that is written [sic] from the point of view of the country building. (Ne'eman 104)

This contention holds as well for films made until the early 1950s and the establishment of Israel—they were essentially propaganda films in the service of the state. Appropriately, Shohat has termed this genre "Zionist-Realism." The protagonist of these films was the "new Jew." Not the Jew of the Diaspora, derided and ridiculed by Zionism, but a new, muscular Jew committed to work and to the land. Paradoxically, although the centrality of this charismatic Jewish character was of ideological importance, the films tended to emphasize "group imagery rather than that of the individual who was granted very limited cinematic space" (Shohat 14).[170] After Israeli statehood in 1948, cinema continued to present a similar purview, but now the films tended to emphasize the heroism of the new nation and its pioneering denizens. These films, now known as part of the "Heroic-Nationalist" film period, reached their apex with Hollywood's *Exodus* (1960). Overall the basic notion—driven by political impetus and ideology—was that cinema should represent the emerging state of Israel in a positive light. "Both fiction features and documentaries," Shohat writes, "resolutely 'improved,' as it were, the reality they had undertaken to represent through the simultaneous elision of negative and enhancement of positive images" (25).

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[170]This is undoubtedly related to Zionism's socialist/communist roots.

Even though Uri Zohar is mostly remembered today for the lewd comedy of *Peeping Toms,* in the annals of Israeli cinema he is regarded as the forefather of Israeli modernist cinema and as one of the most important members of the 1960s' "State Generation:" a group of artists who, Judd Ne'eman writes, "appeared on the stage of Israeli cultural [sic] and became the expositors of modernism. The mission of these moderns was two-fold—to institute in society the freedom of artistic creation, and to disengage the arts and the artists from the political elite" (110). Zohar's first film *Chor Balevana(Hole in the Moon*, 1965) was, according to filmmaker and educator Renen Shor, the catalyst that Israeli film needed in order to carve an identity and purpose for itself.[171] It was, Shor writes, the "exodus of Israeli cinema." Influenced by—the now even more obscure—Mekas Brothers' *Hallelujah the Hills* (1963), Zohar's first feature film was a breakthrough:

> For the first time we were witness to a film—to getting out of the studio, to complex shots, and to *mise-en-scene* as part of the shot, to deviation from the shot book while abandoning the tripod in favor of handheld filming, to sharp pans and zooms, to an a-realistic score and comic music that anticipated the situation with a wink, to novel editing, to a filmic language that was alive and proper….[172]

To this novelty and filmic adventurism (clearly steeped in French New Wave cinematic rhetoric) Zohar brought not only his credentials as a leading entertainer and bohemian, but also a wealth of knowledge of Israel and Palestine's short but industrious cinematic history. In 1962, Zohar had collaborated with filmmaker Nathan Axelrod and actor Chaim Topol on the documentary *Etz O' Palestina* (*Tree or Palestine*) which comically narrativized news-reel

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[171] Shor is the notoriously confrontational and controversial head of Israel's leading film school: Sam Spiegel.

[172]See Shor. No proper pagination available.

footage from pre-State Palestine.[173] He thus comes to the film quite versed in the propagandist nature of those films; and, more importantly, he was cognizant of the representational history of the nation's character and especially the mythic and representational aspect of the Israeli male or "sabra."[174] In the 1960s, Zohar together with other artists of the period (the "State Generation"), as Israeli sociologist, Oz Almog suggests,

> [C]riticized with increasing stridency the mobilized writing of the 1948 circle with its focus of the world of the collective, while celebrating critical, anti-establishment writing that focused on the world of the individual and in particular on his distress and alienation. Implied also was criticism of the sabra character and of the writers who represented it. (16)

Thus, beginning with *Peeping Toms*, Zohar sets out to challenge Israel's uncritical celebration of the iconic and ideologically unvarnished Sabra. What better than comedy not only to invite discussion, yet also undermine firmly held ideological structures and worldviews.

6.3 *Peeping Toms*: Zohar's New Language of Desire

> "Israel is not a state. It's not even an idea. Israel is an organized mess of paradoxes that somehow work together. Anything you say about Israel or about Israelis, the opposite will also be true…any man, woman and child appear ready to go to war at a moment's notice, and nevertheless, when you meet them, their first word will be *shalom* (peace). And in a strange way they make you believe that they mean it."—Roy Hemmings[175]

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[173]In some ways, Axelrod is considered the forefather of Israeli and Zionist cinema and Chaim Topol of course would later portray Tevye *in Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and proceed to have additional success in Hollywood.

[174]A term that refers to an Israeli born person.

[175]These words are uttered by Roy Hemmings, a character in Zohar's 1968 film *Kol Mamzer Melech* (*Every Bastard a King).*

By the time Zohar made *Peeping Toms*, he was already an established filmmaker and a notorious celebrity bad-boy with a reputation for debauchery who had been admonished by Israel's conservative mainstream culture.[176] When we first see him as Gutte, the irreverent beach bum in *Peeping Toms*—coming out of the sea in the middle of the night to greet his musician friend Elli (Arik Einstein) and the new "catch" that Elli brought back from one of his gigs [i.e. the groupie Dina (Mona Zilberstein)]—it is in a medium to long shot, not well lit, of a little boat carrying Gutte and his two young cohorts Avi (Motti Levi) and Duvidke (Tzvi Shissel) (see fig. 9).

When he steps off of the boat, the camera focuses on Zohar, the bohemian icon, and surprisingly reveals a disheveled man in his forties, dirty and unkempt. From this early moment Zohar is playing against audience's expectations of "Uri Zohar," the iconic playboy. Zohar, the director, clearly understands throughout the film that this dirty and misshapen "degenerate" (the word *degenerat* is used often in the film, usually in reference to Gutte) also represents for some audiences a view they have of the allegedly fallen bohemian playboy, Uri Zohar (see fig. 10).

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[176]See Shor.

Figure 9 Gutte's first appearance, arriving with Duvidke and Avi like a stealth commando unit.

Figure 10 Gutte meets up with Elli and Dina.

More than simply playing with audience's expectations, Zohar chooses an aesthetic of lewd shock treatment to Israeli sensibility. The movie, and later on the rest of the trilogy, will continue to break down the relationship between the filmic and the real, an attitude which, Shor maintains, Zohar had already established in his first film, *Hole in the Moon*

where he "rejected the focus on the actual-historical-documentary of the Israeli reality. And raised questions about the relationship between reality and imagination….—the historical reality and the filmic illusion."[177]

This breakdown results in the creation of a cinematic space filled with contradiction and ambiguity, one that reflects Zohar's understanding and internalization of Jewish ambivalence. Zohar essentially gives the figure of the Israeli [male (protagonist)] a sense of Jewish ambiguity and ambivalence that was sorely missing from Israeli cinema.[178] Perhaps this ambivalence is partly responsible for the fact that readings of *Peeping Toms* have been so diverse. Sandra Meiri argues that the film "presents an economy of voyeurism and fetishism that unveils the tragic nihilistic existence of the Israeli male in the post-Zionist world."[179] Ne'eman, in his seminal analysis of the film, claims that the film is a "pitiless self-obituary of the disintegrating Sabra myth of eternal youth" (117). Shohat, however, writes that the films (speaking about all three films), "form a poignant and humorous portrait of the 'never-grown-up' instability of the restless Sabras…. Melancholy in the film is only implied, rather than stated, since the foreground of the film is taken up with humorous situations, a tone that sets apart Zohar's films like *Peeping Toms* from the earnest, high serious tone of personal cinema" (223-24). Strongly disagreeing, Nitzan Ben-Shaul finds the film's "vulgar poetics" distasteful because of the "thematic reduction of the films' subjects and in their dishonesty, in their excessive portrayals of action in war, sexual license, and

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[177]Ibid

[178]At the same time, this ambiguity creates a difficulty when we try to analyze the film, raising questions such as: is the film an exaggeration of the Israeli macho attitude? Is Gutte a filmic representation or is he an alter-ego of Zohar's and if the latter is true, are we meant to make connections to Zohar's life at the time?

[179]HTML, no pagination.

ethnic stereotypes, and in their bland disregard for style and artistic restraint" (239).[180] What is indisputable is the fact that the film is more than the sum of its ambivalences and contradictions. It is no surprise that a film that is able to elicit such diversity of opinion would become a site of discursive import.

The source of this ambivalence is also related to the film's clear dialogue with unresolved issues of Jewish masculinity and Jewish identity. Even though most critics would not credit Zohar with such insight, I believe that he was cognizant of some of these issues and dilemmas. Prior to becoming a filmmaker, Zohar's very successful comedy act was known for a very specific shtick: he would begin his performance by turning to the audience and asking them: "Ani Yafe?" ("Am I good-looking?"). The question would often begin his performance to enthusiastic cheers from the audience. For it was supposed to be a rhetorical joke, that was punctuated by the incongruous presence of its handsome poser, Zohar. How could Tel Aviv's successful playboy be anything but good looking? Zohar was clearly attractive: limber, fit, light blonde hair, and tanned. He was an exemplar of the "new Jew" that Zionism had cultivated since its inception, the "Sabra" or "Tzabar" in Hebrew, the prickly pear of the cactus tree, which was imported to Palestine, but took hold famously in the desert and became a staple of the landscape and Israeli diet. Yet Zohar's question was only slightly cynical or narcissistic. It was also poignant and profound on that unconscious level that good comedy always addresses and disturbs. As ironic as that question might have seemed to the audience, it was embedded in an understanding of the intricacies and problems of Israeli Jewishness and Israeli masculinity that was quite sophisticated for its time, and more importantly, quite revolutionary for Israeli popular culture of the time. In

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[180]He does nonetheless credit the film for being as "the most notable expression of the Israeli mood during the decade between 1967 and 1977 which was characterized by "euphoric" and quasi-capitalist freedom…"

2004, news reporter Raz Shechnick interviewed the now orthodox Rabbi Zohar and; his first question: "so how was your catch-phrase, 'Am I good looking?' born?" "'It's a professional gimmick," Zohar answered, "I used to talk a lot with the audience, and in one of the shows, I turned to them and I asked if I am good looking. I saw that it worked and I continued. Today, I don't say it anymore. Today I know: I am good looking. Black is beautiful. Once, I wasn't sure."[181] Zohar's insight suggests that we should perhaps consider his films within a larger framework than that of Israeli culture. What we find in his strange narcissistic insecurity is actually a perceptive observation of the long arc of Jewish representation and its conceptualization of masculinity. Could a Jew, Zohar suggests, less than a generation removed from the *muselmann* of the Holocaust and centuries of caricatured representation of the Jew, the "other" of Europe, now be considered "good looking?" Zohar's insight is the insight of a filmmaker, of an individual, invested in the appearance of things and the artifice of representation. He realizes how indebted concepts of Israeli masculinity are to the filmic representations that essentially created them in the first half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, his deeper engagement with Judaism was engendering newer philosophical possibilities for Israeli and Jewish masculinity. In the trilogy his comic depiction of the Israeli male is raunchy and rather unsympathetic but also attentive to the liminality of artifice, representation, and Jewish ambivalence.

Peeping Toms opens with a theme song playing in the background and a panning shot which scans the beach and the dilapidated neighborhood around it. This combination establishes as it reveals a dire sense of emptiness and forlornness that will contrast with the comic sensibility that follows. But it undoubtedly sets a rather ominous tone of emotional decrepitude. Then the camera cuts to a nightclub and focuses on a magician surrounded by

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[181]See Shechnick—online article no pagination available.

kids, foregrounding the relationship of illusion to reality that underlies the film and even the entire trilogy. The camera then crosses over to a band setting up on stage, surrounded by a loud and heckling audience. On the little stage, among the huddled band members, the singer motions to the band's driver and points to an attractive young woman standing across the room who is making eyes at the entire band and especially exchanging flirtatious glances with the handsome guitar player Elli. The singer then tells the driver: "you see that girl, I will fuck her tonight." What stands out in this seemingly lewd but rather conventional chauvinistic rhetoric of male bravado is that the singer uses the slangy verb "*arim*" to connote "fuck." "*Arim*," the future form of the infinitive "*leharim*" when not used as slang, means "to lift." Were this the only instance in the movie that the slang was used it might not be especially significant, but a similar usage returns in a later scene now committed to memory by countless hormone-addled young men in Israel. This occurs when a young, macho beachgoer flirts with Milli (Sima Eliyahu), Elli's pretty wife, who is in the mood to goad her unfaithful husband. The young man invites her to join him on a *Hasake* ride ("*Hasake*" is the name of a wide surfboard that lifeguards in Israel use in rescue attempts) and she flirtatiously sets up the gloriously appropriate and expected punchline: "but what will happen if I fall?" To which he answers smiling "oh well, then I will pick you up." He is of course using the same verb that the singer used in the first scene—"lifting" or "picking up" to connote the obvious fact that he wants to have sex with her. Sima agrees to the ride but once they return, Gutte—who throughout the film takes on the hypocritical position of protector of the couple's marriage—ends up beating up the guy and his friends.

The significance of this slang usage paradoxically points to the failure of such a "lifting," a failure that will run through the trilogy in various articulations and situations. The singer of the band will fail to "lift" the girl, as she will run off with Elli, and the hapless beach macho, of course, fails with Elli's wife. This failure is set up quite emphatically in that

first and unique scene in the nightclub, in which the *mise-en-scene* truly portrays the confusion and lack of boundaries between performer and audience. In the nightclub, the band, overwhelmed by the young and overbearing audience, gets through about one minute of their set before a young fan, frustrated by the lack of attention paid to him, pours the contents of a coke bottle on the band's amplifiers, thereby short-circuiting the PA system and provoking a run on the band. This ultimately allows Elli and the aforementioned girl to run out the back and barely get away with the band's driver, stranding the rest of the band in the remote, small-town club. The sequence sets up the two prevailing themes of the entire trilogy: 1) the failure of the Israeli male to live up to the demands and the pressure of the mother nation; 2) the struggle of the Israeli male to define himself and establish his individuality and character against the collective ideal of Israeli society. The crowd in the scene—initially just overbearing and later violent—negates the idea of art as a means for the establishment of individuality. As Nurith Gertz has emphasized, "the collective national identity imposed an imaginary national unity on all participants, and, by doing so, also imposed homogeneity on an entity that was in fact fragmented and heterogeneous."[182] Zohar, as a pioneer of Israel's New Sensibility Cinema, undoubtedly prepares us for a narrative that will try to step outside the collective violence of the nightclub and try to individuate the Israeli male, in essentially an analogy to the action that Elli takes with Dina when they escape from the collective crowd of the nightclub to Gutte's shack on the beach.

The most significant failure of the film, however, especially for a film entitled *Peeping Toms*, is a failure of seeing. First, not much peeping actually occurs in the film, but we do get a lot of failures at peeping. In the scene in which Elli brings Dina back to the shack, Zohar dedicates about five minutes to Gutte and his lecherous sidekicks' comic

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[182]HTML Article—no pagination.

misadventures in pursuit of a comfortable position from which to peep on Elli and Dina. And, just before this happens, there is an extreme close up of Duvidke's buttocks (see fig. 11). Second, throughout the film, Zohar portrays the *habitus* of the beach's voyeurs as an individualistic and competitive battlefield where voyeurism is constantly disrupted by other men. Even more significant is the foremost failure of voyeurism in the film, which occurs on the part of the audience: Zohar never provides the audience the expected point-of-view shot of any peephole. Instead, we are only privy to the act of voyeurism itself. This is crucial, because by never giving audiences the characters point-of-view, which itself, as I noted, is often contested and disrupted, Zohar ultimately forces us to gaze at the voyeuristic narcissism of Zohar and his cohorts.

Figure 11 Israeli object of desire

Zohar, rather uniquely, positions the post-Sabra Israeli male as a new, yet problematic, object of cinematic desire. In her pioneering 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Laura Mulvey argues that the classic Hollywood cinematic gaze, which, as she explains, has used the camera to make women objects of male desire:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

Additionally, Mulvey argues that classic Hollywood cinema facilitates an identification with the male protagonist's voyeurism and the subsequent sexualization of women in the film.

While incredibly influential and used quite often in discussion and analysis of films of various genres and periods, the essay has been quite appropriately criticized for the binaries it sets up between woman/object and man/voyeur. Mary Ann Doane adds to Mulvey's argument and notes that, in a sense, cinema is never truly divorced from the real, and that

> the cinematic apparatus inherits a theory of the image which is not conceived outside of sexual specifications. And historically, there has always been a certain imbrication of the cinematic image and representation of the woman. The woman's relation to the camera and the scopic regime is quite different from that of the male…. Spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely, a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging—framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. (76)

But Doane also takes issue with Mulvey's essay: "What, then, of the female spectator? What can one say about her desire in relation to this process of imaging? It would seem that what the cinematic institution has in common with Freud's gesture is the eviction of the female spectator from a discourse purportedly about her (the cinema, psychoanalysis)—one which, in fact, narrativizes her again and again" (77). To be fair to Mulvey, she quickly addressed

some basic problems with the essay, and has since elaborated on it.[183] She has indicated that her essay was both very specific to Hollywood cinema, and that it reflected her strong political commitment at the time to the Women Labor Movement.[184]The essay clearly does not appear to take into account a more complex view of an audience's potential diverse erotic inclinations, and more importantly perhaps, an audiences' tendency for identification. There is a long bibliography of studies of the gaze, and of Mulvey's contribution in particular, and of its drawbacks, especially with regard to the importance of race and sexuality in critiquing the gaze.[185]

The unique situation that Zohar creates in the film is an inevitable challenge to the way classic Hollywood cinema's gaze functions. By taking the air out of the expected voyeurism of a film that is, after all, called "*Peeping Toms*," and consistently positioning the film's men as subjects and receivers of the cinematic gaze, Zohar reshuffles the normative parameters by which classic cinema operates. One could say that in the *Peeping Toms* trilogy Zohar situates the post-Sabra Israeli male as an object of "to-be-looked-at-ness." To use Mulvey's words, Zohar breaks with "normal pleasure expectations" and produces "a new language of desire" (16). The film breaks away from the pleasure oriented, familiar, and wholesome sabra and establishes the average but not necessarily normative Israeli male as an object that is to-be-looked-at. In his important application of Mulvey's essay to concepts of masculinity, Steve Neale suggests that in fact there is much more instability and ambivalence with regard to the gaze and identification in cinema. In any film, he suggests,

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[183]See Mulvey, "On Duel in the Sun"

[184]See Mulvey, "Interview…"

[185]For a multi-disciplinary perspective and analysis of theories of the gaze and looking in art one might do worse than consult British visual semiotician Daniel Chandler's website "Notes on 'The Gaze'".

> a series of identifications are involved, then, each shifting and mobile. Equally, though there is constant work to channel and regulate identification in relation to sexual division, in relation to the orders of gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority marking patriarchal society. Every film tends both to assume and actively to work to renew those orders, that division. Every film thus tends to specify identifications in accordance with the socially defined and constructed categories and male and female. (11)[186]

What Zohar clearly does in *Peeping Toms* is mark the gaze, displace it, and in such a way as to make the men of the film, and Israeli men in general, the site of investigation, and in a perverse sort of way, a site of identification. Zohar not only puts the viewer in a position of a voyeurism of the Israeli male in his shabbiness, he also wants to make the idea of visibility itself, and notions of voyeurism an explicit site of investigation. After all, Zohar could have given audiences even just a single keyhole glimpse of what the owners of these three tucheses were seeing, but he specifically chooses not to.[187] Inversely, when we are given a view of the site in which Eli and Dina slept together, it is when Gutte tries to force himself on Dina but retreats when she forcefully rejects him. In other words, the site of the alleged gaze is a site of failure, and possibly even more so, the site and sight of the Israeli male at his worst.

Despite, or as a result of this new subject's imperfections, this new language is one that is appropriate for its time. The film arrived when Israelis were still euphoric about the military triumph of the Six Day War of 1967, yet the national mood was plummeting as a

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[186]There is a whole other, complex and fascinating essay to write about the cultish popularity of *Peeping Toms* and the role that gender plays in spectatorship, influence, and fandom. That is of course out of the scope of this research. The point of view I am suggesting here mostly comes from the spectatorship of men, especially young men, still forming their identity and masculinity.

[187]Interestingly, the film that Mulvey and those that have addressed and critiqued her work reference probably the most is the 1960 British film *Peeping Tom,* which uses the scopic point of view as its chief cinematic device.

result of the "war of attrition" and the problematic beginning of the occupation in 1967. Together with the rest of the country, Israeli men were struggling to define their relationship and commitment to the Zionist enterprise. Zohar captures this instability on the part of the collective ego of the Israeli male and Israeli society. Israelis were—perhaps for the first time—unsure about their character and national narrative. *Peeping Toms* comic instability, with its oscillating indecision, scopophilic ambiguity, and depiction of quite unappealing men manifests this sensibility extremely well. Shor explains that Zohar stages his actors in "a unique way in relation to the camera—he films them and himself without shame in the center of the frame and in 'close' and medium shots that are larger than the generally accepted in Israeli film."[188] As I just noted, throughout the entire trilogy—despite various instances of voyeurism—the audience is never provided with the point of view of the voyeur, and consequently is forced to gaze and fixate on Gutte and his mainly male cohorts. To further emphasize this agenda, in one scene, audiences do become analogs to the viewing that occurs on the screen. In what is perhaps the film's most memorable moment (and for cult fans, includes the most memorized lines) occurs after Elli and Gutte rescue Little Altman (Motti Mizrahi), one of the beach's most persistent voyeurs and the son of Altman (Mordechai Ben Zeev) from the hands of Avi and Duvidke who take his clothes, tie him up and put him on a mock trial for, as Duvidke proclaims—fully naked—in a high-brow, judicially minded voice: "peeping through a hole in the women's showers and all that with a naked eye. In view of the grave sexual problem in the country, when hundreds and thousands of sex maniacs are peeping and turning on the entire population everywhere…." (see fig. 12)[189]

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[188]See Shor.

[189]A hole-in-the-wall restaurant owner with whom Elli fantasizes about going into business

Figure 12 Sexual deviance on trial

After the rescue, when Little Altman steps out of the water in his underwear, the camera closes in on his bulging manhood with Gutte and Elli still in the frame. Elli notices Altman's well-endowed manhood and motions to Gutte: "Hey! Did you see that instrument?" And Elli retorts after Altman says that he is only 15: "What? It's still growing? What do the doctors say?" At that moment, we—the audience—are looking together with the characters at a new representation of Israeli masculinity (see fig. 13).

Figure 13 Puzzling masculinity

The scene presents this new Israeli male as a locus of problematic ambivalence. No longer the purely mythic sabra who was depicted, Yosepha Loshitzky writes, as "a Rousseu-like 'Noble Savage' born from the sea" and encapsulated in *Exodus*'s Ari Ben Canaan (played by Paul Newman): "a powerful, eroticized, counter-image to the diasporic Jew epitomized, perhaps, by the on-and-off screen image of the neurotic and, intellectual urban "persona" of Woody Allen" (1). But rather, what we see here is a "new" new Jew that is perhaps virile but in a clearly transgressive and deviant manner. In his work on popular culture representations of masculinity, Peter Lehman notes the commonness of penis-size jokes in popular culture and especially in popular cinema. Lehman associates this with the "little attention [that] has been given to the representation of the male body in cinema," and he adds that representation of masculinity

> takes the form of penis-size jokes, which are generally dismissed as not worthy of serious attention. Moreover, many of these films in which these jokes occur are not prestige films, and the phenomenon may have been dismissed as an uninteresting feature of films aimed at the teen market; such jokes may simply seem to exploit adolescent anxiety about changing bodies and sexual discovery. (116)

Peeping Toms and Zohar present a fascinating case-study, because, as I discussed earlier, Zohar was considered (and still is) a serious and accomplished filmmaker. Yet, the film as we have seen, runs the gamut from intercourse innuendo to penis-size jokes. What is one supposed to make of such a film and a close-up of genitalia? In this case, the film's funniest moment is also rather poignant in its relationship to Zionism. Raz Yosef explains that "Zionism was not only a political and ideological project, but also a sexual one, obsessed with Jewish masculinity and especially the Jewish male body." He describes how "in *fin-de-siecle*, anti-Semitic scientific discourse, the male Jews' body was associated with disease, madness, degeneracy, sexual perversity, and "femininity", as well as with homosexuality"

(16). The pathology of the Jewish male's sexuality was even a common theme in the writings of Jewish and Zionist writers. Even Theodor Herzl, who was discharged from military service because of health issues, wrote in 1894:

> I understand what anti-Semitism is about. We Jews have maintained ourselves, even if of no fault of our own, as a foreign body of anti-social qualities. Our character has been corrupted by oppression, and it must be resorted through some other kind of pressure. All these sufferings rendered us ugly and transformed our character which had in earlier times been proud and magnificent. After all, we once were men who knew how to defend the state in time of war (Yossef 19).

Against this, Zohar sets up a new and ambivalent model of Jewish masculinity. Up to that crucial moment, the film was attempting to dismantle and destabilize the notion of the strong, muscular sabra. Gutte is constantly referred to as "Ha-shamen (the fatso)", despite hardly being overweight. And throughout the entire film Elli is inhaling nasal drops, because he claims to be "sick." One cannot escape the feeling that Zohar's filmic representations have on the one hand internalized the negative stereotypes of the Diasporic Jew, but at the same time try to challenge the mythic portrayal of the sabra as healthy and strong. The film contrasts Gutte and Elli's "sickness" and deviance with the older Israeli generation who we see doing calisthenics early in the morning—a tradition that is still maintained by elderly Israelis all across the country. When "little" Altman (or rather his lower half) stands before us and the camera, the "new" Jew of Israeli society in its ambivalence is completed. On the one hand, the masculine ideal, on the other hand, an incomplete image, half a body of a young man together in the filmic frame with two older and allegedly dysfunctional men: one a "sick" philanderer and the other a "fat" bum. The contrast and incongruity are even more powerful considering that the two men, when not in character, but in their real-life identity, were two of the biggest stars in Israel at the time, and supposedly exemplars of manhood and masculinity for many years. The movie comes full circle from failure to deviant and

transgressive masculinity. From Gutte's failure with Dina to his failure to have sex with his favorite prostitute before, at the end of the film, the younger and more virile Little Altman beats him to it. The film ironically turns the failure of old masculinity to the success of a new, yet deviant masculinity.

It is also important to remember that the prior image of the sabra, was far from that of an individual identity delineated in the cinematic space. Despite its constant mythologizing by Zionism, the sabra was not portrayed as a subject with an individualized identity in the world, not to mention in the space of the filmic event, as Ne'eman writes, "Zionist realism emphasized group imagery rather than that of the individual who was granted very limited cinematic space" (104). In *Peeping Toms,* Zohar introduces the sabra into the center of the frame. But rather than celebrate a new, sexually potent Jew at the center of the narrative and the image, Zohar does the opposite. He gives us as the "star" of his final filmic statement, the Israeli Jewish male, as a liminal site of failure and ambivalence. No celebration occurs in front of the camera but a projection of the unconscious and ugly interiority of the Israeli male at a moment of social and cultural crisis. In a sense, Zohar turns on its head a film whose title implies the peeping of the male voyeur at women on the beach (Hebrew is a gendered language of course, so even without the "tom" moniker it implies that those doing the so-called "peeping" are men) into simultaneous castration of one generation of men and the eroticization of another generation. Yet, I would argue, there may be an even more nuanced complexity here. On one level Zohar recreates for us the complex historical crossroad of the time and the generational divide that was challenging Zionist mythology. Zionism's portrayal of the European Jew as essentially compromised, sick, and lacking was partly rooted in internalized anti-Semitism and partly a longing for the historical and symbolic national mother figure, under whose figurative auspices Jews could reclaim their national identity

and thus power and virility. But Zohar's generation, especially during that historical intersection of social and political turmoil, had begun to question the ideology of Zionism as some sort of restorative masculinity. A key scene articulates the generational difference that binds the film's depiction of generational difference. One could imagine this scene as being an analog to the tension between Zohar and Israel's older and conservative ideologues who had criticized him for his lifestyle. As a stand-in for tradition and conservatism, in essence a stand-in for the Jewish Zionist imagination, Zohar places Max, the older lifeguard and alpha male of that certain beach environment. Max is displeased with the fish that Gutte had brought back from sea and he begins to berate and slap Gutte for the latter's alleged incompetence:

> Gutte: Stop, don't hit me!
>
> Max: Stop hitting you ah? I should have, twenty years ago, when you came here, to break your bones. Maybe then you would have become a human being. Look at yourself…!
>
> Gutte: What's the problem, I like it this way.
>
> Max: Shut up when I am talking. Running around here is a dirty man, unshaven, and with hair like a beatnik. At your age, people are already building their lives, what will become of you? Running around with two brats that you could be their father, and you're not ashamed?
>
> Gutte: What do I have to be ashamed? What did I do?
>
> Max: What? That's exactly the problem. That you never did anything, you're not doing, and you never will. I raised you here; I was hoping that you would become a human being, and what became of you?

The scene's *mise-en-scene* is established rather carefully and comically (see fig. 14). Zohar's posture emphasizes his incompetent "schlubiness" and contrasts with the manly pose of authority that Max assumes. In the back of the frame stands Max's young and attractive wife. A sign above the two men captures two phrases: "cold watermelon" and underneath,

in smaller letters, “funny watermelon.” Zohar, as he does throughout the film, turns this rather serious scene into one with comic undertones.

Figure 14 Old pioneer versus lazy bum

This important dialogue reconstructs the strange mix of self-love and self-hating ambivalence that was central to Israeli identity. Max as a representative of the pioneering generation with his slightly foreign accent is portrayed as virile and strong also represents Zionism’s collusion with the modernist idealization of nationhood and hatred of Jewish nomadic existence: the notion that land, country, and nation was the antidote to Jewish suffering. The nation was meant to turn the unhealthy and transgressive Jew—as understood by Zionism—into a “human being.” More than that, as Yossef had suggested earlier, the new masculinity that Zionism imagined was a rejection not only of the alleged ailing and frail diasporic Jew, but also the rejection of the seeming femininity of the diasporic Jew. Daniel Boyarin articulates this quite deftly in his book *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man:*

> In early modern eastern Europe, the ideal Jewish male, the Rabbi or Talmudic student, was indeed characterized by qualities that made him very different from, in fact almost the exact opposite of the “knight in shining armor) heartthrob of our romantic culture. The east European ideal of a gentle, timid, and studious male—*edelkayt*—moreover, does have origins

> that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud. (1-2)

This notion, of viewing the Jewish male as feminine and womanly, becomes a staple of anti-Semitic discourse. As discussed in an earlier chapter, this was notoriously argued by Otto Weininger in his widely-read, anti-Semitic tome, *Sex and Character (1903).* Boyarin, in his book, however, reads this accusation against-the-grain when he suggests that "there is something correct—although seriously misvalued—in the persistent European representation of the Jewish man as a sort of woman. More than just anti-Semitic stereotype, the Jewish male as countertype to "manliness" is an assertive historical product of Jewish culture" (3-4). Not only then, Boyarin argues, was the *edelkayt* not associated with weakness, but just the opposite, this model of scholarliness and gentleness became a masculine ideal. So much so in fact that Jewish culture began to frame the gentile man as a hyper-masculine caricature (Boyarin 4). But Zionism, throughout its ideological development regarded this Jewish male, especially after the tragedy of the Holocaust, as something to admonish and discard. This alleged femininity and weakness had no place either in Israeli culture or on its movie screens.

With Gutte, Zohar tries to reclaim a new kind of character and masculinity outside of the narrative framework of Zionism and Israeli society. Zohar's narrative captures and situates this new masculinity outside of societal normativity. Yet through his subversive scopophilia, Zohar grants it possibility and legitimacy. Gutte's character thus figures as the upsetting image of Zionism's alleged failure to make the unhealthy healthy and give meaning and order to the allegedly disordered and ailing state of Jewish existence. However, he could also represent a harkening back to older definitions of Jewish identity. In this incarnation, then, Zohar is offering a possibility for a new, non-traditional Israeli masculinity that may be asserting some essence of that old European Jewish masculinity.

6.4 *Big Eyes*: The Sacrifice of Individuality

> "Early Israeli settlement society was collectivist in its importance and demanding regarding the modes of behavior that those who live in it must be committed to. When these rules stopped being valid, society turned into a lifeless scarecrow. The baby and the bath water were thrown out and the bath remained empty. The lonely [missing a word?] is not able to find his Israeliness…what is left is a people of empty character who live a secular life, devoid of any value, greed, want, or vision."
>
> - Gershon Shaked[190]

Peeping Toms offers no real closure but rather open-ended repetition, concluding with Avi and Duvidke playing a practical joke on Gutte and Elli. Elli appears to have made up with his wife, but he is lured in the last scene by Avi and Duvidke dressed as female tourists and immediately reverts back to his old self. But this old self, lecherous, immature, purportedly unhealthy is one that—perhaps for the first time in Israeli film—has established an identity and has carved out a cinematic self. The film's collusion with the real manufactures a diegesis that arguably penetrates the fourth wall, and therefore feels more real for audiences. But, at the same time, ambivalence exists at the core of *Peeping Toms*. Since Zohar excludes the audience from "real" voyeurism, he also allows audiences distance from these transgressors—identification is therefore not fully complete.

In *Big Eyes* (1974) Zohar deepens his focus on this new post-Zionist Israeli male. Zohar wrote the second film in the trilogy, *Big Eyes,* with noted Israeli author Yaacov Shabtai.[191] Shabtai's literary-minded contribution and his generally serious tone, as well as the fact of the film's release immediately after the traumatic Yom Kippur War, give the film

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[190] Quoted in Zimmerman, Moshe.

[191]Shabtai's book, *Zichron Dvarim* is now considered the most important Israeli novel of the second half of the twentieth century.

a dark and subdued tone. This was no time to be invested in comedies or expect audiences to relate to them. Some lighter comic moments are provided by the comic actor Tzvi Shissel who plays Duvidke in *Peeping Toms* and now plays a young fan and financier of the basketball team that Benny Furman (Zohar) coaches. Zohar and Einstein occupy the leading roles again. Now, however, it is Zohar's character who is the married philanderer, whereas Einstein plays Yossi, an over-the-hill basketball player with a Peter Pan syndrome. Yossi still lives with his mother and rejects any attempt by the other individuals in his life to "set him up" with a real job.

As he does so often in his earlier films, Zohar manipulates the film's relationship to the real world. Elia, Benny Furman's wife in the film, is played by Elia Zohar, Zohar's real wife and mother of his children (who also participate in the film as Furman's kids). And Sima Eliyahu, Einstein's real wife (who had played the role of Elli's wife in *Peeping Toms*) now plays Sima, the club's equipment manager and Furman's main libidinal interest. Zohar's decision to shoot the film in black and white creates a sense of desperation and melodrama that is maintained throughout the film. The first close-up of the film betrays the sentiment at the center of the film—the disgruntled and unhappy Israeli male, torn between societal norms and expectations and his libidinal drive. Furman, in Zohar's hands as director and actor, is an enigma, a mystery to unravel. An ongoing struggle throughout the film exists between Furman's search for meaning and personal drive and the audience's search for the meaning behind Furman's mystery. His enigmatic nature becomes a tool in Zohar's hands, especially since he is a sort of successful Israeli every-man. As audiences view his private dilemmas and try to make sense of his struggle, they are also struggling with the nature of what it means to be Israeli.

In the film's first close up, Zohar stands in the doorway of his mistress's apartment, this time shaven and somewhat slimmed down from his portrayal of Gutte. This is not the image of a lover, but that of a run-down and even perhaps doomed man (see fig. 15):

Figure 15 Benny Furman

The contrast that the film sets up is clear. There is no obvious reason why Furman should be unhappy or dissatisfied with his exemplary and successful bourgeois life. He is actually a projection of young male desire; not to be desired sexually, but rather socially and economically, a bourgeois ego-ideal. The mystery is then ontological and existential, or in Furman's case, directly connected to being Israeli. If nothing else Furman is indeed ambivalence and ambiguity codified. On the one hand, he is a laconic enigma while on the other hand he is a man driven by primal animalistic desire. The beach bums of *Peeping Toms* enjoy a carefree life and any philosophical or moral dilemmas in the film comes from the judgmental eyes of Max (the old lifeguard) and the audience. In *Big Eyes*, however, the melodrama of the plot also turns inward.

Just as he did in *Peeping Toms*, Zohar uses the film's main song to intimate some possible meaning. In *Peeping Toms* the memorable theme song cuts straight through to the

film's core. In accordance with the decaying urban landscapes that accompany it during the opening credits (the first time we hear it) it tries to foreshadow or suggest the more serious implications that lie behind the comedy that we are watching. The song written by iconic songwriter Shalom Hanoch addresses the diegesis of the film as it simultaneously intertextualizes with Zohar's own life:

> In the morning's wind/ there's a sense of weightlessness/ when you leave quietly/ the dew covered shack/ and in the yard there's a hose that the water/ is still dropping from its hole/and there's more sea down there/ that they will always have a place to stay.

The chorus points to the narrative locus of the film but more importantly to the ex-diegesis of Zohar's real life:

> Again, you didn't sleep at all last night/and you call it a party/ but once you're done/ you're still troubled by worries/you return to your pain/you're still trying to guard/ that you won't change/ that you will always/ have a place to return to."

The last verse of the song repeats the first with reference to the water "dripping from the hose:" they will always have a place to return to—a *heimat.* The song quite clearly alludes to Zohar the playboy. However, a much larger theme of Jewish wandering and nomadic life might be at stake here. Rejecting Zionism's uncritical acceptance of Israel as the rightful homeland of the Jewish people, the song implies that the restless Jewish spirit is still alive and still seeking that untenable feeling of homeliness. This theme arises once again very strongly in *Big Eyes* with an additional dilemma. The dialectic or struggle between the restlessness of the Jewish spirit and the comfort that the state of Israel was supposed to provide is this time more specifically couched in the search for individuality. *Big Eyes* suggests that stability and comfort is offered by the state at a price—that of individual spirit and creativity.

In *Big Eyes*, the theme song written by Uri Zohar, Arik Einstein and Micki Gavrielov, is much more central to the film. In *Peeping Toms* the song bookends the film, both setting the tone in the beginning and finishing with a putative explanation. Whereas in *Big Eyes,* the song, which is named after the main character in the film, addresses the narrative specifically and keeps hovering in the background, returning in key moments in the film. More than mere musical accompaniment, the song is an actual narrative device:

> This is a story about Benny Furman who always came up aces/he had everything you could want and wanted more/ he had a warm house, good wife and kids/ he had everything you could want and he wanted more
> Oh Benny Furman / You drank all the nectar from the flower / You drank all the / nectar, the flower's dry/ Oh Benny Furman
> Where are you running, what's burning? / Drop the bullshit, go rest / Don't risk what you have, and you have a lot / Benny Furman / people live together, you can't alone/
> Can't give just a finger, and take all the hand / People see, people know, it's not nice
> You're thinking about yourself, but there are also others.

The song unequivocally points to the main dilemma that the movie tackles: the relationship of the individual—in this case Benny—to his milieu. Benny's Tel Aviv milieu also is a rather obvious stand-in for nation and society. The model of individuality that *Peeping Toms* projects is an escapist one, suggesting that the individual can separate himself from the crowd through deviance. Whereas the decaying social landscape in *Peeping Toms* hints that the beach bums' behavior was a symptom of a decaying social structure in *Big Eyes* the setting moves from the periphery of the city to the center's bourgeois environment. The opening credits roll with the theme song in the background, but this time a combination of panning and tracking shots shows a quiet urban neighborhood. The film has to probe more deeply into this seemingly benign infrastructure in order to reveal its underlying decay.

After establishing Furman's relationship to Sima in the first scene which may be seen as an homage to European-style realism, the narrative of the film begins in earnest with a unique *mise-en-scene*. Sitting down in the team's restaurant with his baby (Zohar's real child), Furman orders some food. Framed in a medium close-up, he occupies part of the frame while the rest is busy with constant movement: Yossi playing chess, people—wife, fans, Sima—coming and going. The frame and the scene are both inclusive and collective.[192] Furman is clearly the center of this universe and comfortable among his milieu. But as we soon discover, he is comfortable with this collective identity as long as he can escape to his sexual alter-ego, as long as his infidelities remain private or his delusions about their secrecy remain intact. Later in the film, as Furman begins to feel the burden of societal norms and conventions tightening their hold on his life, the film returns to the same exact space. But this time as one of the team's manager's sits down next to him and starts picking at Furman's plate, he gets upset, and quickly urges his friends to go elsewhere.

[192]Zohar is not credited enough for this, but he was also revolutionary in my opinion in his racial inclusiveness. He portrays Tel Aviv as an urban mixture of culture and ethnicities. Not that exclusion and racism did not exist, but at the same time, Tel Aviv—especially its urban areas— was a true melting pot of European and Mizrahi cultures.

Figure 16 Furman and the tightening social circle

The key scene which suggests that Benny's struggle should be understood as a metaphor for the struggle of the individual versus the collective, occurs midway through the film. Furman's adultery has been substantially undermined after a former mistress discloses the affair to his wife. But he has yet to tell Elia, his wife, about his current affair, although she suspects that he has not been completely honest with her. He returns home to find his wife watching television. She turns her head around to face him and asks whether anything is bothering him and he replies, "No." His affect is incongruous with his reply; he is clearly experiencing some inner turmoil. On the television, we can barely see what she is watching. As the camera catch's the agony on Furman's face, the extra-diegetic narrator—intervening from the television—is overheard:

> "In Ein-Gedi and Ma'ale Gilboa, Nahal Snit and Nahal Yam, at the plateau and Sinai Dessert, the soldiers return. Here today are Avrum, Michal, Matti, Tamar, me, Shaul and all the others, who came to the Pioneering Youth Fighters Army, to the settlement, to make this place a home."

The scene ends when Elia turns back to the television and an over-the-shoulder shot captures a shot from the film she is watching, showing the handsome face of prototypical sabra in uniform featuring a utopian and euphoric smile of success. This captures with increasing sensitivity the tension that exists between Furman's model of masculinity, his existential and ontological self-doubt, and the ideal model of the Israeli and Zionist man as a character of unwavering happiness and intent. It is also clear that an incongruity exists between the individuality that Furman represents—he parades through life following his egotistical desires; and the Zionist model where the individual is always represented as a member of a group. Ne'eman writes that in Zionist realist cinema the camera predominantly favors long shots of the toiling group working the land and making the desert bloom:

> When occasionally it captured a close-up of an individual pioneer, it never conveyed an individual's suffering or joy—the "face of the battleground," as succinctly phrased by Igal Bursztyn. Instead, the individual pioneer posed for the camera with a blank expression or a smile delivering an abstract message, personification of an idea. This message was always one and the same: look at me, I am the happy citizen of a Zionist utopia. (104)

In other words, former representations of the Israeli male imagined a wholesome and happy individual. Yet this happiness came at a cost to individuality and individual filmic identity. What Zohar was uniquely suited to understand, and therefore undermine, is the fact that the sabra model of manhood was in itself a sort of false representation, a filmic representation—therefore a constructed one.

Unlike that voiceover, Furman is anything but a happy citizen of a Zionist motherland which feels—with the very recent trauma of 1973—rather shorn of utopian happiness. This overlapping of Furman, in his most unhappy state, with the filmic ideal of Zionism exposes the sabra masculine ideal as nothing but filmic and illusory representation. If the Yom Kippur War shattered Israel's myth of power and then finally put in complete

abeyance any shred of national and nationalistic euphoria still remaining from the end of the 1960s, then it is Zohar who in *Big Eyes* basically puts into relief any sort of delusions of grandeur that the Israeli male as the representative of Israeli society, might have still carried.

Figure 17 The attractive and happy Sabra

As was the case in previous film, Zohar's continuous erasure of boundaries between the fictional and the real penetrates through the implied division that exists between the diegesis and film audiences and therefore establishes, one could argue, a much deeper and more real kinship to the real than was previously established by the propaganda of Zionist Realism. The critique of Israeli social mores is established via another aspect of the plot of both films. In both films it is the social outcasts who are given the pretense of moral authority. Gutte, for example, is at times the voice of reason. He often berates Elli for his infidelities. Similarly, Yossi, the bachelor representative of the individual's right to a non-committed existence, also acts as the moral backbone of the film, playing Jiminy Cricket to Furman's Pinocchio. Yossi presents the audience another way of being that is at once unconventional, yet simultaneously valid. These voices of moral authority are problematic

and perplexing because their moral authority is hidden behind bad-faith. Without committing to society, or standing outside of the norms, these characters can indulge their separateness and critique others, while feeling immune to criticism. Their position adds to a long list of characters that Zohar rebukes, sometimes with a heavy hand, for their myopia.

The theme song and the title of the film point to Furman's alleged myopia, but if Furman is denigrating the familial ideal how can Yossi, who resists social normativity throughout, act as the film's moral center? One way of framing these problematic inconsistencies is through the lens of critical ambivalence. The ambivalence that underlies *Big Eyes* is unrelenting. On the one hand, unlike *Peeping Toms*, in *Big Eyes,* Zohar presents us with a somewhat normative and successful individual. Furman is described by one of the team's fans as "one of the best basketball coaches in Israel." On the other hand, he is a truly unsympathetic figure and as suggested by the song, he is depicted as a strange and transgressive enigma who constantly wants more and is never satisfied with his lot. Yossi's inability to grow up, however, is depicted in a tame and rational manner. He is the moral compass of the film, despite choosing bachelorhood and instability. Furman's struggle challenges the traditional wholesomeness of the family. Thus, once again, a Zohar film depicts an individual struggling with the key and basic tenets that Israel has taken for granted: the family and the collective. Furman's anguish is unattractive and overdetermined. He often turns his inner turmoil into violent temper tantrums that come just short of physically harming his wife. Perhaps the film's most incisive critique of family occurs when Benny and Elia go to see an apartment for sale after a big fight. Both reluctantly enter a bustling apartment with kids and a father sitting on rocking chair. And as Furman walks around looking at the apartment, we hear an off-screen diegetic voice repeating, in monotone: "Quiet please." A medium shot glancing over to the father finally reveals that it is the family's patriarch who has been saying these words in passive-

aggressive repetition. Just as Benny and Elia are about to leave, we get a quick shot of the father again saying "quiet please" but then also slapping one of his kids. The couple's disintegrating marriage is thus foregrounded against an even darker and more violent family life, potentially the future of the Furmans, especially if they buy this apartment.

6.5 *Save the Lifeguard*: Closure and Retreat

> "To regard a story as its author's last will and testament is clearly to grant it a privileged, determining position in the body of an author's work. As its name implies, the will is taken to represent the author's final "intentions": in writing his will, the author is presumed to have summed up and evaluated his entire literary output, and directed it—as proof against "dissemination"—toward some determinable destination. The "ending" thus somehow acquires the metalinguistic authority to confer finality and intelligibility upon all that precedes it."
>
> - Barbara Johnson[193]

Big Eyes is the bridge that leads us from *Peeping Toms* to *Save the Lifeguard*. The progression is logical. If *Peeping Toms* presents the imperfect Israeli male as an object of desire and invites, even forces, audiences to become comfortable with him, in *Big Eyes* Zohar raises the moral stakes for this "ugly" Israeli male and therefore also for the audience. If in the first the Israeli male was still living out the fantasies of freedom and individuality, in *Big Eyes* Zohar gives the Israeli male the Israeli dream and forces him, together with Israeli spectatorship, to confront the symbolic collision between his socialization and the transgressive fulfillment of his libidinal fantasies.

The titles of the first two films clearly suggested that Zohar was invested in the idea of looking and scopophilia. The films actively dislocate the fictional and the real in order to

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[193]See Johnson 80.

invite spectatorship and implicate audiences in the process of seeing, or rather its failure. The last film of the trilogy breaks the obviousness of this theme. The title no longer addresses issues of voyeurism, even though these themes arise once again. The title does, however, strengthen the notion that Zohar is trying to implicate the audience. The title, *Save the Lifeguard* uses the imperative plural form of "to save" and is seemingly addressed toward some recipient, but who is this recipient and what must they "save the lifeguard" from is unclear. After all, it is a lifeguard's job to save, not be saved. As we quickly find out, it would appear that the lifeguard needs to be saved from himself and possibly from what he represents as an Israeli male. The film, despite its filmic successes and likeability (it is probably the best shot and edited film of the trilogy), represents Zohar's conservative turn, both back into the fold of conservative Israeli society, and, just around the corner for him—towards orthodox Judaism.

It is difficult and problematic to measure the film against its two brethren, despite their thematic and stylistic similarities. As Renen Shor documents, the first two films were produced while Zohar was still a cultural pariah, having been judged by Israeli society for his drug use and freewheeling lifestyle, whereas the auteur that made *Save the Lifeguard* was an individual who had just recently been awarded the Israeli Prize for Lifetime Achievement (which he declined), and therefore an individual feeling somewhat embraced and loved by the same Israeli society that had previously rejected him.[194] Subsequently, *Save the Lifeguard* betrays the sense of cultural critique that the two earlier films project. At the same time, similar themes arise here, and the narrative connection is obvious. The film is constructed as an inverse image of *Peeping Toms*. Unlike Zohar's Gutte and his ramshackle and meandering existence on the beach, in this film, Zohar plays a lifeguard with a loving

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[194]See Shor. HTML no pagination.

family. His doting wife is now played by the legendary actor Gilla Almagor (not Zohar's actual wife as was the case in *Big Eyes*), but their three kids are once again played by Zohar's actual kids. Here, as in the previous two films, we are meant to understand that Zohar's character has not been faithful, although this is only shown through the appearance of one woman on the beach, who lures him out of his lifeguard's shack in order to tell him that she is getting married.

The theme of the individual's relationship to mother country returns. This time Zohar tries to universalize the characters in the film. Instead of giving the characters names he gives them terms of reference. The elderly lifeguard, is called "*HaZaken*" (the old man), the playboy is called "*HaYafe"* (the pretty boy). Zohar's character does not even receive an identity in the form of a nickname. Zohar thus transitions from a modality of representation in the first two films that is entrenched in the real to representational categories and archetypes. Instead of names, characters in the film now represent cultural archetypes. It is almost as though Zohar retreats from an understanding of identity as multivalent into one that views identity as fixed and archetypal. Instead of complex on-screen individuals co-existing as part of a complex social network that engages with the extra-diegetic social world, the previous possibilities for the Israeli male now exist as rigid cultural types. The transgressive edginess of the first two films is supplanted by a mostly conservative and normative message. In a way, Zohar's personal identification with the characters he portrayed in the two films reaches its climax here, as Zohar is essentially playing himself. Interestingly, one could argue that one of the strengths of the first two films was that sense of indeterminacy between the characters Zohar portrayed and his real life. Here Zohar appears to be giving up on this ambiguity, while, at the same time, trying to suggest universalism. This is analogous to other elements in the film which try to turn notions of deviancy and transgression back into the orderly and straight—by "saving Zohar."

"*HaYafe*," Zohar's fellow lifeguard, is the irreverent skirt-chaser that Elli was in *Peeping Toms* and Furman was in *Big Eyes.* He especially preys on American tourists and Zohar's character acts as his foil. The familiar sense of the macho battlefield of the beach voyeurs in the first movie returns here. After one such sabotage, in which Zohar pulls "*HaYafe*" away from a rich American tourist by pretending to be his gay lover, Zohar and "*HaYafe*" exchange the following telling conversation. "*HaYafe*" has had enough and he confronts Zohar and tells him that it is "all out of jealousy":

> Zohar: Idiot, what do I have to be jealous of? I am the happiest man in the world. I have a wife, a house, and kids. A base, roots. What do you have, sucker? Nothing? Why be jealous, idiot.
>
> HaYafe: You know what? I will tell what you have to be jealous of.
>
> Zohar: Yes…
>
> HaYafe: You have a wife, kids, house, roots.
>
> Zohar: Exactly.
>
> HaYafe: Yeah you are like a root…
>
> Zohar: Exactly.
>
> HaYafe: Buried deep in the ground. But me? I am free, like a butterfly, a bird (whistling)—from flower to flower-you understand.

Succinctly put, this is the dilemma that Zohar's wants to investigate in the film: does family life mean the end of individuality? This continues the similar theme of *Big Eyes*, which asked whether the Israeli man must sacrifice his individuality for Israeli socialization and maturity, or could he, as "*HaYafe*" wants, continue "smelling the flowers." But if we recall Benny Furman's song, we realize that "*HaYafe*'s" argument rings false for Zohar, because, as he sees it, the flowers have been drained dry. But as is the case with Furman, the impression is that the Israeli man has not yet internalized this, and he is still seeking egotistical self-fulfillment.

Zohar's character and similarly "HaYafe" must be saved from themselves because they have not yet internalized this problem. Zohar has not fully internalized the idea that there is nothing to find in the flower fields. Therefore, in the film he is constantly having his head "straightened." Or he is constantly thanking other individuals in the film for clearing or straightening his head and leading his wandering libido back to the righteous path of family life. In one scene the older lifeguard ("*HaZaken*"), *Peeping Toms'* Max's doppelganger, a representative of the older generation that built the country, performs what could best be described as a baptizing of Zohar in the sea, after Zohar shows up in the morning disheveled and drunk. Nothing however seems to help, making viewers wonder whether all of Zohar's apologetics are done in good faith.

Nevertheless, despite the film's humor and comic sensibility there is a strange pessimism that hangs over its notion of individuality and identity. Instead of a movement towards individuality and agency in the direction of possible transgression, the film implies a conservative turn for the individual back into the socialized fold of Israeli culture. Anat Zanger has articulated the centrality of the "*Akedah* Myth," (the binding myth) in Israeli society. And although the film does not address ideas of wars and casualties that are usually associated with the myth, the film ostensibly argues that the individual must sacrifice freedom and individuality in order to fit in and become an accepted member of Israeli society—in order to be a proud son of the Jewish motherland.

Much of the mythology of Zionism and Israel is subsumed under this push for love and protection from the implied motherland. The idea of the wandering Jew in search of protection and love is exemplified in perhaps the ur-poem of Zionism, Haim Nachman Bialik's "*Hachnisini Tachat Knafech"*(Take Me under Your Wing):

> "Take me in under your wing

And be unto me mother and sister
And let your breast be my head's rest,
Home of my lonely prayers.

At the hour of mercy, at sunset,
Listen and I'll reveal my sorrow's root:
They say there is youth in the world,
Where is my youth? (52)

As the film takes this conservative turn, Zohar also lays the foundation for his turn away from filmmaking and more importantly from being an object for scopophilic pleasure and desire**.** The film's narrative is impregnated with a certain meta-filmic tension that is embodied in the following dichotomy: on the one hand, Zohar's character as a representation of the sabra as an object exposed in all its vulnerability to the camera, and on the other hand Zohar, the director/actor in his extra-diegetic capacity as a gaze-eluding and rejecting object, who will shortly retire from filmmaking and public life altogether. In the film, Zohar's father-in-law hires a theater student (Hanna Lazslo) to seduce Zohar and photograph him in the act, so that he can prove to his daughter that her husband is unfaithful. But, throughout the film, the theater student fails horribly. First, she mistakes "*HaYafe*" for Zohar and later in a series of comical accidents, she fails to "capture" Zohar with her camera. Ironically, or as a brilliant commentary by Zohar, he partly financed the film by receiving money from the Gindy Construction Company for placing their name in the film. His father-in-law in the film is supposed to be the owner of a big construction company. Thus, just as Gindy financed the film, Zohar's father-in-law is also financing an attempt to keep Zohar in the limelight, whereas, Zohar's character constantly eludes this attempt.

At this point in his career, Zohar clearly wants to retreat from the gaze of the camera and into the private sphere. The end of the film could be read as an allegory on filmmaking, or on the consequences of celebrity. As a solution to Zohar's lifeguard infidelities, his father in law "brilliantly" helps the beach's station manager construct a transparent glass shack for the lifeguards, as he suspects with good reason that the infidelities occur in the secrecy of the shack's wooden walls. It is not difficult to find the parallelism between his solution and Zohar's filmic project in the trilogy. We might think of Zohar's political impetus in the film residing in the notion that the cinematic apparatus will be generative and therapeutic: that by exposing the problematic nature of the Israeli male, by showing his ugly face, he somehow will help Israeli society, and especially Israeli men, come to grips with their problems. That is of course a necessity behind any slightly committed work of art.[195] Cinema, and especially films like Zohar's last three—so clearly indebted to the entwinement with the real—try to expose the real and thereby affect the real. But, in *Save the Lifeguard*, Zohar might have generated a different conclusion and effectively engineered his own symbolic turn from the public to the private. In one scene, "*HaYafe*" comes into Zohar's house to feign illness and ask Zohar to take over his shift so that he could abscond with a woman. He captures the family during dinner, in a most familial setting, just as Zohar is sharing a fantastic tale of seaside heroism with the family. "HaYafe" comically stands behind him, overhearing and smiling, because, Zohar is singling himself out as the lone hero. When Zohar finally notices him, he says: "civilized people knock before they enter." Even in this set up, Zohar shows fatigue from the exposure of his family and his self to the viewing public. Alone at home, he is suggesting, he can conjure up all kinds of narcissistic tales of

[195]It is clear that Zohar saw his work has of political and social import and significance. Einstein has reported how Zohar told him that they are also soldiers, doing their little part in the larger national project. See Friedman.

heroic fancy. Similarly, his character's father-in-law's pragmatic solution, of rendering the lifeguard shack transparent and thus the Israeli male visible is reversed at the end with Zohar's comic epiphany to paint over the glass and thereby cover up any putative transgression broached by him, or more symbolically by the Israeli male. Zohar has essentially reversed his previous positioning of the Israeli male as an object to-be looked-at into something that wishes for a state of not-to-be looked-at-ness— turning from the public rhetoric underlying the first two films to the private and personal sphere.

Figure 18 The Israeli Male and cinematic transparency

By the conclusion of this film, one cannot escape the feeling that the arc of the trilogy has moved Zohar away from the radical politics of presenting the ugly and ambivalent male at the center of the frame to a politics which celebrates the private and the hidden. The trajectory is then one that moves from radical transgression to radical conservatism in the face of the camera. About midway through the film, "*HaZaken*," runs across a drunken Zohar who has gotten mistakenly locked in a building's basement with a

bottle of alcohol. After a night alone in the basement, Zohar is terribly unkempt and misshapen. The older lifeguard finds him and berates him similarly to the manner in which Gutte was berated in *Peeping Toms* by "HaZaken's" doppelganger, Max. But whereas in the first film, despite humiliation and physical abuse, Gutte remains irreverent and unyielding, claiming "what's wrong with me?" and "this is how I want to be," here Zohar is penitent and remorseful and even confirms the suggestion that he looks terrible: "yes, I look like shit." (see fig. 19)

Figure 19 The fall before baptism.

Unlike the scene with Max in *Peeping Toms* in which Zohar presents the camera his schlubby back and physique, thus establishing the patriarchal dominance of Max, here the frame captures the two men, members of two different antagonistic generations on equal representational footing. Thus, the film invites a closure which embodies identification and socialization. In the end, it is as if Zohar has come to agree with the Zionist ideology which viewed the Jewish male as ailing and incompetent.

6.6 Conclusion: The Failure of Cinematic Representation

> "What is social about art is its intrinsic movement against society, not its manifest statement…insofar as a social function can ascribed to art, it is its functionlessness."
>
> - Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Peter Bürger summarizes the relationship of art to the social—mostly through the theoretical lens of Herbert Marcuse—in the following manner:

> Art allows at least an imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in the daily praxis. Through the engagement of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect, i.e. it cannot be integrated into that life. The lack of tangible effects is not the same as functionlessness (as an earlier ambiguous statement of mine suggests), but characterizes a specific function of art in bourgeois society: the neutralization of critique. This neutralization of impulses to change society is thus closely related to the role art plays in the development of bourgeois subjectivity. (16)

There is a tendency to think of art—especially representational art—as a reflection of historical conditions. The same has usually been the lot of Israeli film criticism, which has largely discussed and reflected on the historical and social conditions of the period that a certain film depicts or which it is made. This is, of course, a completely appropriate and meaningful way to understand cinema and art in general, and much of what I do in this chapter is in that vein. But Zohar's trilogy suggests, in my opinion, a different intervention into the social sphere and therefore calls for a different form of analysis, or at the very least an additional perspective. Zohar's films are not mere reflection **on** and **of** the disintegration of the sabra identity, but rather a deeper investigation into the nature of cinematic gazing and looking. Zohar's films are clearly embedded within real and resonant historical contexts, but at the same time they realize and capture the potential and constructedness of cinematic artifice. In her highly-regarded text on Freud and the visual image*, Sexuality in the*

Field of Vision Jacqueline Rose notes how for Freud sexuality and thus sex in its various forms and utterances is tied to visual representation. The problem of seeing or at times not seeing (and even seeing and forgetting) is tied to sexuality and sexual development. And I would argue that today even more than in 1970 or 1986 (when Rose's book was published) Rose's words resonate:

> For Freud, with an emphasis that has been picked up and placed at the centre of the work of Jacques Lacan, our sexual identities as male or female, our confidence in language as true or false, and our security in the image we judge as perfect or flawed, are fantasies. And these archaic moments of disturbed visual representation, these troubled scenes, which expressed and unsettled our groping knowledge in the past, can now be used as theoretical prototypes to unsettle our certainties once again. Hence one of the chief drives of an art which today addresses the presence of the sexual in representation — to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and, in the same gesture, to trouble, break up, or rupture the visual field before our eyes. (227)

While, the tendency is to dismiss representations which transcend the mimesis of realism as unpolitical, it is also rather easy to understand how a filmmaker who is aware of the power of cinematic representation could be considered even more political and radical. Additionally, Zohar's films force us to face that old challenge at the heart of aesthetics and politics: if film or art is to be analyzed as construction rather than representation, how much does it ascribe to or participate in the social realm? Put differently, to what extent can we extrapolate from history and society in order to make sense of art? And with regard to the larger investigation in this dissertation, what is the viability of comedy as a transformative political device? Not only do Zohar's films revel in their essence as works of comedy and entertainment, they rather openly as well, as I hope I have been able to outline here, venture quite openly into the social and the political fray. Comedy, in its purest sense, is the most unique representational mode in that it goes beyond the more commonly celebrated obvious and valued reality of Tragedy, and presents us with an inverse sort of image of our world. Through this "put on" world, comedy can, at times, come to grips with,

transcend, and expose fissures and problems in the so called "real world" in ways that Tragedy and its embeddedness in the real, simply cannot.

And this notion of reality versus representation is actually uncannily linked to the ambivalence at the heart of Jewish identity. The representation and allegorical aspect of cinema, especially perhaps that of third world film, provides cinema a special ability to create identities that also work through generalizations. This goes hand in hand with the relationship of Jewishness to perception and its ambivalent representational paradigm. Zygmunt Bauman, as I noted in the introduction, describes the notional Jew as "ambivalence incarnate" and thereby as the "sworn enemy of contradiction," because the perception of the Jew has been forever caught in a struggle between anti-Semitism and philo-semisitism, which are for Bauman in essence representations of "proteo-semitism" which thus turns the Jew into pure ambivalence. As "ambivalence incarnate", "the Jew" becomes a site of representational impossibility. For "the Jew" evades the very concept of framing and ordering. The other side of the coin, however, of being the "sworn enemy of contradiction" is that all contradictions and incongruities, the life-blood of comedy, exist as possibilities for mischief or for political transformation.

Zohar's trilogy captures a unique mood of Israeli history when Israeli culture was caught between euphoria and self-hatred (or self-directed anti-Semitism) and classic ancient Jewish philo-Semitism. In the first two films, Zohar gave back to the Israeli male his Jewishness in all its complexity, wonder, and unresolved masculinity. This is not a Jewishness that Israel or Palestine extinguished, but rather one that had spread into different particularities of identity: religious, political, and ideological. As a participant in the modern project of nation building, Israel attempted to give structure and coherence to centuries of ambivalence. Accordingly, Israeli films tried to present a very particular and ideological focus. But in that certain historical moment, when Zohar found himself as an

outsider to Israeli society, he saw a society in which identity—mainly that of the Jewish male—was once again thrust between ambivalence and ambiguity and between individuality and the collective. In *Save the Lifeguard*, after a few years of searching and literally wandering, Zohar found a particular and stable identity to which he sought to belong. But as a filmmaker committed, one could say, to the constructed representation of filmmaking, it would appear that he realized that one could no longer be what one is, a Jew—"ambivalence incarnate"— in his case, if one is captured and framed on camera.

CHAPTER 7

NOT ENJOYING ANYTHING: HANOCH LEVIN AND THE PROSAICNESS OF THE GROTESQUE

"On the verge of death, I'd like to write
A great comedy,
Something to put you in a
a great and wonderful mood,
something to put a smile
on your lips
and sometimes a laugh,
that will leave you
on your way home,
with a feeling
of deep satisfaction."
- Hanoch Levin, "The Great Comedy"[196]

"Rabelais' basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events. He strove to take a new look at them, to interpret the tragedy or comedy they represented from the point of view of the laughing chorus of the marketplace. He summoned all the resources of popular imagery to break up the official ties and narrow seriousness dictated by the ruling classes. Rabelais did not implicitly believe in what his time "said and imagined about itself;" he strove to disclose its true meaning to the people"
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*[197]

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[196]http://hanochlevin.com/text/p408/ 1.26.019 From The Last, 1999. All texts by Hanoch Levin are translated by me, unless indicated otherwise (Only a couple of selections from *The Rubber Barrons* are from a Barbara Harshav translation). All translations from other Hebrew sources, are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[197]See Bakhtin 439.

7.1 Prologue: Comedy and Processes of Socialization

The centrality of the bawdy in twentieth-century Jewish comedy raises many questions. I have so far tried to address some aspects of it in the previous chapters. And while it may be beyond the scope of this dissertation to entirely unpack or synthesize this pervasive theme, a schematic reading of it reveals that the bawdy is, in a certain way, an aesthetic response to the socially acceptable and to society's norms. It emerges as a response to a certain societal hypocrisy about manners and normative behavior, and is spoken most powerfully from the position of those who either lack power or exist in some liminal state in society. I have also argued in this dissertation that certain cultures, including Jewish culture, may have a reason to and indeed exhibit more openness to employ the bawdy. But what is truly significant is that the bawdy, as it is constituted and entwined with the obscene, is neither straightforward nor instrumental. The difference that I assert between the bawdy and the obscene is that the first is specifically comic and as such it provides much more complexity and nuance.

An understanding of the bawdy as a kind of response to society's norms enables us to recognize the difference between American Jewish bawdy and Israeli Jewish bawdy. We identify this difference in the two counter trajectories of Jewish bawdy that have arisen in the United States and in Israel. In the American context the bawdy performs a sort of trangressive mating ritual of crossing into the inside from the outside. American culture is often a game between dominance, hegemony, and challenging newcomers.[198] Some Jewish American comedians vying for the attention of audiences and attempting to break into the hegemonic circle of white puritanism, have employed the tools of the bawdy and the obscene to infiltrate its ranks. The significantly different context of Israel found the bawdy

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[198]See Werner Sollors's seminal *Beyond Ethinicty: Consent and Descent in American Culture*.

deployed differently. In that setting, as we saw with the work of Uri Zohar, the Israeli comedian does not speak from the position of an outsider, but rather as a voice crying out for individuality in a (mostly urban) wilderness of overwhelming sameness and conformity. This cry therefore often represents a challenge to an overwhelming and culturally conforming Zionist discourse and ideology, as well as a challenge to a Jewish culture that, perhaps because of its historical circumstances, but also because of some of its religious framework, venerates a certain kind of performative masculinity. I am speaking here both of Jewish religious framework that presents restrictive challenges to women and their representation, as well as a Zionist framework, that found it imperative to shed earlier iterations of masculinity that had, according to Zionism, failed the Jews, and construct a more pronounced and powerful masculinity.

On a broader level, the work of the Jewish American comedians that inspire and are discussed in this study participate, similarly to other Jewish Americans, in an attempt to assimilate into the American cultural setting.[199] The Jewish American comedian speaks as an outsider, a sideways cultural commentator offering an unvarnished look into the American culture that has ostracized him or her.[200] He or she speaks from the ambivalent position of the "Other," using the bawdy as one of the third rails of American culture and its Puritan roots. In the Jewish American comedian there is a desire for assimilation into a culture that finds him or her "different" and unwelcome in the days of the Borscht Belt; and later, in the era of Woody Allen and even Jerry Seinfeld, marked as "urban." As such, the Jewish American bawdy is both a critique and a bridge—it pokes fun at a culture of

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[199]See for example Stuart Hecht's book on Jews and their impact on the musical and Broadway.

[200]That is of course the more lachrymose version of history. As Jules Chametzky has highlighted, the United States also offered unparalled openness for the Jews to thrive, as many did.

appropriateness, as it also suggests a possible bridge, an opening through the universality and commonality of sexual discourse.

In contrast, the Israeli Jewish bawdy performs a kind of resistance ritual of non-conformity, of breaking away and separating from a suffocating cultural and identity sameness. It manifests this resistance by both addressing and crossing boundaries of decorum and cultural acceptability. Consequently, for better or worse, depending on one's position, it broadens the definition of that culture.

7.2 The "Dangers" of Comedy

On the one hand, these opposing trajectories correspond to the different socializing processes that have occurred in their respective settings. On the other, they are related to how comedy operates in the public sphere. The purpose of comedy or, in other words, its functionality is unique to art. I would argue that much of comedy is not about emotional affect but rather about political affect. Judging comedy against its historical other, tragedy, points to this important aspect of comedy. The outcome of tragedy in classical terms is to elicit catharsis. When Oedipus discovers that he has killed his father, there is not necessarily some revelation presented to the audience about the world that is beyond the world of the play. Similarly, other genres, like drama and horror try to elicit a certain emotion in audiences and a recognition that is intrinsic to the work itself. Comedy, however, is unique. More than other genres, its function or purpose is political. At the very least, comedy is uniquely entwined with the political in ways that other genres are not. What are the reasons for this? First and foremost, it may be because comedy—and in this it is like tragedy—is about the release of pent up energy through laughter. But while tragedy's catharsis is about the exposure of a revelatory truth that is innate to a specific plot or the story at hand, the truth that comedy exposes, in a sense, gives light to a truth that is audience-centered or

externally based—a truth out in the world. The reason for this is that while there is an emotion associated with drama and tragedy such as sadness, laughter (the outcome of comedy) is not so much an emotion as a physical reaction that includes a personal release, as argued by Freud. As such, I contend that comedy (and its outcome) inserts itself more viably and directly into the real world of the audience. Hegel's take on the difference between tragedy and comedy suggests a similar understanding. In tragedy, Hegel writes, the essence of representation is essential and explicit, "the hero who appears before the onlookers splits into his mask and the actor, into the person and the play and the actual self" (450). In (Greek) comedy, however, "the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates (with his stage character)," which in turn, Hegel argues, "specator is completely at home in the drama performed before him and sees himself playing in it" (452).[201] Comedy, according to this, presents to audiences, a more familiar and relatable world, in addition to its more mortal and everyday subject matter.

Could this also be the reason that early philosophers were so afraid of comedy and subsequently many centuries later comedy was almost excluded from the work of great thinkers? Umberto Eco conveyed this fear in *The Name of the Rose* and made famous Aristotle's missing text on comedy. But even existent texts spoke of the "problems" with comedy. Comedy and laughter were feared by some of the earliest commentators on comedy. According to John Morreall, in *The Republic*, "Plato singles out laughter as something to be avoided." Plato argues that the guardians "must not be prone to laughter, for usually when we abandon ourselves to violent laughter, our condition provokes a violent reaction" (Morreal 10). Literature, Plato maintains, should not have any mentions of heroes or Gods laughing, so as not to provide bad models. In his censure of comedy as a

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[201]Alenka Zupančič's analysis of this matter on pp. 23-29 is thorough and enlightening.

form of malice, in which, in the words given to Socrates, "the malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbors misfortunes", Plato also gives credibility to the notion that comedy has more direct influence on the real world Socrates, again, argues:

> Then let this be principle of division. Those who are weak and unable to retaliate when they are laughed at may rightly be called ridiculous; those who are strong and can defend themselves may be more truly called formidable and hateful. For ignorance in the strong is hateful, because it is hurtful to everyone both in real life and on the stage, but powerless ignorance may be considered ridiculous, which it is. (Morreall 12)

Comedy, then, is dangerous. It is a danger to the status quo and a danger to a political discourse that is invested in articulating and maintaining that status quo. Sex and sexuality have, for millennia, played a similar role. Yet, there is another danger, one that we must be mindful of. Comedy and by extension laughter are also "dangerous" by what they have the potential to do, or possibly portray the illusion of doing. In her admiring but challenging analysis of comedy, Alenka Zupančič warns us of this danger:

> If the imperative of happiness, positive thinking, and cheerfulness is one of the key means of expanding and solidifying this ideological hegemony, one cannot avoid the question of whether promoting comedy is not part of the same process. If comedy is not all about cheerfulness, satisfaction, and "positive feelings"? And is this not why Hollywood is producing huge amounts of "comedy," neatly packaged to suit different audiences: romantic comedies, black comedies, teen comedies, family comedies, blue-collar comedies, white-collar comedies…? (7)

As I move forward with Levin's work, I want us to, at Zupancic's behest, be mindful—as it is undoubtedly important with regard to Levin's work—of comedy's political potential, but also its potential to defuse the political with enchanting joy and entertainment. In the following pages, I will try to be mindful of the dangers and complexities, and possibly even the complicities that comedy yields.

7.3 From Chosen to Broken: From Uri Zohar to Hanoch Levin

In the previous chapter we looked at the cinema of Uri Zohar and specifically his notoriously bawdy *Peeping Toms* Trilogy. We found in the work an attempt to open a critical lens and paradigm through which to understand and reorient the concept of the Sabra and the "New Jewish masculinity" it epitomizes. We also saw a transition from the visibility of this new masculinity into a process of redefinition, and finally a type of cultural and religious erasure. We might add that this transition could count as a loss of the radical promise that Zohar's cinema portended. Zohar's final performative act in the form of becoming a *Baal Tshuva* (embracing ultra-orthodox Judaism) was an ironic but symbolic turn. His attempt to give visibility to and find solace in some older, less-than-perfect, exilic notion of Jewish masculinity that is less enthralled by Zionist models of muscular Judaism, symbolically (in his films at least) fails to find a foothold in the larger (mostly secular) Israeli culture; he then, via his personal journey, finds a home in what is seemingly an older, and according to some individuals, a more authentic existence in Israel.

The outrageous, bawdy, and lewd cinema of Uri Zohar found a more than able contemporary in Israeli art of the1960s. This person was Israeli Playwright Hanoch Levin, whose work's singular vision not only showcases a deep and at times virulent critique of Israel and Israeli culture, it also performs this critique with even more pronounced bawdiness than Zohar, placing, sex, the body, and sexuality center stage. Despite the bawdy or, as I will argue, because of it, Levin's work has had monumental impact and success in Israel. Not counting his early writings as an ultra-controversial column writer for a student newspaper at Tel Aviv University in the 1960s (which I will return to later), in his three decades of work between the late 1960s and 1990s, he single-handedly reshaped Israeli

dramatic arts with his unique vision of the theater and Israeli culture. During his relatively short life—Levin died at the age of fifty-eight—he wrote sixty-two plays, of which twenty have been produced (some posthumously). Levin also wrote numerous short stories, sketches, poems, and children's books.[202]

Writing in the 1990s, Haim Nagid claims that: "No less than three decades Levin survives in the middle of the (Israeli) artistic landscape, a period during which he developed a unique poetics in the dramatic arts, directions, performance techniques, and stagecraft, and had a central place in the continuous changing of (our) collective self-image" (7). Unlike Uri Zohar, whose work oscillated in the artistic landscape between commercial success and wider critical acclaim, Levin's importance and acclaim has never been in doubt, with Israeli drama scholars consistently arguing for his place alongside not only great Israeli writers and playwrights, but global ones as well. As Shimon Levy notes, "among a few Israeli theater acolytes and researchers there is a secret agreement that Hanoch Levin is as 'great' as Samuel Beckett" (8). Even so, Levin's work has had difficulty finding a foothold in the theatrical world outside of Israel. Although he is by far the most translated and performed dramatist in the Israeli canon, reaching Poland and even China, his work has not received the recognition suggested by and merited by his appreciative Israeli scholars and audiences. One possible reason for this is that, while his work draws inspiration from well-known dramatists, it is remarkably culturally specific, and his use of language is unique and difficult:

> Levin has no equivalent in England; perhaps a little of Beckett, Edward Bond, Ionesco and Joe Orton, laced with Swift, and rolled into a package that seems to have been assembled by Antonin Artaud in his theatre of cruelty. Levin's plays depict Israelis with relentless mockery, but his bleak view is extended to people everywhere, a "universalization" that helped to placate his critics.

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[202]Some of Israel's most famous pop song lyrics are based on Levin's poems.

> Apart from certain localized political details, Levin makes Israeli society a metaphor for western society in the late twentieth century, corrupt, bloated, ugly, and murderous. (Abramson 31)

This chapter continues the methodological approach that was laid out in the previous chapter and that runs through the entire dissertation. To remind the reader: one of the premises of my analysis of Zohar's work is that the allegedly unserious and what one might refer to as low-brow, as is the case with the "Peeping Toms Trilogy", should be taken seriously, even if the modality and the technique with which it is presented to the audience is not in itself serious. Not following this notion, some critics of Zohar's films have dismissed them as childish and misogynistic, because they revel in lewd mischief. In fact, similar accusations are often levied against the genre of comedy in general, both as a topic not worthy, according to some, of philosophical discussion, or as a literary mode. And this is doubly true of the bawdy, or comedy that specifically addresses, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase, "the lower realms." As I established in the previous chapter, despite his bawdy humor, Zohar wanted us to take his films seriously, and they provide an important critical lens through which to view aspects of Israeli identity. In Levin's work we find an even more complex challenge to our understanding of lewd and sexual discourse. In Levin's case, the bawdy is often at the center of the artifice.

While Uri Zohar's path to the center of Israeli art-making and popular culture (transitioning from popular entertainer to serious filmmaker) was sensible but transformative for both himself and Israeli culture, Levin's path was much more idiosyncratic. In some ways, as I will show, Zohar's and Levin's creative and life paths are inverse images. But they carved those paths during the same era, at the beginning and in the middle of the 1960s, finding their artistic imaginations converging with a strong use of the bawdy as part of their social critique.

7.4 The Destroyer of the Sacred: Early Life and University Years

"Hefetz: You really decided to destroy my life?

Taygelach: Of course.

Hefetz: I would like to know why?

Taygelach: Don't make a big deal out of your life. We Destroy, and that's it."

- Hanoch Levin, *Hefetz*

Hanoch Levin was born on December 18, 1943, into a poor orthodox family that arrived to Palestine from Poland. He died on August 18, 1999, after a long battle with cancer. Following his father's death, when Levin was only twelve years old, the young Levin was told to quit school by his mother, so that he help support the family financially. Levin worked during the day, and at night would take high school classes and spend time at the theater with his older brother David, who was making a name for himself as a playwright and a director. After a short stint in the military, Levin entered Tel Aviv University and quickly engineered his first controversy. Levin was only twenty-two at the time. He began writing a weekly column for the University's student newspaper, *Dorban* (*Porcupine*), and immediately displayed his developing radicalism and his talent for satire. The column's title "Daf Ha-achoraim" (translates to "The Back Pages," but is also a play on the word "Achoarim, i.e. "buttocks") foreshadowd the future playwright's obsession with sex. Levin's column, which often satirically mocked the military and the treatment of Arabs in Israeli society, quickly found a following among the radical and Communist groups on campus, and made enemies of much of the rest of the student body. Literary scholar and poet, Itzhak Laor, notes that Levin's radicalness was indeed influenced by his association with the Communist Party on campus. The column elicited special scorn courtesy of a punchy and ridiculing text about the macho pilot "Itzik M." In this iteration of the column, entitled "The

Flies in History's Nostrils," Levin mockingly paints a severe picture of one of Israel's most celebrated military battles, *Mivtzah Kadesh* (The Kadesh Operation) and the fictional pilot "Itzik M," the epitome of Israeli masculinity with his "sharp eyes" and "hairy hands" whose "truth" will sadly not be told because:

> [He] died, and in this way, he was fated to be spoken of from the bare mouths of the evening papers. Because Itzik M. has died and as usual "the whores are bathing in his blood." And on the other hand, were he still alive, it is possible that he himself would become a journalist, or a restaurant owner that is a parliament member, or a parliament member that is a thief, or a thief that is a painter, or a painter that changed his sex, so that he could have natural sex with a "Kol Israel" (the national radio channel) announcer. (*The Young Levin Book* 19)

The real politically transgressive aspect of the text is not found in the patriotism of this imaginary pilot, for that is a given. What Levin implies here, in my opinion, is the seeming odious, masculinist patriotism and nationalism that has infiltrated all of society, as represented in all the possible selves that "Itzik M" could have become, had he not died, reaching its apex in his willingness to change sex, so that he could "naturally" copulate with an "organ" of the state. Not surprisingly, students at the university, many of whom were soldiers themselves and some of whom had participated in the same war, did not appreciate either the obviously satirical tone or the fact that Levin repeatedly tells the reader that he has "killed" his fictional pilot.

According to Laor, this is Levin at his sharpest and most acerbic. Laor recalls that a petition to cancel Levin's column was put together, not simply because of one specific incident or another, but because it became quite apparent that the totality of the critique in those satirical back pages bespoke a direct and devastating voice against a certain kind of smug Israeliness and masculinity that valorizes power and patriotism and renders invisible those who critique it. In one of Levin's few interviews on record, given to the weekend

edition of the popular daily newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* five years after *Dorban* and on the eve of the first performance of his controversial play, Malkat Ha-Ambatia (*Queen of the Bathtub)*, Levin reflects:

> It irritates me—the rough Zabari industry, the fictitious image of the Zabar (Sabra), the egocentric, the narcissistic, morality as an industry. The fictitious combination between mysticism and power. I worry about the development of a nationalistic society, full of itself, that pats itself on the back, closed off, and foreigner-hating—a neo primitive society. (*Shiva Yamim* 16.4.70)

Apart from a handful of interviews, there is little material outside of his literature from which to gather information about Levin's ideology and politics. Levin wrote only one text which might be understood as a theoretical essay. Written essentially even before his career as a playwright officially began and around the same time that he began working on the satirical column at university (November 29,1965), the text entitled "*Hodaa Ishit, Maamar Al Satira*" (Personal Notice: as Essay on Satire) appears to be a kind of prologue to the satirical columns that he would go on to write for *Dorban.*

Levin introduces the essay by suggesting that the satire that he is writing and plans to write in the column requires a context and an explanation, and that "the gift of writing a satirical column" is that it comes with a certain "discomfort." This discomfort, he continues, "is entitled to a sharper internal debate and a deeper analysis than the one he has dedicated to it in this narrow column, but at least I have to suggest to you its different aspects so that I will not seem in your eyes a lad too full of his own wit" (47).

The essay is remarkable in both its prescient interpretation of Levin's future work, but also in its criticism, at such a young age, of the Israeli establishment, as Laor writes: "very few are the literary scholars that dared in the next four decades to make that move and to present a historical description of Israeli literature as conscripted literature (*safrut*

meguyeset)" (46). Laor is referring to the section entitled "*hinuch"* (Education) where Levin writes:

> Based on the values of the socialist or religious tradition, the *Yishuv* [early settlers] that settled in the country had no choice but to enslave art to a role that is foreign to it. That is how, not only art and its many facets, but also hairy and warty bodies like the parliament and the military, not to mention journalism, were conscripted into the service of education. That is the reason that it is so natural for *Dorban*'s writers to try their hand without hesitation in the areas of prophecy, preaching, and admonishment. (45)

But Levin's most interesting comments in the short essay come in his discussion of satire and humor:

> [T]he word is an empty sign. Its power lies in what hides behind it, in the logical meaning, the aesthetic, or the semantic that the agreement gives it. The word expresses reality, but does not participate in it. You can cover your ears from hearing, but not cover them from strikes. I am referring to the socio-political sphere. Therefore, by hook and by crook the language of *phrasiologists* itself is not a power and is not a weapon and its magical power is taken away with the first slap on the cheek. Often, I feel that talking, as well as screaming, suffocate me with their inadequacies and my hands sweat from their desire to speak with their own tongue. Everyone that works in language has to recognize the boundary of the work, and that especially applies to the person who set out to fence with its help, who is often saved only because of the jester's cap. (47)

The text displays the playwright's deep sense of sarcasm and irony. It displays an understanding of the deflating power of satire. Satire provides an important tool for criticism, but satire that does not discriminate can also unwittingly extinguish the meaning of anything.

7.5 Early Plays and Controversies

Following an already tumultuous beginning to his writing career on the student newspaper, and after serving in the military reserves for some time and witnessing the

excruciating images of war, Levin decided to leave university before obtaining his degree. His friends report that he rented a small apartment, worked at odd jobs to pay the rent, and just wrote.[203] This writing period culminated in his first work of political satire—a satirical cabaret combining songs and sketches entitled *Ani Ata Ve-Hamilchama Ha-Baa (You, Me, and the Next War)* Although the work was performed only in relatively small venues, it contributed to the growth of Levin's reputation as a humorous and overtly political writer, but also received rebukes from some critics and certain audiences. Calls for censorship were heard, and audiences at times were abusive with the cast members—storming the stage, heckling, or throwing objects at the performers. The public denunciation was so strong that the play was taken down after relatively few performances. Somewhat exasperated with the reaction to his first show, Levin wrote a more mellow second cabaret entitled *Ketchup* (1969). While still a political satire, this play tones down the straightforward politics in favor of greater humor.

Levin followed *Ketchup* in the same year with the firebrand political satire, *The Queen of the Bathtub* (possibly a play on Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale"). The reactions to the politics of this play echoed the public's wrath for *You, Me, and the Next War.* In fact, *The Queen of the Bathtub* was so controversial that audiences, who wanted to see what Israel's *enfant terrible* has come up with again, began to throw food at the cast members. The play had a very short run of nineteen performances and was taken down. While full of humor, an aspect the audiences indeed responded to, *The Queen of the Bath* also addressed and challenged deeply seated Israeli anxieties and beliefs and the play may have been too confrontational for audiences and even critics. Even though it was not explicitly expressed, the "Queen" was assumed by everyone to be Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who is

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[203]See *A Life Whose Likeness We Have Yet to See*, Episode 1.

depicted in a somewhat odious manner in a sketch entitled "The Meeting of the Cabinet." Here, the Prime Minister claims with hubris: "I tried and tried to find and I could not find a single fault with myself. Seventy-one years I check myself and I find in myself such righteousness, God forbid. And every day it surprises me again and again. Right, Right, Right, and Right again." [204]

Even Michael Handelzats, *Haaretz*'s legendary theater critic and Levin's greatest champion notes that he—as a young actor who adored Levin and even participated in an early student production of Levin's *You, Me, and the Next War* while both were students at university—identified with the critical thrashing that the play received. It caused such tumult and uproar, Handelzats notes, that even a critic writing in Israel's leading teen newspaper (*Ma'ariv Lanoar*) wrote in a review of the play that "you should treat Levin as you treat a puppy that pees on the living room rug—push its nose into the puddle of pee and throw him out of the window" (Handelzats adds the amusing anecdote that this article was printed almost in its entirety on the record that came out with the play's songs). The public upheaval in response to *Queen of the Bathtub* was even more significant. David "Dado" Elazar, the Commander in Chief of the IDF at the time, said, rather misogynistically, in response to the question of what his soldiers in the Suez Canal thought about the play being performed in Tel Aviv: "[T]hey told me, Commander, bring this Queen over here and we will give her a bath" (Handelzats 10).

Levin's satires, as noted, are overtly political and undermine Israeli sacred cows such as the military; they are also full of bawdy material. In various sketches Levin provides a foreshadowing of that which will show up later in his much less controversial and much

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[204]See *Queen of the Bathtub* in *What Does the Bird Care*, http://hanochlevin.com/text/p86/ [in Hebrew].

more popular "domestic comedies." A monologue in *Queen of the Bathtub* begins with the overt refence to the local history of war:

> It was at the age of three
> That my youth was lost
> On the way from kindergarten to the shelter
> Planes with beautiful wings
> Passed above me
> And left me and my face
> covered in dirt

The scene recalls an actual incident that left a deep impression on the young Levin,[205] when on his way back from school, his Tel Aviv neighborhood was attacked by Egyptian airplanes. The monologue, however, does not end there. What is the lesson that the monologue's narrator wants us to take away from his near-death experience?:

> so get up, wake up
> You mortal babies
> Eat and drink and piss your bed
> And massage carefully, carefully
> Your mom's breasts
> Your best hour is almost behind you.

Thus, even this early into his career, Levin still gives us a glimpse of the perspective that seems to shape his entire catalog—one in which the political and the everyday are never disentangled from the bawdy or, to be literal in this case, the mother's breasts. And in

[205]See *A Life Whose Likeness We Have Yet to See*, Episode 1.

Levin's world there is neither reason nor possibility to untangle them. Therefore, we find the political becoming bawdy, and the bawdy, one might say, political.

7.6 The Historical Context

In order to fully understand Levin's work, we first must be aware of the unique Israeli context that produced his peculiar brand of theater, both in terms of the historical period and the cultural setting. The period in question is the late 1960s, following Israel's decisive success on the battlefield in the Six-day War, but also the creation of a new, problematic geo-political situation for Israel with the annexation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The general feeling in Israel was one of elation and confidence in Israeli power and prowess. The momentous and some would say disastrous outcome of the war is still haunting Israel, its public, and consciousness today. While there was a strong sense of pride in the rout of the Arabic nations in 1967, life in Israel quickly transitioned to what is known as the War of Attrition, which took a psychological toll on Israelis, culminating in a sense of utter devastation with the Yom Kippur War. Journalist Ari Shavit argues that this period gave way to a re-examination of Israeli ideals:

> The settlements were a direct response to these two wars. The swift turn of events in 1967—from fear of annihilation to resounding triumph—sideswiped the rigorous self-discipline that had held Zionism together for seventy years. The Israeli nation was drunk with victory, filled with euphoria, hubris, and messianic delusions of grandeur. Six years later, the almost instantaneous shift from an imperial state of mind to cowering despondency was followed by a deep crisis of leadership, values, and identity. The nation was filled with despair, self-doubt, and existential fear. Let down by Israel, many sought comfort in Judaism. The diametrically opposed war experiences, which occurred within six years of each other, threw the Israeli psyche out of balance. The incredible contrast between them gave birth to the settlement movement. (202)

Levin's early career owes much to this cultural cauldron.

After the disastrous national backlash and financial failure of *The Queen of the Bathtub*, Levin's career was in doubt. But he returned to the stage in 1970 (premiering at Haifa's municipal theater because of his recent reputation) with a different kind of play—a comedy called *Hefetz*, the first of the successful comedies that have been deemed by many as "domestic comedies," but I prefer Haim Nagid's more appropriate term "Comedies of Misery."[206] These comedies replace explicit political satire with a very dark and severe vision of society, supposedly Israeli society.

This time, however, the message of *Hefetz* was removed enough from ideologies of national consensus that audiences absolutely embraced the play. Zehava Caspi argues that Levin's arrival on the national scene is analogous to numerous other changes occurring at that time on the Israeli cultural landscape**.** Similarly, to what we traced in the previous chapter regarding the transition of Israeli cinema from a focus on Zionism and national heroism to a more personal cinema that at times critiqued those very things, Caspi points to an analogous transition and cultural change that was taking place in Israeli literature and other art forms. In that sense, Levin's work is a corollary to Zohar's work. Both artists' work was a challenge to the nationalistic status-quo. Zohar's work moved away from the nationalistic to the more personal, as I discussed in the previous chapter, ultimately making a unique political statement on Israeli identity. Levin's work was more clearly and unashamedly political. According to Caspi, the new geo-political complexities together with additional emerging critical voices, made audiences receptive to self-criticism:

> Despite the explicit language in which Levin disagreed with the sanctified values in society, in the public there was at least a partial willingness for self-critique in the days after the Six-Day-War. This willingness is connected to changes that had begun to take place in the world of values and concepts of the public in Israel. A work of art never appears in a vacuum. When it

[206]See Nagid 23.

> comes out the public already has a frame of reference—"an anticipation horizon"—to use a term coined by Hans Jaus—that is the background of its acceptance. New works are accepted after a change occurs in the models of thought and new communal needs come against old beliefs and demand new beliefs. Texts that are accepted as "truth" are those that reflect the shared values of a society at a certain point. (28-29)

7.7 The Politics of the Rabelaisian

There is no doubt that a unique aspect of Levin's plays is the brazen yet effortless way in which they explicitly discuss sex and allude to sex and sexuality. Far more than in the work of the two most established influences on Levin's work—Beckett and Brecht—the definite and unabashed use of sex is central. The question though, as has been repeatedly asked throughout this project, is to what end: What is the purpose of this explicitness, the lasciviousness, the at times outrightly crass? Moreover, not only does sex show up in Levin's comedies, but so do genitalia and numerous bodily functions and malfunctions. There is a very obviously Rabelaisian quality to it all.

Among Levin's critics and readers there has been mostly two approaches to the sex and obscenity found in his work. One approach views it a sort of shtick and a waste product of the other more important elements in his work.[207] The second approach, which does address—and it is difficult not to do so—the sex in Levin's plays and writings comes in a few forms. For example, Yitzhak Laor points mostly to the linguistic wizardry and innovation in the plays with regard to sex: "the number of times that masculine and feminine genitalia in folk images that Levin invents in his comedies, can explain the special role of the playwright in the Hebrew language culture" (*Hanoch Levin*, 84).[208] Noam Yoran

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[207]For example, Freddie Rokem and Zehava Caspi point to "more worthy" ideas to explore in the comedies, like humiliation and family power dynamics.

[208]Laor addresses sex in other ways as well, through symbolic Freudian and Lacanian readings.

takes Levin's lasciviousness seriously, as is clear by the name of his book, *The Erotic Word: Three Readings in the Work of Hanoch Levin*. In his analysis, however, Yoran ultimately finds the rampant use of sex, a metaphor for more important things: "In his early satirical writing Levin continuously presented sexual allegories to national politics." Yoran ties this to a similarity between Levin and the somewhat radical weekly of the time, *Haolam Haze* (This World). In both cases, he suggests, "the obsession with sex… had a local and political dimension" (34). Gershon Shaked, one of Israel's most influential literary critics, provides perhaps the most interesting reading of the sex in Levin's work. For Shaked, the obscenity in Levin's plays is a pointed stylistic choice. In an essay almost exclusively about Levin's early play from 1970, *Yaacobi and Liedental*, Shaked writes:

> What characterized this work more than anything else, is its style. This refers not only to its pure linguistic style, but to all the different content and formal ingredients that create a "style": the atmosphere of a play is created through convention, which is a kind of "contract" between the writer and the addressee that gives him, the playwright the "poetic license" to speak obscenely as much as he likes. "The foul mouth," in a first instance like this, might create shock and awe, but once this "style" becomes a dominant norm in the work, the shock and awe disappear, and are replaced by the willingness to accept this "style" as one of the characteristics of this fictional world…. This is a style that assumes that there is no need for euphemism, but that you can call all the anal, oral and phallic activities of men by their name. Levin requires a language without repression and deflection. He breaks language taboo conventions and with great joy exposes what others hide. Furthermore, he needs the convention of sex language even in areas that don't address the "topic" directly, because the sexual metaphoric is legitimate in his eyes and the uninhibited release is his stylistic "calling card." (6)[209]

Shaked's reading of Levin is more resonant than Yoran's or Laor's and he makes various valid, if disjointed, points. Yoran's and Laor's instinct is to find meaning beyond the obscene

[209]He refers here to the playwrights Matityahu Shoham and Nissim Aloni.

and the sexual in order to maintain an image of the "political" Levin.[210] Shaked's reading, however, presents a more direct investigation of Levin's "obscenity" for exactly what it is. Over his long career, the lewd, not only became an audience expectation, but Levin's "calling card." However, it seems mistaken and problematic to assume that a writer with such a clear political point of view wanted to poke the audience with profanity simply for the sake of style. Could there be a more resonant and enticing reason for the profanity, even if Levin, in an extremely rare radio interview with Michael Handelzats conducted around the time of his real first success with his play *Hefetz*, suggests otherwise:

> Handelzats: People accuse you of using "obscene language"
>
> Levin: I have to tell you, different journalists wrote that I got pleasure out of it, and I have to say that I really did. It gave me pleasure to write it and to see people saying that; I have gotten pleasure out of seeing people not taking it well. It was simply a pleasure. You see, that is one of the pleasures of the theater that you don't have in song (poetry) (laughs). You curse, and that's it. (14-15)

Putting aside the implied sadistic pleasure that Levin seems to derive or is coy about deriving, the interesting contrast that is drawn here is between the audience's elevated expectations for the theater and what the theater really is. The theater for Levin is about reducing the space between the street and the audience. And on his stage, as in life, one curses "and that's it." The sex and the obscenity in Levin's plays are used as a kind of reminder of the everyday and of common humanity. Thus, the obscene and the lurid language function as a satiric shock to Israeli sensibilities, and a reminder of the frailty and corporeality of the Israeli individual. Levin's work does two things that are indeed intimately tied to comedy and the obscene: on the one hand, it offends—it is a challenge to

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[210]This was especially important for Laor, who was also an active radical at Tel Aviv University and similar in age to Levin.

propriety and norms—and on the other hand, it is a reminder of the core essence of the flesh, which we all share. Thus, Levin is positing a unique politics at the center of the stage. Levin, I would also contend, as he left behind his blatantly political satires and moved on to the domestic comedies, did not abandon his desire and penchant for political statement. The political simply transitioned to questioning the place of the individual in society, and very specifically Israeli society. The sexual and the body inform a complex but fascinating political engagement that is committed to the dignity of the individual and the basic humanity of the individual.

7.8 Levin through a Bakhtinian/Rabelaisian Lens

Quite possibly the most interesting theoretical framework into which we can insert Levin's work comes in the form of Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais in *Rabelais and His World*, which is both an archetypical reading of comedy, especially comedy of the bawdy variety, and also a treatise of sorts on the importance of Rabelais' work as a challenge to official culture. Bakhtin, while perhaps not the first writer or critic to hold Rabelais in high esteem, is the critic who provided an important framework and a context in which to take Rabelais seriously, including the very things that may have been deemed inappropriate and juvenile in his work.[211] Additionally, there is an interesting affinity that Michael Holquist points to between Bakhtin and Rabelais that could easily be applied to Levin's work as well:

> Both were aware that they lived in an unusual era, a time when everything was in flux and the world had become in Bakhtin's phrase, a "stage without footlights." This breakdown of the border between stage and gallery, between actors and audience, in their respective ages is a key to the obsessive concern we may trace in the work of both men for the breakdown of borders of all kinds. (9-10)

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[211]That is obviously not the only reason to take Rabelais seriously. Arguably, one needs no justification to take something seriously, only because it has not been taken seriously.

It is this affinity that may have made Rabelais' work relevant for Bahktin centuries later. As for Levin, his work alone—even if he did not communicate any of this in the sparse extra-literary texts he wrote—suggests that he saw the time he was writing in, like Rabelais and Bakhtin, as a time of public urgency and turmoil, one might even say a "carnival" of sorts.

Even though Bakhtin's more well-known term, "the Carnivalesque," has been instructive to the analysis of Levin's plays for a few critics, a more important and propitious term, which Bakhtin specially coined for his work on Rabelais is appropriate for the analysis—"Grotesque Realism."[212] Bakhtin is referring to the ubiquity and centrality of sex, the body, scatology, and the lewd in Rabelais' work, what we refer to now as "Rabelaisian." Bakhtin concedes that he is not the first to point out Rabelais's exorbitant focus on body apparatus:

> It is usually pointed out that in Rabelais' work the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role. Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form. Rabelais was proclaimed by Victor Hugo the greatest poet of the "flesh" and "belly," while others accused him of "gross physiologism," of "biologism," or "naturalism."

And, Bakhtin adds, Rabelais was not necessarily unique at the time:

> [S]imilar traits were also found to a lesser degree in other representatives of Renaissance literature, in Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, and were interpreted as a "rehabilitation of the flesh" characteristic of the Renaissance in reaction against the ascetic Middle Ages. Sometimes they were seen as a typical manifestation of the Renaissance bourgeois character, that is, of its material interest in "economic man." (18)

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[212]See Laor and Shaked. However, a reading which truly and deftly applies the concept to Levin's plays has not been attempted.

Bakhtin's original take on the French Renaissance writer is that Rabelais's work was not a "gross" outlier or an exaggeration, but quite the opposite. Its uniqueness, and by extension I suggest Levin's as well, postulated an adherence to a realistic sense of folk humor:

> All these and similar explanations are nothing but interpretations according to the narrow and modified meaning which modern ideology, especially that of the nineteenth century, attributed to "materiality" and to the "body." Actually, the images of the material bodily principle in the work of Rabelais (and of the other writers of the Renaissance) are the heritage, only somewhat modified by the Renaissance, of the culture of folk humor. They are the heritage of that peculiar type of imagery and, more broadly speaking, of that peculiar aesthetic concept which is characteristic of this folk culture and which differs sharply from the aesthetic concept of the following ages. We shall call it conditionally the concept of grotesque realism. (18)

Bakhtin essentially argues that Rabelais's seemingly foul language, his fulsome discussion of sex and bodily functions was not overly dramatic or fantastic for effect's sake. Quite the contrary, the so called "grotesque" that is depicted in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is, in fact, the most realistic aspect of the novels. The novels' uniqueness lies in the fact that they capture the spirit of the market place and of the people that inhabit it. The essence of grotesque realism in other words lies in its **realism,** not in its **grotesqueness:**

> In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severence from from the material roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. (19)

Returning to Levin, we might want to understand the grotesque, both in terms of the bodily and the sexual, in such a way that it fortifies the notion that we are dealing with something that seeks our attention in a much more political manner than simply seeking the exploitation of the pleasures of juvenilia. According to Bakhtin, the crudeness of "grotesque realism" is generative and positive:

> We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (19)

The Bakhtinian lens explains why Levin's often crude and sexual plays and scenarios resonate with audiences. It is, after all, the *lingua franca* of the street put on stage. More importantly, it allows us to understand why Levin's work can be understood within the parameters of the grotesque and the lascivious, but still contain important political commentary.

Thus, the bawdy or "Rabelaisian" in Rabelais can function in two interesting and counterintuitive ways. First, the depictions of sex and other bodily functions speak rather naturally to the very essence of being human. Second, these depictions gather even more importance when official culture is trying to limit not only what is spoken but also to govern and police how human bodies are depicted. As Bakhtin emphasizes again and again, this kind of celebration of the body is always opposed to that put forward by official culture, which seeks to reduce it to "an unresponsive surface, a flat plane" (25).In this sense, grotesque realism is powerfully political and confrontational, because it ruptures the false image of the body from the state. As Michael Holquist writes:

> This view goes a long way towards explaining not only why disciples of the Old Commandant in Kafka's penal colony turn the body of their prisoner into a surface to be written on, but why repressive governments are always puritanical. The body is the most universal symbol of the State. It is inevitable that in Stalinist Russia, xenophobic in its relation to the outside world and (like Renaissance doctors) given to purging its own body politic, the idea of keeping the body pure had central importance. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has pointed out, when a "man recognizes a very strong allegiance to a social group ... then the group is likened to the human body: the orifices are to be carefully guarded to prevent unlawful

> intrusions, dangers from poisoning or loss of physical strength (Holquist 26).

Furthermore, the grotesque is the natural ally of humor and comedy, as Wolfgang Kaiser puts it:

> The grotesque is a structure. Its nature could be summed up in a phrase that repeatedly suggested itself to us: THE GROTEQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD. The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable. We have observed the progressive dissolution which has occurred since the ornamental art of the Renaissance: the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of "natural" size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order. (184-185)[213]

In a similar vein, Simon Critchley claims that comedy turns the world on its head:

> Jokes tear holes in the usual predictions of the empirical world. We might say that humor is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves…. The comic world is not simply '*die verkehrte Welt'*, the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters."

7.9 Comedies of Despair or Comedies of Truth?

In response to his third play, *The Queen of the Bathtub* getting cancelled due to public outrage, Levin composed two very rare pieces of extra-literary writing: the first is a very short letter entitled *"Gilooy Naot: Beikvot Bitool Ha-Machaze"* (Full Disclosure:

[213]Capitalization is in original text.

Following the Cancellation of the Play)," and the second is a sardonic sketch entitled "Eych Pagashti Et Baali" (How I Met my Husband).[214]

In "Full Disclosure," Levin feigns an apology for the play:

> Dear Minister of Defense, mayors, public officials and esteemed individuals, grieving parent organizations, news, radio, and television journalists, respectful civilian audience,
>
> Deeply ashamed, and yet grateful, I stand before you today. Your sincere and indefatigable efforts to cancel the play *Queen of the Bathtub* opened my eyes and made me think about what I had written. Now, with the removal of the play from the Cameri's Theater stage, I am willing to admit with my head hung low: I was wrong. I used the principles of democracy and freedom to erode public moral, to curse and blaspheme Israel's wars, and to plant hatred and shamefulness amidst a unified nation.
>
> I take back every word and mark I wrote. I hereby implore you, in a hushed tone, to relate my mistake to my young age, and to the bad education that I received at my parent's house.
>
> And with this request for forgiveness I am going to keep hoping that I will be given another chance to prove myself as a contributing ordinary citizen, to the glory of state and nation.[215]

The overriding tone of this response is clearly sarcasm. It is a sharp and biting "appeal" to various Israeli sensibilities and sensitivities which he must have felt were to blame for the removal of his play. Sarcasm and irony were elemental components in Levin's theatrical tool box, as implied by a key sentence in his earlier essay from his university days: "the word expresses reality, but does not necessarily take part in it."

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[214]It is somewhat unclear where these were published if they were published at all, aside from their posthumous publication in a collection of writings that the young Levin produced. Throughout his career, Levin often wrote short pieces that he just handed to friends or read to cast-members while working on a play.

[215]Hanoch Levin, "Full Disclosure (Giloy Naot)" Ma Ikhpat La-Tizpor" (1970). http://hanochlevin.com/text/p102-2/ Accesses on 2.10.2019.

As a bitter reaction to the cancellation of the play "Full Disclosure" is understandable and somewhat justifiable. However, it is rather noteworthy that following those scandalous plays, and supposedly as he was writing this piece, Levin had already begun writing comedies that at first glance display none of the politics or "bad education" that he had received at home. It therefore must be asked: Did Levin retreat? Did he cower? Were these plays not political? Or are they political in a different way? One aspect that these comedies shared with the early satirical cabarets was the bawdy and scatological. While these were things that audiences also protested, it was much clearer that the no holds barred political combativeness was the thing that brought about the cancellations. The obscenity was just another aspect that critics latched on to in order to defame the playwright.

Perhaps, however, the critics were wrong, and the obscenity was central to Levin's project and to his artifice? In "How I Met My Husband (Following the Cancellation of the Play)," the second piece that Levin wrote in response to the cancellation of the *Queen of the Bathtub*, he tries to highlight, in his very idiosyncratic and deeply sarcastic tone, the hypocrisy of the average aggravated theater-goer. Perhaps Levin additionally articulates an artistic point of view from under this rubble. I quote the text here in full for effect:

> I'd like to tell you how I met my husband. It was during the play "Queen of the Bathtub" at the Cameri Theater. Real smut and filth. Even though I came alone, during the second part I couldn't hold myself back anymore and I screamed. Actually, it wasn't me. All the grieving parents, all the widows, all of the fallen and the injured—were the one who were screaming from my throat. It was the first time I couldn't control myself at a play. I roared like a widowed lioness. Because the lie of the thing hurt me. Not one single word in the play is true. All our lives here, in this country, are not like kaka and pipi (*pee*) as they tried to show on stage. I think that you really must be blind or evil to make all that is dear to us into kaka and pipi. You realize that the playwright has an obsession; he needs to play in kaka and pipi. He's welcome; nobody is standing in his way to do so at home. I, as an audience

> member, will not come to a theater that is funded by my money and find myself drowning in kaka and pipi.
>
> As I mentioned, it was in the second part, near the end. It was already beyond the pale, the kaka and pipi and the kaka and pipi, and again the kaka and pipi. I remember that I screamed and suddenly jumped from my seat, ran to one of the microphones, lowered it and screamed into it: "this is scum! It is kaka and pipi and kaka and pipi and kaka!" I heard, as in a dream, the voices of other people joining my screaming: "It is kaka! Indeed, it is kaka and pipi!" One man, short, with a reddish face, jumped on stage to pull out the electric cord, and when he heard me, in all that noise shouting "kaka!" he looked at me and continued after me "pipi!"—that was actually our first meeting. Meanwhile the play was stopped and the light in the auditorium was turned on. But, we, the audience, did not want to stop the protest. We kept shouting "kaka! Pipi!" And after they threw us out, we gathered in front of the entrance of the theater and we did not stop even for a second: "kaka! Pipi! Kaka!" We shouted for three or four hours, we were so riled by this low-life. Around 2 a.m. the crowd disbanded. The short man with the red face that stayed with me to shout: "kaka and pipi" walked me home. All the way home I was still stunned, I walked and mumbled not willing to believe: "kaka and Pipi?! Kaka and Pipi?!". When we made it to my place, I wanted to say goodbye, but he asked to come up for a second because he had some pipi. I agreed. He also did a kaka, he came out of the bathroom and said: "I did kaka and pipi." We stayed up until the morning. That's how I met my husband. (69)[216] (June 1970)

It is productive (the opposite of wasteful here) to think of "How I Met My Husband" as a transitional text between Levin's early "political" career and the more straightforward comedies. The text is a scatological manifesto that paints a picture of a society that is blind to its essence. At this juncture, Levin transitions from satire to producing melodramatic comedies centered around everyday folk whose lives are not the lives of heroic pilots or prime ministers. But the bawdy remains as a clear through-line that points to the ways in which individuals, and at times society as a whole, are unable to see themselves as material and sexual bodies in the world. Levin pulls the profane into the familiar space of everyday

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[216]Hanoch Levin, "How I Met My Husband". *Ma Ikhpat Latzipor.* 1970. http://hanochlevin.com/text/p101-3/ accessed on 2.10.2019

life, not only as an act of subversive opposition, but just as much, as a reminder that the profane has always been there—always a part of our basic nature.

7.10 *Hefetz:* Humiliation and Ambivalence

As noted earlier, Levin's dramatic output was vast, and of the more than forty plays that he wrote and directed, more than half were comedies. There is no space currently to discuss all of them. Luckily, Levin's few detractors' argument that his plays are repetitive or too close a variation on the same theme helps in this case. It is not uncommon for artists to develop variations on a same theme. In Levin's case, he naturally gravitated to certain preoccupations and many times even to similar types of characters. Thus, a few examples should suffice to give a reader a good understanding of the work, specifically the comedies.

Hefetz, Levin's 1972 play is essentially where it all starts, because it was the play that let Levin back into the national spotlight, after the financial failure and public outcry over *You, Me, and the Next War. Hefetz* is the definitive example of what critics like Haim Nagid have described as Levin's "misery comedies" (11). Others have less judgmentally dubbed them simply "bourgeois" or "domestic" comedies, since the setting of these plays is often an urban neighborhood inhabited with an almost returning cast of town folk living lives, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, of "quiet desperation." The desperation in *Hefetz* is channeled through the play's namesake, Hefetz, for whom we do not have a surname or age. Hefetz is practically alone in the world, even though he lives with what the play refers to as his "blood relatives" Teigelach and Clemensah, the father and mother respectively of Fogra, a spoiled Jewish princess for whom Hefetz has a hopeless (she is engaged to be married) and ultimately fatal infatuation (see fig. 20):

Figure 20 Hefetz and Company

When Fogra announces to Hefetz in a rather demeaning manner that she is about to enter into marriage, Hefetz one ups her and announces his plan to commit suicide during the ceremony. This strange anti-climactic play ends with Hefetz, standing at the balcony about to jump, gets cold feet and backs away, only to have Fogra, in a most vicious and sadistic way push or guide him off the roof—announcing in victorious cruelty: "Enough, really, there's a limit to my patience" *(Hefetz and Others*, 171). What is it exactly that she has had enough of? Hefetz not embodying the strength and directness expected of the Zionist male? Is she, or the play, telling us that there is no room in this context, for the undecisive, the meek, and the different?

Many of Levin's plays are given the title of a character, and in this case the name is undoubtedly symbolic. The name, not an unused Israeli surname, means "object" or "thing." As the play progresses, he will indeed be a thing that is disregarded and eventually discarded. It would not be surprising that Levin, the obsessive wordsmith (he would relish playing word games and inventing new words with his sons), may have wanted audiences to think about another meaning of that three-letter combination, חפץ, which with different

diacritics means "want" or "desire." As, I will discuss later, desires and often their failures are important themes in Levin's work.

Hefetz, I would argue, is not Levin's funniest play and not his most bawdy. It has many moments of melodrama, there is undoubtedly something essential in the play and characteristic of Levin's oeuvre. It was also the play that brought him back into the consensus of Israeli culture. In the words of Handelzats:

> If until 1970 Levin was considered a sharp and frustrating satirist, in March of that year he became a dramatist. The Klemensah and Taigelach families are the source, the cornerstone, the big bang from which everything sprouts, and you can find in it the sources for all the following plays. As far as I can recall, that is how it registered with me already upon the first viewing. Of course, I could not foresee what this play would birth, but it seemed to me a complete world, coherent, convincing in its validity. (11-12)

Furthermore, even though *Hefetz* is not one of Levin's funniest comedies, the unease and protest with which audiences reacted to the satirical cabarets was replaced by huge laughs and cheers.[217] That would not be surprising, were the play not actually a heartbreaking play about small lives, tragedies, and bullies that ends with a suicide/murder. The play—like all of Levin's plays—has bawdy and grotesque elements. But more significant is the fact that the entire play, its premise, its outcome, feel grotesque. Indeed, one of the mysteries that undergirds the play's strange and absurd environment, is why anyone would put up with such abuse. It is one of the reasons which gives one a sense that more lies underneath the play's manifest strangeness than simply an awful family's feud and strife.

The laughing audience did not probably realize that Levin parlayed the animosity and bitterness he exhibited for Israel and the average Israeli in his satirical cabarets into a

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[217]See *A Life Whose Likeness, we have yet to See,* episode 2.

depiction of a cruel and unbearable human existence in which he has now implicated the audiences. It becomes clear that even though Levin wanted to transition from outright and confrontational satires, he was not content with letting the audience off the hook. The opening of the play signals the sadistic-masochistic attitude that the play engages in and leaves at the doorstep of the audience. *Hefetz* has become in retrospect a kind of Ur-play, of a playwright that still clearly maintained some disdain for his Israeli audience and wanted to poke and challenge them. He thus poses an ethical dilemma for the audience and waits for their reaction. When the play begins, we find Hefetz sitting on stage alone eating a cake as Teigelach his relative walks in:

> Hefetz: *Enjoying his food, hitting his pallet with his tongue*. Ta, Ta, Ta, Ta, *pause.* Ta. Ta. Forgive me, that I am making these sounds. It's from joy. I'm enjoying the cake. Ta. Ta. *Teigelach does not respond*. I am enjoying this very much. *Pause*. This cake is causing me a lot of joy."

But instead of affirmation or agreement, Hefetz gets this cruel exchange:

> Tigelach: No.
>
> Hefez: What, 'no, (pause), what 'no'?
>
> Teigelach: No.
>
> Hefetz: What 'no'?
>
> Teigelach: You are not enjoying yourself.
>
> Hefetz: why not?
>
> Teigelach: Because.
>
> Hefetz: I am very much enjoying myself.
>
> Teigeliach: You don't enjoy anything.
>
> Hefetz: Excuse me? I am eating a cake and enjoying myself.
>
> Teigelach: No.
>
> Hefetz: How no? When you eat a cake you don't enjoy yourself?
>
> Teigelach: I do.

> Hefetz: Me too.
>
> Teigelach: No.
>
> Hefetz: Why are you speaking this way?! Do I not enjoy like everyone else? Ah? *Pause*. Ah? *Pause*. Ah? Ah?
>
> Teigelach: What do you want from me?
>
> Hefetz: That you tell me, why you're talking like this?!
>
> Teigelach: So that you don't think that if you taste something sweet sometime that you are happy like us.
>
> Hefetz: I don't presume to be happy like you, but regarding the cake, you'd agree with me that I enjoyed it.
>
> Teigelach: No, I will not agree. And don't put words in my mouth. You didn't enjoy the cake, and you have never enjoyed anything in your life. And that ends the discussion.

Hefetz's humiliation continues throughout the play, as well as this terribly confrontational tone. Yet, it seemed as though audiences were seeing something else. The actor Liora Rivlin ("Fogra" of the original cast) notes in a four-part television documentary about Levin: "I thought it was a terribly cruel play, and the audience screamed in laughter."[218] Levin essentially plays a satirist's bluff—he dares the audience to look on stage and not see themselves. And the audience failed and laughed. Shai Bar Yaakov notes: "One of the more interesting reviews of the play said that the theater was full of Fogras, Teigelach, and Klemanseahs that laughed at the characters on stage and didn't even understand that they were laughing at themselves."[219] Even Levin, was somewhat surprised by the success and the laughter. In a rare interview that he gave during the play's successful run, Levin was asked about the laughter:

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[218]Ibid

[219]Ibid

> Levin: The fact is that the audience is laughing and it saddens me. In my opinion this is a drama. And when they tell that me the play is funny, I feel like a failure. I'd prefer that actually the tragic aspect, the malicious, be conveyed."
>
> Interviewer: Who is the audience?
>
> Levin: A foe. I see the theater as a boxing match between the stage and the audience.
>
> Interviewer: What would you like to happen to the audience?
>
> Levin: I'd like to hit them, make them feel bad, let it flow out of their ears.
>
> Interviewer: You don't have any educational purposes?
>
> Levin: Definitely not. I would like to show [them] how bad they are" [220]

The audience was of course a very specific audience. The playwright who had wielded his sharp satiric knife through political figures and sacrosanct Israeli ideologies was now taking it to the common man, daring him and her to see themselves as brutish and bullish.

The entire play, beginning from that first exchange, is about a renunciation of the self, the flesh, leading finally to a complete annihilation of the self through suicide**.** Even though the play abounds with humiliation of one's fellow man, like many other of Levin's plays, the humiliation here is so all encompassing that it becomes self-inflicted. Hefetz, "thing" of another name, a reified collection of misery, loneliness, yearning, pain, who is clearly meant to personify the average petty bourgeois Israeli and his little pleasures is humiliated for simply being. If the play points to any actual failure on the part of Hefetz, it is only that he exists. Hefetz is Levin's everyman, whose life is measured against the expectations of society, but he has internalized these expectations so thoroughly that he carries with him a sense of his failures, as judged against societal expectations:

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[220]Interview in the newspaper *Yedioth Aharonot.* Quoted in Nagid.

> *(A little bit later that night. Street. Hefetz walks heavily. He stops in his tracks, turns around, hints with finger towards something invisible to come forward)*
>
> Hefetz: Come, come, wasted life. Come father, mother, kids, kindergarten teacher, bicycles, trees, robbers, and milkmen. Come, books, RV's, sea ports, wars, fat and skinny girls, managers, paupers, sickness and tiredness. Come all, gather around and hear my speech: important guests, I am small and humbled (*bends his knees and shrinks)*, small and smaller (*bends some more. In a playful tone)* who will find me? (*Laughs giddily and runs outside on bent knees and with a lowered head*). (117)

Hefetz's humiliation and self-renunciation continues throughout the play, and it quickly reaches the sexual domain**.** In scene nine, Teigelach and Klemensah enter Hefetz's room and begin making out in Hefetz's presence. He erupts:

> Hefetz: You really have decided to destroy my life?
>
> Teigelach: Of course.
>
> Hefetz: I would like to know why?!
>
> Teigelach: Don't make a big deal of your life. (Were) destroying and that's it.
>
> Hefetz: So why all the games?! Tell me honestly that you have been waiting all the years just for a chance.
>
> Teigelach: Yes, of course. And I am not ashamed to tell you, weird and misshapen Hefetz, for years you make my blood boil. Since the day you came to live with us, you've awakened in me a desire to destroy you.
>
> Hefetz: Why?
>
> Teigelach: The devil knows why. For seventeen years I see you eat, drink, sleep and pretend to live, and my heart revolts. Because you deserve nothing. Nothing, nothing. Every slice of bread you put in your mouth, every cup of tea you drink, is a chutzpa, every breath you take is a theft, and your eyesight and your hearing are a robbery. Who are you that you allowed yourself. Who are you that you dared to hope, to hope for love, for success, for comfort? That you dared to be like everyone else. Seven times a day you needed to apologize for being alive.
>
> Hefetz: *answers not long after* Let me rest, after I apologize to you all the time, you don't have eyes to see this? I wake up in the morning apologizing, I wash my face apologizing, and walk among people apologizing. Because with me it's a kindness that I am permitted at all and before I turn my head backwards, all my life has passed in one big apology. No life. Happy? And now you can rest? (Pause)

Although Hefetz, as mentioned earlier, has less of Levin's signature bawdyness and obscenity, the key scene in the play is a sex scene, or rather a particularly cruel performance of sex that Teigelach and Klemensah transition into after ignoring Hefetz in his room:

> Klemensah: I don't understand why you can't ruin people in the morning.
> Teigelach: Now! Before our good-heartedness will cause us to regret! Get Up Klemensah! One of the favorite games of mine and Klemensah when we're rolling in bed is the beautiful game: "Peeping Hefetz Receives his Punishment." (*Klemensah gets up and stands in the middle of the room*.) It is night time. Teigelach is not at home. Klemensah takes her clothes off before bed. Peeping Hefetz bends down before the door and peeps through the key hole.
>
> Hefetz: A Libel! I never peeped.
>
> Teigelach: You can now begin, Klemensah. I am portraying the character of Hefetz.
>
> Hefetz: I forbid you to use my character! (123)

It is difficult, considering Levin's view of his audience, not to assume that Levin was trying to make them complicit in the humiliation that occurs throughout. Hefetz's character would have seemed to Israeli audiences as an odd duck—eccentric and alone—who relishes simple joys. Simple joys are not meant to be enjoyed. Not like the great joys of the bourgeois family unit of Teigelach and Klemensah. They share a bed, a child, and are awaiting a wedding. In the Israeli context, a culture that experienced the historical rupture of the Holocaust, the individual must succumb to the collective, that is if a nation is to rebuild itself. Thus, when audiences watch Klemensah and Teigelach engage in a game which caricatures and criminalizes Hefetz as a peeping tom, they are made by Levin complicit in a hostile game of ridicule. It is difficult to miss the connection to Zohar's *Peeping Toms*. As I argued in the previous chapter, Zohar made audiences complicit in a gazing of a new and blemished Israeli masculinity. Levin takes it one step further and makes audiences complicit

in a masquerade of sexual transgression, and perhaps even a blood libel (or a peeping libel) against the one character in the play whose name might be directly tied to the Israeli setting.

Nevertheless, if we take Levin's interview at face value and suspend for a moment our knowledge of Levin's penchant for sarcasm, what does one make of the laughter, of the fact that a serious play is taken as comedy? There is surely some form of misrecognition, on the part of the audience, of the action on stage. As noted, Hefetz is the only character whose name is Hebraic sounding. The rest of the characters' names point to a foreignness, possibly of Eastern European origin. Such character naming practices are common in Levin's plays. Many of the names and much of the setting, remind us more of a shtetl than a town in Israel. This therefore raises the question of whether the audience is showing sympathy for old-worldliness, while rejecting the one character who might be Israeli, or does the fact that they laugh convey how ridiculous they find these old-world Jews? It might be a conundrum that cannot be resolved, because on the one hand, their animosity towards' Hefetz's pecularity and indecision does generally fit the Zionist framework, which rejected much that was associated or reminiscient of European Jewery and their perceived weakness and failures. On the other hand, of course, it is only Hefetz whose name is explicitly hebraic.

7.11 *Yaacobi and Liedental*: The Jewish body

Yaacobi and Liedental, or in its lesser known full name: *Yaacobi and Liedental: [Temporary Name]* has the feel of a companion piece to *Hefetz* and was indeed written (1970) and produced in the same years (1972). To produce *Hefetz* Levin had to migrate an hour north to the respected but not as acclaimed Haifa Theater. After the embattled satirical cabarets, his work was toxic for the Tel Aviv institutions. But after *Hefetz*'s remarkable success (more financially than critically), Levin was welcome back at the

Cameri Theater for *Yaacobi and Liedental*, and permitted to direct the play as well. He later went on to direct most of his plays and developed a reputation for his overall vision as a dramatist, not only for his writing. [221]

The play shares many similarities with *Hefetz*. Like *Hefetz*, it is a comedy with instances of melodrama, and just like in *Hefetz,* the characters are blatantly and often mysteriously unkind to one another. The plot is simple, succinct, and sparse. It tells of two friends, Itamar Yaacobi and David Liedental whose lives are, simple, quiet, and rather miserable. Yaacobi meets a woman and neglects Liedental. To get in the couple's good graces, Liedental desperately and childishly offers himself to the couple as a wedding present. (see fig. 21)

Figure 21 The most recent production of *Yaacobi and Liedental*

The play opens with an almost uncanny and brutal wink to *Hefetz* with Yaacobi's opening monologue:

[221]Which was performed as well at another important theater, Tzavta.

> I, Itamar Yaacobi, forty years of age, declare that I have come to the recognition that I was born to live. By the end of the night, I will go and ruin the friendship with my good friend Leidental. I will no longer drink tea at his place, and I will not play dominos with him. I will hurt him and stab him, I will kick his friendship and leave him alone so that he knows where he is—and where I am. I will hurt him and stab him. I will stab him and hurt him. And wishing myself a hearty good luck, I kiss myself passionately—I, Itamar Yaacobi.

Later that night Yaacobi begins following up on this decision:

> Yaacobi: Tell me, have you ever thought about that maybe you and me are totally not the same type.
>
> Liedental: What do you mean the same type?
>
> Yaacobi: Because you don't see that I am a busy man?! That I don't have patience for nonsense?! How much longer, you think, am I gonna stink it up here on the balcony?! How many years are you gonna pour tea on my tongue?! Ah?! Ah?! But why am I standing here and wasting my dear time?! I am a busy man, I am busy, busy.
>
> Liedental: Yaacobi! Yaacobi, what happened?
>
> Yaacobi: well, the whole beauty is that nothing happened. Excuse me, life is calling me, goodbye.
>
> *Walks out*
>
> Liedental: Yaacobi… *Pause* What do you mean not the same type…?

Things quickly get complicated when a love interest joins the play and brings with her Levin's notorious bawdy. Yaacobi follows on stage Shachash, a woman of somewhat considerable girth and backside, which is in fact the first thing that catches Yaacobi's interest:

> Yaacobi: Excuse me, are you the Mrs. of this ass?
>
> Shachash: That's how it turned out.
>
> Yaacobi: Charming, what's its name?
>
> Shachash: Friends call it "Big Tuches."
>
> Yaacobi: *to the ass* Hello, Big Tuches!

> Shachash: Everyone is so impressed by it, whereas I say: take it, what does it have to do with me? Why do I need this spoiled pet stuck to my behind? Because I, in case you don't know, am a pianist.
>
> Yaacoby: Oh oh!
>
> Shachash: Yes, a pianist. So that Big Tuches is not exactly for my character. It always pulls down, while I want up, with my sounds, if you know what I mean.[222]

Shachash follows it with a little song entitled "Wherever I go:"

> Down below, at the end of the back
>
> An incredible ass flowers
>
> A delicate crack and on its sides
>
> Pair of balls in pink

Shachash's song gets more of Yaacoby's attention and he says to himself: "Wonderful woman. Why am I getting excited? Because on the one hand, there is meat like you need, and on the other hand there is art, a very spicy combination. To Shacash: "Can I invite the Mrs., including Big Tuches for some coffee?" (*Hefetz and Others*,183). Micki Gourevich, the director of The Han Theater Company recalls, "I remember seeing it and laughing so hard, it was so funny. The fact that you're essentially talking about that this is what drives us: I want to fuck you, I want to sleep with you, I want your ass." He also adds regarding the theater itself: "You need to remember to what theater (The Cameri) Hanoch entered. A very reputable theater, they talked nicely. Hanoch's lack of tact could enliven the soul."[223]

The play offers the first real glimpse into the work that Levin's grotesque realism does. As Gourevitch suggests, there is more candor and realness in not speaking around and

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[222]The English/Yiddish combination is in the play.

[223]From *A Life That We Have Not Seen*, ep. 3.

under desire, but rather presenting it as it is. Moreover, the fact that it lacks "tact" or that it may not be becoming of an institution like the Cameri Theater only gives further credence to the subversive nature of grotesque realism and its humanistic essence and honesty. There is indeed something soul awakening about such candor and awareness that one is embodied and part of the natural world, as suggested by Bakhtin:

> Degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism… Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (21)

In fact, while there is, inarguably, as aspect of misogyny in the way that Shachash is portrayed, there is also a sense of an awareness of embodiment and a reveling in it. A song at the end of Act 1 entitled: "The Natural Right to Wear a Bra" and sung by both Shachash and Liedental does not perhaps qualify as feminist empowerment, but it does convey a sense of pride in embodiment, that is, in some ways, revolutionary:

> Shachash: Above the stomach, a little on the side
>
> I have a breast,
>
> Liedental: She has a breast,
>
> And next to breast, also on the side
>
> There is another breast
>
> Liedental: There is another breast
>
> Shachash: Two dear, loyal breasts, that thanks to them

> I will get a house, a car, and a little black butler.
> Because it is my natural right to wear a bra,
> And the right to overflow the man's face with blood,
> And the right to stomp on your hat,
> And the right to tear your tie,
> And to laugh and to cry and to pee in weddings and fart in funerals.
> I have a pair of breasts—and I am a woman with rights! (203)

This is undoubtedly rather offensive, especially coming from a male playwright. Levin really mixes up various aspects of what Bakhtin refers to as the "lower stratum." There is both sex and scotology. But there is also a kind of revelling in the body that is truly transgressive and rebellious. If in the previous chapter we saw how the use of the bawdy starts to show fractures in the sabra's sheen and purity of aptitude and decorum. By inserting frailty through the "lower stratum," Zohar opens the door to a certain legitimacy of the more traditional Jewish subject in Israel. Zohar was a cultural and societal insider fighting for a way out of a generic circumscribed Israeliness, Levin, performs an unrelenting "outsiderism." Zohar complicated Israeli masculinity, Levin completely incinerated it. In addition to finding the body politic of the scattered Jewish nation under assault and disintegrating, Zionism, as discussed in the Zohar chapter, found problems with the Jewish body itself. Michael Gluzman writes:

> With the rise of Jewish nationalism at the end of the nineteen-century, and especially with the solidification of the Zionist ideology at the turn of the century, Hebrew culture told its story using a vocabulary of the body and stated repeatedly the need for a new Jewish body. Already in the 1870s Hebrew literature began constructing a variegated discourse about the defectiveness of the Jewish body. This literature—which was the main arena of national thought—described the Jewish man as someone who is exiled not only from his country, but also from his body, and his masculinity. Many literary and journalistic texts described this defective masculinity, inscribed on the body, and imagined meanwhile an alternative body: anti-exilic, Zionist, masculine. (12-13)

In a Jewish homeland according to Zionist ideology the ailing and fractured Jewish body will be made whole again, just as was the case in pre-exilic times. Unfortunately, this was a fantastic perspective that did not take into account two important things: one, the state of the Jews before exile was not so wonderful and obviously not so stately as Zionism imagined; second, and conversely, the lives of Jews in exile were not always horrible and wanting—in fact there were periods in Jewish history when Jewish life in the diaspora thrived and succeeded. This adds to the notion—that in many ways is already inscribed by the fact that Theordor's Herzl's foundational Zionist text *Altneuland (Old New Land*) is written as a utopian fantasy— that there is a deeply ideological and fantastic aspect to Zionism. The land of Israel, after all, was for millennia, the land of prayer, dream, and fantasy, and over time legend and mythologies grew into ideologies and imagined truths about political history and the Jew and his or her body.

In many of Levin's plays we see a veritable dismantling of the idea that the Jewish body can be reflective of the Jewish nation, and somehow be elevated, redeemed, made holy and whole, by a return to Zion. The critique that Levin levels at Israeli culture is much stronger than Zohar's. Zohar may have complicated the image of the Sabra and added some frailty to the new noble-savage image that first-generation Israelis like himself cultivated, whereas for Levin, what ails Israelis is much stronger and all-encompassing. For Levin, the new Jews of Israel are a lot like the Jews of the diaspora. He does not abide by the delusion that somehow the creation of the Jewish state has healed the Jew and made him or her whole. As I noted earlier, it is somewhat difficult to avoid Levin's nomenclature. As a writer so in love with linguistic innovation, he really invites the reader to find symbolism. And often these names point us away from Israel elsewhere, somewhere usually reminiscent of a shtetl. Levin, according to Gershon Shaked, usually tries to

suggest that "relationships that are typical to a different society (The Jews of a shtetl) have not changed in Israel and it is not by accident that there are in this play language of Yiddish origin like 'big tuches', etc…. These characters are closer to Alexander Portnoy than to any Israeli character." Most importantly, Shaked makes a valuable and interesting argument about Yaacobi and Leidental: "Levin wrote an anti-pornographic and punk play that releases without any inhibitions, the obscenity of sex relations, but its meaning in the social realm of 1970s Israel is that the new Hebrews are similar to the old Jews and even surpass them" (80). In other words, Levin is casting doubt on the gulf that Zionism had imagined between the diaspora Jew, especially the one of the shtetl Jew, and the so called "new" Jew that was born in Israel. The doubt that Levin's casts on the elevated fantasies of Zionism and his desire to bring his characters back to the bodily and the ground is complicated because when everything is fair game, when everything is thrown into the sweltering fire of satire, is any point of view legitimate? Are there any values left once all values are questioned?

In contrast, the bawdy and the grotesqueness of the lower regions operate on another plain and offer another value. The value that Levin creates through the bawdy is that of giving the Jew a sense of embodiment. To use a cliché that is used commonly today, but in our case, actually has rather a lot of resonance: through representations of the bawdy body Levin gives the Jew and his body a sense of representation and the space to be seen.

7.12 *Yakish and Popcha*: Turning Off the Lights

Written in 1978, *Yakish and Popcha* premiered in 1982 at Tel Aviv's Cameri Theater. It may have the distinction of being Levin's funniest play and of being his most "comedic" comedy in the classic sense of the word. Uncommonly for him, but in a very classic sense,

Levin gives us a comic hero on a quest for love, who will face obstacles and failures until he reaches the yearned for and surprising "happy ending." The plot centers on Yakish Hoshpish, a "poor and ugly lad" who is longing for a relationship and love, but he is "ugly" in a very non-symbolic sense—he is very unattractive. The play begins with Yakish at home:

Scene 1:

> *A room at the destitute home of the Hoshpishes in the town of Platzky. Nightime. Yakish is sitting on a chair in his room, leaning forward with his head between his hands. He can no longer endure his situation. He gets up and screams*.
>
> Yakish: I am lonely. I am miserable. I am burning, I don't have a woman because I am ugly to my core and I don't have money to cover my ugliness, I wouldn't care about giving everything up, but unfortunately I am a healthy lad, healthy, the heart wants a little piece of sun, there are ambitions and desires, so that I can't even get hopeless, in short, whatever side you turn me to, a total disaster.
>
> [*calls out to the other room*]
>
> Father, Mother! Your kid is burning and you are snoring… Woman or Death!

His parents, He-Hoshpish and She-Hoshpish, want to marry him off desperately, as they can no longer endure their son's misery and they also want to continue their legacy. His mother:

> She-Hoshpish: Oy my, my son is burning to cook me some grandkids and he does not have a pot!
>
> [*She-Hoshpish and He-Hoshpish get dressed quickly in coats and scarves*]
>
> Son, think of something bad to cool yourself off, think of a national disaster, and meanwhile, we will run to the train station to see if a new *shadchan* (matchmaker) came into town, maybe he has some bad merchandise that we don't know about yet. [224]

[224]Online Text, no pagination. Translation is mine.

At the train station, the Hoshpishes indeed find a new matchmaker, Leibach, who is not only a matchmaker but also, as he keeps reminding the families, "a watchmaker and an optician." He does have a new match for the Hoshpishes that is just as ugly as their son:

> What are you talking about?! Ugly? I am giving you a monster…. I am not exaggerating; an ugliness like this you have never seen, I after all have no need to lie, I am just moonlighting anyway, for a *mitzva*, I am at my core an optician, ask about Leibach, also I won't bury you in matchmaking fees, and now I'll just get on the express train from Platzky to Phalatzinky to bring her, tomorrow night, here on the tracks.

What follows is the arrival of Popche Chropche, a "poor and ugly girl" and her parents He-Chropche and She-Chropche. (see fig. 22)

Figure 22 Yakish and Popcha

The main theme of the play corresponds to what is, according to Nurit Yaari, the "fundamental theme in all the plays by Hanoch Levin," and that is "that life is a struggle that is lost from the outset" (169). In Levin's worldview, life is not only a struggle from the outset, but rather a struggle made up of ongoing failures. And as is the case with a few other Levin comedies, like *Hazona MeOhayo* (*The Whore from Ohio)*—the most basic failure is one of sexual desire. "In the comedy of Levin," writes Laor, "there is a tension between the desire to fulfill desire (to get a woman) and the way in which very quickly the inability to

fulfill this desire is discovered. Levin's stumbling pattern of action involves casting doubt on the ability to even fulfill the result of such limited objective" (53). The failure that will repeat itself throughout the play begins with Yakish and Popcha's first attempt to materialize their new relationship, when a romantic scene becomes a grotesque parody of a wedding night. When passion is not immediate, the strangers begin to talk and Chropcha to sing:

> Yakish: So you always sing dirges before bed?
>
> Popcha: I sing about my life. Tell me meanwhile something about yourself. What did you want to be when you grow up?
>
> Yakish: What everyone dreams about: being a manager in a women's bath house.
>
> [*Popcha lowers her gaze. Yakish finally stands in underwear. He looks at her with disgust. She groans. He come close to the bed. She hesitantly reaches out her hands. He sits next to her, but through the blind the full moonlight comes in. He gets up, closes the blinds, but the light continues to enter.*
>
> Popcha: [*apologetically*] of all nights, a romantic moon light. Just our luck.
>
> Yakish: Would be good to just shut the light in the entire world.
>
> Popcha: and that the sun won't shine tomorrow
>
> Yakish: but it will rise
>
> Popcha: unlucky business. A complete and utter darkness would be the best medicine for us.

In their desire not to be seen and their discomfort with their body the characters in effect speak to an awareness of embodiment that is intimately tied to the Jewish experience. For the play's shtetl atmosphere points to a matchmaking experience that is more than merely the result of disfigurement or natural ugliness. Beforehand, I argued that there is value to the embodiment that Levin's bawdy confers to his characters. Here, while the play is a sex comedy of mischief and amusement, Levin also suggests an awareness of Jewish

embodiment in the world, and there is an important service that the play performs in this awareness. Schwartz writes that:

> important strands of modern discourses on Judaism exhibit nervousness and anxiety over issues related to the body. In the modern period, the majority of Jews came to regard various parts of Judaism, particularly those having to do with the body and sexuality, as primitive and embarrassing. These sorts of feelings and judgments partially explain why Jews have been so enthralled with the designation "people of the book" in the post-enlightenment period. Since the late eighteenth century when Jews were able to join European intellectual life, there has been an embarrassment over parts of Jewish tradition dealing with the body, despite the importance of such matters in Jewish sources. Texts dealing with bodily emissions, circumcision, rules for defecation and urination, rules about how to perform sexual intercourse, and so forth evoked embarrassment and shame. (3)

Although the establishment of Israel and the Zionist project was imagined partly in the words of David Biale as an "erotic revolution," some of the same anxieties and ideas about bodily propriety migrated with the Jews to Israel. As was discussed earlier, the notion that indeed some sort of "new Jew" created in Israel, is, at least from Levin's perspective, a fantasy. The Jewish body continued to be a site of contestation. Israel could not solve this problem, because notions about the Jewish body developed out of a complex internalization of anti-Semitism, as Eilberg-Schwartz writes Jewish bodies:

> [Jewish bodies] were doubly damned. On the one hand, Jews were told that they were inadequately embodied since their bodies had inherent defects which made them inferior to other kinds of peoples. Yet, on the other hand, Jews were accused of being too embodied, too close to nature, too reliant on gross bodily senses. And this overabundance of embodiment was evident in their carnal tradition as well, a tradition with overtly concrete modes of thought, embodied in ritual practices and focusing too much on matters of the flesh. The representation of the Jews as a carnal people had a long history to it, extending back to Patristic ideas of the Jews as a people of the flesh. (4)

In other words, it is not that Jews have anxiety about their bodies, but rather they have anxiety about their Jewish bodies and how to relate to their embodiment in a world that has historically marginalized them, quite often via their bodies. In the modern Jewish experience this has been translated into an anxiety about being seen and being discovered. Sander Gilman suggests that Marcel Proust projected the anxieties he had about his own Jewish identity and body and their potential "visibility" unto the character of Swann and his "aquiline nose."[225] Yakish and Popcha, similarly, are anxious about their appearance and they desire that the "light in the world be shut." The play thus becomes a stage upon which certain Jewish anxieties are acted out and figuratively "brought to light."

Many of Levin's characters are driven by desire, and then consumed by their unfulfilled desire. Then the failure of said desire turns into fantasy. Yakish is having a difficult time getting excited, even after covering Popcha with blankets, so he turns to fantasy:

> Yakish: they are coming from all directions, by foot, in carriages, trains, as if my brain were big town square upon which all the beauty in the world steps. And they walk, and their beautiful thighs sway above me, and they move on, leaving me alone—with you.
>
> [*under the pile you can hear Popcha's cracked voice crying. To himself*]
>
> Not only looks like a disaster, also cries like a graveyard's cantor.
>
> [*Popcha jumps from underneath the pile and attacks Yakish's manhood*]
>
> Popcha: ugh! I will grab your poliza and tear it and eat it!
>
> Yakish: [*pushes her off of him*] Pull? What do you think it's a sock? And what are you talking about Poliza!? Does it remind you of a policeman's baton? poliza?! She calls it a poliza?! Enough! Now she shrunk my poliza to nothing. What nothing? The poliza has been sucked into my stomach! No more poliza!

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[225] See Gilman, "Proust's Nose."

> Popcha: [*Sunken and withdrawn*] And here's the sun, like we feared, already rising in the east.

The fantasy is interrupted because fantasy requires a delay, if momentarily, of desire. Desire is reached through being embodied in time, in the present. For this understanding, Yakish should have turned to Leibach, the matchmaker, who takes pride in his real professions: watchmaker and optician. Unfortunately, Leibach seems to have failed in the first and his watch-making or mending skills are inadvertently ridiculed in an iconic scene in Levin's repertoire that takes place immediately after the couple's nighttime failture:

Scene 9:

> [*There. Morning. She-Chropcha walks in. Yakish stands humiliated by the window, Popcha is sitting on the bed crying. When she sees her mother, she jumps into her arms*]
>
> She-Chropcha: Popcha my daughter, what did the sex-wolf from Plazky do to you?!
>
> Popcha: He didn't do anything.
>
> She-Chropcha: How didn't he?
>
> Popcha: the hand shows six!
>
> She-Chropcha: what hand?
>
> [*He-Chropcha walks in*]
>
> He-Chropcha: What?! Already crying?! Maybe already a morning sickness?! Baby on the way?! So? More expenses, expenses!
>
> She Chropcha: His hand shows six, she says!
>
> He-Chropcha: What hand, what six? [gets it] oh! Six!
>
> She-Chropcha: What six?
>
> He Chropcha: [*points finger up and down*] the hand! Six!

Although, Leibach has clearly failed at this point as a "watchmaker." His second true profession, Optometry, might be of interest here. Leibach refers to himself as an optician in

a play whose main characters are victims of visibility. Their lives are miserable, or so they believe, as Popcha says: "a complete and utter darkness would be the best medicine for us," because they are constantly seen in their deformity. Therefore, Leibach the optician, may not have failed to see them for what they were: "ugly" and "miserable" and therefore a possible match. But more importantly, he has, in the process of the play given them a new perspective or way of seeing the world. After Yakish's failure, the action in the play goes in search of the object that will get the "clock" moving, so that he could reproduce with Popcha. The family even summons the "Princess Champagne Shandelia" who eventually helps Yakish when she legitimizes his failure to even get aroused with her:

> Yakish: "What do I have to hope for? Nothing, right?
>
> (*The princess nods her head in approval and compassion)*
>
> Thank you.
>
> *(The princess is about the leave)*
>
> And it will always be bad, right?
>
> *(The Princess stops again)*
>
> I am asking again just to be calm and certain. It will be bad, right?
> Not a minute of rest, no new opportunity, Popcha and that's it!

Following this realization, Yakish makes his way back to Popcha and they are even able to awkwardly "finish" what they started. In a certain sense, Leibach was ultimately successful. He has Yakish see the world correctly. There is another aspect to Leibach that is worth mentioning, even if not exploring it in too much detail. The name "Leibach" bears a similarity to "Levin", both can be variation on "Leib" or "Lev"—which would essentially be a form of the word "Lion." Is the playwright just fooling with his audience? Or are Leibach's consistent reminders that he is actually a "watchmaker and optician" suggestive and noteworthy? Levin's placement of an avatar in the play could hint at how he views his work

as a playwright. With Levin or Leibach's "help," Popcha and especially Yakish turned from looking at each other and their unsatisfactory ugliness to instead looking at the world. They realized that the world is just as ugly and that, in the words of Yakish, " there is nothing to hope for… and it will always be bad." And this, one could imagine, is exactly what Levin thinks he "gets hired" for—to make audiences realize that the grotesque on stage is quite real, just as much as at the reality in the world is grotesque.

7.13 Conclusion: Don't Enjoy this Cake

This chapter began with an argument in favor of the political potential and efficacy inherent in comedy, possibly more than in other genres and especially more than in tragedy. It then discussed perhaps the most directly political artist in Israel's history and surely its most bawdy. But the introduction also spoke of the dangers of comedy. That through its inevitable connection to enjoyment and entertainment, comedy harbors within it the "religious" dangers of absolution, in that our laughter can become a kind of dispensation that creates a misrecognition of ideology. Laughter, as Mladen Dolar points out is "the condition of ideology." He argues that:

> It is only with laughter that we become ideological subjects…. It is only when we laugh and breathe freely that ideology truly has a hold on us—it is only here that it starts functioning as ideology, with specifically ideological means, which are supposed to assure our free consent and the appearance of spontaneity…. (Zupančič 4)

Thus, the very same political energy running through comedy's veins can be enervated by the joy it begets.

This is one of the dangers that Levin's work poses for us. Potentially, the way in which he infuses the bawdy into the quotidian furthers this danger, because as the bawdy tries to politicize and potentially critique, it also humanizes, and therefore forgives. Levin's

work may be mitigating this danger by its self-conscious awareness of the artifice of performance and play and therefore possibly its awareness of such potential dangers. In one of Levin's most explicitly bawdy plays *The Rubber Barrons* (which premiered in The Cameri Theater in 1977) there are two important self-reflexive moments that are often pointed to by critics as Levin's most self-aware. In the first instance, Berta Berlow, a pragmatic pharmacist (who is pursued by two rather unfortunate schlemiels, Shmuel Sprawl and Yohanan Tsingerboy—the first in the possession of ten-thousand condoms he inherited from his father and the second holds a secure job and "sixty thousand shekels in the bank") notes "*to herself*" (Levin's stage direction), as the stage lights begin to dim:

> Oh, this moment in the theater, when the light in the auditorium is out, the light on stage isn't on yet, and the audience sits in the dark, waiting in silence, all the expectations, all the dreams of a thousand people focused on one point in the dark in front of them. I have a feeling that I've been living in this moment all my life, waiting in the dark. Soon the curtain will open, the stage will be flooded by a dazzling light and a colorful life will start flowing before me. Yes, soon, a colorful life will dawn, a wonderful magnificent life, whose likeness we've never seen before."[226]

This, we know, is not just the promise of theater or the promise of Levin's drama, it is the promise of art itself. In a certain sense, Levin is also evoking a corollary between the hope of a new nation and the hope of its art. But at the very end of the play, Levin brings everyone, his characters, the audience, the desire we project unto art, back to reality, when once again we find Berlow in a contemplative mood. But his time, after the inconsequential and non-material events that occurred in the play, her tone has changed:

> Like that moment in the play, twenty years ago, when the light in the auditorium has gone out and the light on the stage hasn't come on yet, and we sat in the dark and waited in silence, all expectations , all dreams focused on one spot in the dark before us: and then the old curtain creaked open, a

[226]I made a couple of changes to Harshav's translation in the final sentence.

> weak yellowish light rose on stage, and three miserable people stood on the boards up there with cardboard and rags, and for two long hours churned up our lives, as if there is something there we didn't know. (50)

In other words, Levin says, do not look to me for answers, do not turn to me for new revelations. That "colorful life" you were hoping for at the end of the first act was nothing but an illusion of "cardboard and rags"—nothing but a failed promise.

Levin, you might recall, in the short essay about satire which he wrote when he was only twenty-two, already warned us that: "Often I feel that talking, as well as screaming, suffocate me with their inadequacies and my hands sweat from their desire to speak with their own tongue. Everyone that works in language has to recognize the boundary of the work, and especially that applies to the person who set out to fence with its help, who is often saved only because of the jester's cap" (47). With this sentiment, Levin proposes that he might be the Israeli artist whose sensibilities are closest to the American Jewish comedy writer. For both, life's very essence is failure. The unifying principle in Levin's comedy, according to Itzhak Laor, is "a tension between the wish to fulfill desire (to find a woman) and way in which the inability to fulfill this desire very quickly becomes clear" (50). It is, however, maybe more than just a failure of passion, it might also be a failure of representation, a failure of comedy, and finally, a failure that is life. When we think about the Hoshpish family's pressure on Yakish Hoshpish, who tragically, out of no fault of his own perhaps, cannot get his "Poliza" to go from "six" to "twelve", we cannot help but be reminded of Max Bialystock's famous lines from *The Producers* (1969) in his appeal to Leo Bloom:

> It's not cheating… it's charity. Bloom, look at me… look at me! I'm drowning. Other men sail through life. Bialystock has struck a reef. Bloom, I'm going under. I am being sunk by a society that demands success, when all I can offer is failure.

In other words, Levin tells us, please do not place too much hope in him, comedy, or for that matter life, because: “You didn’t enjoy the cake, and you have never enjoyed anything in your life. And that ends the discussion.”

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: WHEN RESISTENCE BECOMES FLESH

"A happy denouement has at least as much justification as an unhappy one, and when it is a matter of considering this difference alone, I must admit that for my part a happy denouement is to be preferred. And why not? To prefer misfortune, just because it is misfortune, instead of a happy resolution, has no other basis but a certain superior sentimentality which indulges in grief and suffering and finds more interest in them than in the painless situations that it regards as commonplace."

- Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume II*

BIALYSTOCK

So you're an accountant, eh?

BLOOM

(timidly)

Yes sir.

BIALYSTOCK

Then account for yourself! Do you believe in God? Do you believe in gold? Why are you looking up old lady's dresses? Bit of a pervert, eh?

- Mel Brooks, *The Producers*

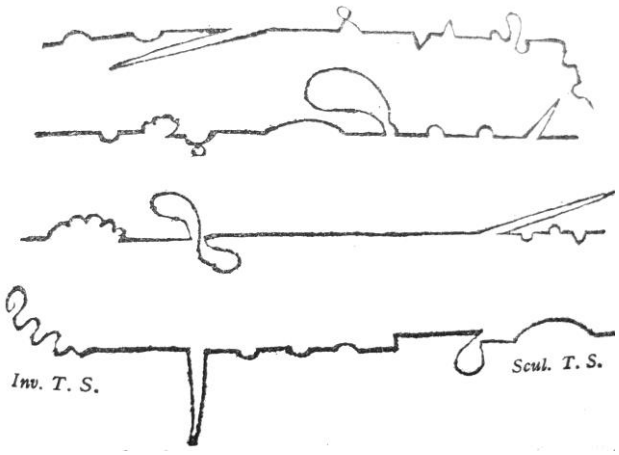
"In order to write well about something, one shouldn't be interested in it any longer. To express an idea with due circumspection, one must have relegated it wholly to one's past; one must no longer be preoccupied with it. As long as the artist is in the process of discovery and inspiration, he is in a state which, as far as communication is concerned, is at the very least intolerant. He wants to blurt out everything, which is a fault of young geniuses

or a legitimate prejudice of old bunglers. And so he fails to recognize the value and the dignity of self-restriction, which is after all, for the artist as well as the man, the first and the last, the most necessary and the highest duty. Most necessary because wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world; and that makes one a slave. The highest because one can only restrict oneself at those points and places where one possesses infinite power, self-creation, and self-destruction. Even a friendly conversation which cannot be broken off at any moment, completely arbitrarily, has something intolerant about it. But a writer who can and does talk himself out, who keeps nothing back for himself, and likes to tell everything he knows, is to be pitied."

- Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*

8.1 Introduction: A Sure-Fire Flop[227]

In one of the great works of literary comedy, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the titular character draws at some point a depiction of his life. What he comes up with is this:



Forgive me, reader, if I borrow this as a metaphor for the journey I may have put you and myself on throughout this dissertation. I would, if I could, tell you that it is smooth sailing from now on, but I cannot. Neither can I say that the tone, shockingly barren of explicit comic examples or levity, is nearing the end of its solemn reign, but sadly that is not the case

[227]If I had my had my druthers, all the subsections would be titled with lines from *The Producers*—a movie that is all about failure.

either. More importantly, I cannot say with a clear conscience that now that we have reached the conclusion that some grand epiphany regarding the centrality of the bawdy in Jewish comedy will shortly be unveiled. Even though I stand behind my original thesis, that the bawdy, i.e., comedy that deals with sex, sexuality, and consequently the body as well, has unique prominence in Jewish comedy, I cannot, and perhaps that is for the best, maintain that I have cracked some sort of underlying humor code. In this regard, I am staying true to the plan I posited in the first chapter: that the succeeding chapters would present—at times in their own unique way, at times in ways that overlapped and spoke to other chapters—a mosaic of ideas about the relevance and theoretical implications of the bawdy in the work of certain Jewish, American and Israeli artists.

And, as I stated in the beginning, in some ways finding concrete answers along this journey was always going to be fraught with obstacles. I believe I stepped into this project more clearheaded than most knowing that "Jewish comedy" poses an almost impossible "compoundedness." One could spend decades looking into the essence of Judaism or "Jewishness" (who is or what is). And when she or he finally think that they have found that proverbial "Holy Grail" text (not to mix too many metaphors or religions here) that will supposedly clarify everything and yield Jewishness's elusive meaning on page (let's say) 123, turning excitedly to that page, they only find a picture of Mel Brooks eating a latke and laughing with his tongue sticking out.[228] As Henry Bial indicates, analyses that are too invested in Jewish identity can too quickly turn into a "who is Jewish" contest, and then into different litmus tests, explaining why one might be or not be.[229] In what is now deemed a

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[228]Image unavailable at this point. One should also not be surprised to find a number next to the image referring to a footnote that reads something like: "and regardless, the meaning would have been essentialist."

[229]See Bial 10.

classic essay in American and Jewish literary history, "The New York Intellectuals," Irving Howe appends a quirky and important footnote to the first line of the text, a first line which reads: "The social roots of the New York writers are not hard to trace. With a few delightful exceptions—a tendril from Yale, a vine from Seattle—they stem from the world of the immigrant Jews, either workers or petty bourgeois." In the footnote Howe writes:

> I am working on the premise that in background and style there was something decidedly Jewish about the intellectuals who began to cohere as a group around the *Partisan Review* in the late thirties—and one of the things that was "decidedly Jewish" was that most were of Jewish birth! [230]

I find this just the right amount of tongue in cheek to disarm the endless and unforgiving complexity that often one tackles in this area with regard to questions of Jewish identity. At the same time, the meaning of identity is clearly central and relevant to this topic, as it interweaves around it, leaving its indelible marks on it in ways that perhaps other identities do not. It is quite possible, I might argue, that the very elusive nature of the term, borne out of the elusiveness and complexity of Jewish identity itself, is the most important marker upon the ultimate meaning of the term "Jewish Comedy."

And with regard to "comedy," as I have learned at my own cost, there is indeed a reason why most of the great philosophers have stayed away from it, as if from a plague. Putting "Jewish" and "comedy" together can thus be a dead end, at least for truths and axioms. When one adds to it, an investigation of its bawdy variety, an investigation into the centrality and complexity of the life-force of eros, one is just asking for trouble. Foucault may indeed be right when he says that "Sexuality points to nothing beyond itself, no prolongation, except in the frenzy which disrupts it" (*Language*, 30). Therefore, in the next

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[230]See Howe. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/irving-howe-voice-still-heard-new-york-intellectuals

few pages, tentative conclusions may just have to suffice. But I will also try to advance some thoughts about what has been excavated and explicated heretofore, and point to some future investigative possibilities for myself (or others).

8.2 Not Every Kid Makes the Team, Not Even Kirby Kyle

If the previous section betrays feelings of the incompleteness of the task or the project, that is, I want to note, very much not the case. The much more localized, contextualized, and specific analysis feels most appropriate for an idea that still has vast areas to be explored. It is important to state though that many additional artists, comedians, and writers were just as deserving to be included in this analysis and given their own sections, including, just to name a few, Mel Brooks, Larry David & Jerry Seinfeld, Woody Allen, Sacha Baron Cohen, Amy Schumer, and Roseanne Barr.[231] The first few listed were indeed in the original plan and outline of this project, but the golem was growing too monstrous and was becoming a bit too keen on taking down its creator. And with every movie and television show that he makes, Sacha Baron Cohen obviates the significance of the bawdy in his work, and I have serious intentions to look more carefully at his work in the very near future. I could also list a few writers whose work immediately conjures up many of the themes and concepts I have discussed throughout, not the least of which is Cohen's British compatriot, Howard Jacobson, whose 1997 intellectual work on comedy, *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (which I have referenced once or twice), and its appreciation of the prurient spirit of comedy really clarifies Jacobson's novels' vigorous obsession with all things sexual. Baron Cohen's and Jacobson's prominence alone suggests that there may be a British-Jewish bawdy variety to look into in the future. While

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[231]Too many to note here of course. The fact of the bawdy's prevalence is after all the impetus for this thesis.

the dissertation proposes and elucidates numerous theoretical directions from which to look at the different artists discussed, the theoretical fields that intersect with the bawdy, including sex, sexuality, the body, and societal mores and cultural apprehensions still leave many more possible worlds of explorations and illumination, not the least of which is more in-depth explorations of sexuality and its domain in light of the work of philosophers of sex and gender such as Foucault and Butler.

Furthermore, the gender disparity in this dissertation should be noted. A quick glance at the chapters of this dissertation will not exonerate me from the indictment of patriarchy. Only one chapter is dedicated to the work of women comedians. Yes, perhaps that is more than many other studies on this topic. And yet, one cannot help but feel that the work, might be reinforcing, the institutionalized dominance of male comedians in a field that is still struggling with its relationship to women, not only female comedians.[232] Only chapter 5 looks at Jewish comediennes, and only in the American context. There have been some prominent Israeli comediennes, and the comedy of the most prominent of them, Hannah Laslow, is quite bawdy.[233] But there have not been enough successful comediennes, in my opinion, to merit a full chapter on them. This is changing though. Women are making more and more inroads in comedy writing and performance in Israel. There has been more openness to women as comedians and as comedy writers in the last twenty years. It will also be interesting in the future to see how the work of these comediennes interacts with the overall growing religiosity and conservatism of the State of Israel.

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[232]See recent cases of Louis C.K., Aziz Ansari, and Chris D'elia.

[233]Laslow, by the way, plays the woman that attempts to seduce and frame Zohar's character in "Save the Lifeguard" which I mention in Chapter 6. She began her career as a comedian, but later morphed into an entertainer and stand-up comedian as well.

In general, modern comedy is a field which has always been a minefield with regard to the representation of women and women's sexuality. Some of the figures and the texts discussed in these chapters have displayed unflattering attitudes towards women. Both unflattering for the way they have portrayed women and at times for the way they have treated women. I did make some decisions in this regard. For example, initially the dissertation had planned to include a chapter on legendary Jewish filmmaker and comedian Woody Allen (either as a stand-alone chapter or as a contemporary of and foil to Philip Roth in Chapter 4). In fact, I admit that Allen's work and themes were part of the inspiration for this dissertation, and in many obvious ways they fit perfectly in these pages. But at a certain point it became clear to me that currently such a chapter might be problematic, even if one may correctly argue that women are much more demeaned or exploited sexually in the work of other filmmakers or even in Roth's work. Roth's work, as we know, has also not been spared a critique of the manner in which women are depicted in any of his novels. The crucial difference between the two men, is that in Roth's case, such attitude or ill-behavior has been, when compared to Allen, mostly kept to his fiction.[234] In Allen's case, troubling details have been part of his reputation outside of his working life. Additionally, in Roth's case, the experimental fictionality of his work does pose suggestive connections and complications to the life of Roth the author, but it also offers alibis.[235] The real world is a "bit" more unforgiving and deleterious, for all involved, and more difficult to argue against, even if one wishes to. While some things, individuals, ideas, thoughts have been left out, I

[234]Roth's ex-wife, the British actor Claire Bloom made some rather damning allegations in her memoir about Roth, but these were never fully substantiated or pointed to some pattern.

[235]To a lesser extent this is true of Allen's work as well.

feel that much of substance has been covered, as I tried my best to enter into conversation with the difficult, and at times contentious, dimensions of Jewish comedy and arts.

8.3 The Airing of Grievances

As part of reading and researching for this project I, as would be expected, went through my fair share of books and articles on traditional, as well as contemporary Jewish identity and art, popular culture, and literature. After a while, I started to notice a pattern emerging. If it was not articulated directly and clearly in the introduction chapter of a given book, then in the conclusion the author would find a way to politely curate a kind of apology for the topic and research material or offer certain qualifications about the material and analysis just given, ostensibily so that it would not be misconstrued or misunderstood. These qualifications and clarifications were almost always regarding matters of Jewish identity and writing about Judaism in general. These clarifications do not correlate in any way to what seem to me as good or bad works of intellectual analysis. If anything, there is something to be said for the more careful academic intellectual, who is willing to confess to possibilities of fallibility. The non-introspective and sure of themselves academics who sound like the pinnacle of expertise and conviction are perhaps more appropriate in other fields. I want nuclear scientists to be at least somewhat certain about their equations. But I prefer the person writing about words, psychology, and religion to come to the task with an open mind towards the arbitrariness of the arts and human existence. Nevertheless, these narratives of clarification and apologetics began to take on an odor that I would describe as a combination of that notorious passive-aggressive *yiddishe memme,* classically depicted by the following joke:

Q: How many Jewish mothers does it take to screw in a light blub?

A: No, it's fine I will sit in the dark.[236]

There is no space in this conclusion to elaborate on possible feelings of disdain felt by some, and exclusion felt by others. Sander Gilman dedicated a whole tome, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, to possible reasons for the first. And, undoubtedly some aspects of Freud's classic definition of Jewish humor as self-deprecatory has deep connection to this. One of the insights that we could perhaps owe to these attitudes is that they bear a connection to Jewish comedy, since feelings of insecurity and standing outside appropriateness, are core components of the make up of modern Jewish identity. What is, to some degree, a more nuanced and overly developed sense of Jewish guilt is not the result, as Avner Ziv suggests, of killing Jesus, but the guilt, or rather apprehension, that emerges, in my opinion, out of centuries of minoritarian subjectivity and the emotions that can overwhelm one, after millennia of exclusions to speak in the public square. We, nevertheless, march onward more or less desteperately, hopingh for the best. Perhaps that is why Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch dedicated an entire career to "Hope," because of the faith he needed to have awaiting the response to his work. The intricacies of Jewish identity, whether in vogue or not, obviously cannot be completely divorced from the discussion of how art and comedy grow out of the individual's relationship to his or her community, and that community's relationship to society. Since it has struggled for thousands of years to maintain a unique identity, Judaism and Jewishness's relationship to society is clearly imperative.

[236]In Israel has become synonymous specifically with Ashkenazi mothers, and even more specifically with mothers and grandmothers of Polish backgrounds.

8.4 Particularism vs. Universalism

It might seem redundant to note that discussing Jewish comedy includes discussing "Jewishness" as a category. Certain apprehensions that might not trouble everyone, here do trouble me. A critique that is often heard with regard to research dealing with Jewish matters evokes a more general criticism of Jewish culture and its research historically. This is the idea that such research tends to uniquely focus on one set of people and their possible uniqueness, rather than a more progressive sort of research which focuses on cultural similarities rather than cultural differences. It also often seems that such criticism against the study of the difference of a set of people is more likely to be directed towards the study of Jews and Jewishness.[237] In the case of Judaism, this argument cannot be completely wrested away from the oft-cited critique that Judaism is a religion and a culture of particularity and not universality. This accusation, which we know, is at least as old as Christianity itself. Paul made one of the basic tenets of Christianity, as an upstart religion rejecting the previous model he was rebelling against, that Jews and Judaism's deepest flaws was their exclusive particularity. Part of the new Christian Pauline doctrine was that Christianity will replace particularity and exclusivity with universality. In *Romans* 10:4 Paul claims that "Christ is the end of law" thereby pointing to two things that Christianity will do away with: first, the old covenant that was established through the giving of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and second Judaism's basis in law and practice of that law.[238] According to Paul, Christianity will replace Jewish legal practice with a new less legalistic covenant that is founded on faith. Paul's transition and denigration of the practice-

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[237]See Auslander, "The Boundaries of Jewishness" and her experience at an academic conference as a scholar working on Jewish matters.

[238]According to Judaism Moses not only received the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, but the Torah itself. The word Torah (תורה) comes out of the root that implies teaching or way of life

based religiosity of Judaism was thereafter cemented in Christian thinking and reflected in the thoughts of other Christian thinkers like St. Augustine, who denounced the Jews for their culture of legalism and materiality, claiming that the Jews separated and marked themselves by their practice of circumcision, and by rejecting circumcision, Christianity was to leave the material body behind and position itself as a more spiritual religion based on faith. In this way it was thus posititioning itself as the religion of inclusivity.

The argument over particularity and universality is tied to the notion stemming from the *Tanakh (Jewish Bible),* that God, the one and only true God according to Judaism, chose the Jewish people of all of the nations, and that it granted them a sense of exclusivity, and also of special importance and potency. Throughout history, anti-Judaism and later anti-Semitism as well, would make these notions staples in their condemnation of the Jews, as a people standing apart from and above the common man. But this critique has also come from progressive and liberal members of society. It has, of course, even come from Jews. In his essay "The Non-Jewish Jew", the Jewish biographer of Leon Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher, bemoans the fact that Jews have sought out a nation-state,

> The world has compelled the Jew to embrace the nation-state and to make of it his pride and hope just at a time where is little or no hope left in it. You cannot blame the Jews for this; you must blame the world. But Jews should at least be aware of the paradox and realize that their intense enthusiasm for "national sovereignty" is historically belated. They did not benefit from the advantages of the nation-state in those centuries when it was a medium of mankind's advance and a great revolutionary and unifying factor in history. They have taken possession of it only after it had become a factor of disunity and social disintegration. (41)[239]

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[239]Aside from an important intellectual career, Deutcher lead a fascinating life, which interestingly began as being considered somewhat of a yeshiva wunderkind. He later, of course, left religion behind when he embraced Socialism. I am reading Deutscher here as suggesting that the project of the nation-state for the Jews is unsuccessful because it came too late, not in the idea of Jews as emancipated members of a state, but literally of them having a state. It comes, as he says, when the entire project of nationalism is showing signs of failure.

He then adds a utopian dream for Jewish action: "I hope, therefore, that together with other nations, the Jews will ultimately become aware—or regain the awareness—of the inadequacy of the nation state and that they will find their way back to the moral and political heritage that the genius of the Jews who have gone beyond Jewry has left us—the message of universal human emancipation" (41). In this final plea, Deutscher is undoubtedly alluding to people like Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky, but probably even more so, to Jesus of Nazareth, despite their, not exactly rosy view of Jews as individuals or nations. Even though, Deutscher is careful to qualify his critique of Jewish particularism, such calls often feel like another attack on historical Others that is similar to what today might be referred to as "blaming the victim." The denigration of Jews and Judaism as standing against universal redemption have been brought up more recently by Alain Badiou, the French Philosopher in his book in support of St. Paul's philosophical principals:

> What is essential for us is that this paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself. Paul's unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class. (5)

The problem of course is that St. Paul's gesture, as utopian and hopeful as it might have been, did not come in a vacuum, nor has its legacy been carried out in a historical vacuum without consequences. Quite the contrary in fact, the very identity that he was rejecting, was a real identity of real people, who very much wanted to continue carrying on and living some version of this identity, as they also do today.

One might ask how can you argue that in academia today there is a push for universalism when we are also clearly in the era of specialization and identity politics.[240] But in a way, there is a kind of apprehension of the study of a certain kind of identity. The notion of a uniqueness of a people has been displaced into acceptable research into the uniqueness of certain nations and national identity, since that at least rested on the notion that nations and nationalities are a result of, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "imagined communities"—thus a man-made institution. Similarly with the study of racial communities, when race is viewed as biological scientific truth. The argument against Jewish particularism combines, in my opinion, not only long and established views and doctrines of anti-Semitism, but also the view that religion is, according to Freud, an "Illusion."

The apprehension regarding particularism with studies of Jewish material is even furthered when one brings Israel and subsequently Zionism into the mix. This dissertation is intentionally a tale of two umbrella Judaisms, two comic perspectives and worldviews. Much of the research of the past, as I discussed earlier, too easily referred to comedy or humor as "Jewish" and assumed that it would be unproblematic to only discuss American humor and only Ashkenazi humor. An analysis that is a bit more geographically and culturally inclusive was needed. And that is what I have tried to explore in this project. However, this sort of project finds itself swimming against certain currents in Jewish studies, which have been prioritizing the role of Diaspora, even though this writer has no desire to do so. This dissertation and the individuals it covers, can clearly prove as a document that affirms the success that Jews have had in the United States and therefore the

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[240]See for example the recent case of the biologically white and Jewish Black Studies professor, Jessica Krug, who must have felt compelled to fit into a particular discipline, not only through her work, but also physically. Although, I do not want to discount the possibly of a deeper psychological problem.

Diaspora, specifically in comedy. But there are those who believe that part of this success is associated with diasporic existence itself. Roberta Rosenberg, for instance, makes such a connection:

> I argue that in the hands of Philip Roth, Nathan Englander, and Shalom Auslander as well as popular artists like Jerry Seinfeld, Woody Allen, Larry David, and others, a new form of Jewish diasporic humor is not only thriving in America but also complements and empowers the world of multicultural identity politics prevalent in a postmodern world influenced by large-scale Jewish assimilation and intermarriage. (110-111)

Rosenberg evokes the work of Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, who in a highly influential essay, write:

> We want to propose a privileging of Diaspora, a dissociation of ethnicities and political hegemonies as the only social structure that even begins to make possible a maintenance of cultural identity in a world grown thoroughly and inextricably interdependent. Indeed, we would suggest that Diaspora, and not monotheism, may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world, although we would not deny the positive role that monotheism has played in making Diaspora possible. Assimilating the lesson of Diaspora, namely that peoples and lands are not naturally and organically connected, could help prevent bloodshed such as that occurring in Eastern Europe today. (Diaspora, 723)

It is easy to see how a privileging of Diaspora sets up a challenge to a study like mine, that also wants in some ways to discuss Jewish identity from the perspective of Israel and Zionism. Such privileging could, in the hands of some, offer a complete delegitimization of the practice of Jewish identity in Israel. As Benjamin Schreier seems to imply in his recent book *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History* (2015):

> Jewish American literary study cannot ground itself in an assumption that Jews call out from the texts of history to be recognized; we must consider the categorically disruptive possibility that the act of literary historical

> identification is conditioned by our critical practices. Despite a recent surge in critical work on Jewish American literature, too much scholarship remains dominated by the historicist expectation of an identifiable historical subject of which literature is presumed to constitute part of the record. It is a mistake for Jewish American literary study to understand the literature ultimately by way of an identifiable and/or legible, which is at some level to say coherent, Jewish people, however pluralized such a fundamentally biologistic concept might be—usually via one or more legitimated narratives of Jewish American social or cultural history (such as assimilation, a political shift rightward, changing relations with African Americans, secularization, or post-Holocaust Zionism). By doing so, it inevitably conceives of itself as an arm of a larger, multidisciplinary narrative of The Jew that depends on a kind of nationalist logic as it confidently looks for traces of a recognizable Jewish subject. As much as the general historiographic project often articulated under the umbrella of Jewish studies (no matter a particular endeavor's disciplinary home) may attend to the transformation and/or multiplicity of its "Jewish" object matter, it largely retains a prescriptive identarian confidence that this object stably persists in being "Jewish." (6)

Though Schreier is forceful and impassioned in his argument, a question that is not answered by writers like him and the Boyarins is whether they believe that ultimately the Jew is always a diasporic being—and therefore always a stranger, and more pointedly perhaps, should this be the case? Perhaps they view the world through an existential lens in which we are all strangers. The argument for privileging Diasporic existence, as championed by some including Deutscher, Boyarin, Schreier, and even Hannah Arendt to a lesser extent, is that part of the Jews' success is a result of their living between borders, on the cusp of cultures, languages, concepts, and therefore epistemology. But that also relegates the Jew's existence to indeed a kind of in-between worldliness and nowhereness. If the Jew is indeed always a stranger—should that impact the way we read Jewish narratives? And should Jewish narratives about contexts such as Israel, where an individual's Jewish identity might imagine itself at home among others like it, be discounted or marginalized? Is there a post-diasporic Jew, and if so, is he or she inauthentic? And is that Jew currently a resident of Israel or elsewhere? Does the writer who wishes to engage with

Israeli and Zionist narratives, regardless of their political persuasion (his, hers, or the narratives), proceed under the assumption that they are looking at illegitimate Jewishness?

Thus, to follow the intellectually and academically righteous path in the matters at hand proves unimaginably difficult (and my last few thoughts on this are by no means an attempt to Jew-wash or Israeli-wash the political issues that still plague Zionism). For with every line, or every thought that begins with the adjective "Jewish", one's mind immediately suspends and wonders whether it somehow betrays some sort of sense of self-importance of a particular identity that might perhaps be circumstantial and contingent and non-contextual in the (post) modern age of atomized identity, which now, however ironically, actually wishes for redemptive universality. Even worse, must one always be careful not to particularize and single out any group for abilities or accomplishments that might not be proportionate to their actual numbers in society?

How then does one continue on this path while avoiding the sense that such work concerns itself with old notions of identity and even worse that it projects a belief, even if has no intention to, in the uniqueness, or specialness of a group of people? The one way forward is to try always to be wary of essentialism and generalization when discussing Jewish identity, as Stephen Whitfield writes: "no generalization can possibly cover all the cases, or finesse all the problems of definition and conception, or keep the expectations from bounding up to do their spiels as well" (245). This may well be the reason that this dissertation has appropriately struggled with forming a general theory of the Jewish bawdy and instead decided to offer a theoretical mosaic of different Jewish bawdies. It is, after all, completely reasonable that many Judaisms have many bawdies: Jewish bodies and their different synagogues would have it no other way. Yet, I would not go to the trouble of articulating these apprehensions, qualifications, and insecurities, if they were not, I believe, tied to the unique place from which Jewish comedy and its attraction to the bawdy emerge.

They do, I believe, come from a deep sense of particularity and a sense of the importance of the individual, his and her body in relation to the universal.

8.5 The Oven of Aknai: It Is Not in Heaven

As the title of this section suggests, the answers to the questions we posited will not be found in heaven, but perhaps we can find some sort of Jewish framework within which to understand the bawdy of the Jewish variety, or at the least to point to a few areas from which the bawdy energy of Jewish comedy comes. One of the most celebrated and discussed Talmudic midrashim is the tractate of *Bava Metzia 59a-b (*the tractate was referred to in the introduction as well), whose setting is around the second century C.E. and is now commonly referred to as "The Oven of Aknai" midrash.[241] The midrash begins, as midrashim often do, with an elementary issue: this time a dispute over the cleanliness and purity of an oven. On one side of the debate we find Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus, who was for all intents and purposes, the most powerful rabbi of the Sanhedrin, on the other side, the rest of the rabbis.[242] Known as an immensely powerful rabbi with magical powers, Rabbi Eliezer calls out to God and with God's help he performs miracles to prove his point and to try and win the argument. The other rabbis however, win the dispute and subsequently excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer by evoking the principle of majority rule, with Rabbi Joshua quoting *Deuteronomy* 30:12: "It [the Torah] is not in heaven", which is generally viewed as the basic

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[241]One of three tractates found in the order of *Nezikin* [Damages]. I would surmise that one of the reasons for its legendary status is both its historical significance for featuring debates between some of the most famous rabbinical authorities, and also the fact that it has, as its title eludes, to a somewhat meta quality. Aknai is a kind of snake and the argument here, as in many midrashim, weaves and snakes around until it reaches its desired explication. I like to describe Talmudic stories to students as Simpsons episodes. They begin at a certain point, but usually end up completely elsewhere.

[242]The Sanhedrin was second temple period Jewish court system, which was famously allowed to move to Yavneh after a deal was struck between him and Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai.

lesson of this important midrash: real world decisions can only be made by men, or rabbis in our case. This follows the principle that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, and now it is the responsibility of corporeal and mortal men to interpret it, as Rabbi Yirmiyahu states: "That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline "'[243]

The early rabbis claim to authority was clearly the byproduct of "*Tzorech Hashaa*" (Need of the moment). Since the destruction of the second temple decades earlier and therefore the loss of the cultic center of Jewish religious and civic life, Judaism had begun to transition, if only in praxis, from a top-down, hierarchical structure with God and the holy temple at the top, to a more horizontal understanding of the religion, albeit now with Rabbis at the top. Judaism, as we know it today, is a religion and culture which has followed the lead of the rabbis. In such a way, it has intentionally or unintentionally reduced the centrality of God as an omnipotent figurehead and given more power to mere mortals to understand, interpret, and live within the framework of the Torah and its edicts, which were given at Mount Sinai. There is, of course, something rather radical in the notion of a religion, which to some degree, excises its deity from relevance. This view is reiterated by social psychologist Erich Fromm in his fascinating reading of Judaism from a secular point of view, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition (1966).* Fromm locates the seeds for Judaism's controversial lessening of God's centrality and prowess in that, contrary to the view espoused by Christianity for several thousand

[243]See halakha.com

years, the story of *Gan Eden* (The Garden of Eden), Adam and Eve, and the serpent, is not a story of sin (a word not found in the biblical story) or the fall of man:

> The Christian interpretation of the story of man's act of disobedience as his "fall" has obscured the meaning of the story. The biblical text does not even mention the word "sin;" man challenges the supreme power of God, and he is able to challenge, because he is potentially God. Man's first act is rebellion, and God punishes him, because he has rebelled, and because God wants to preserve his supremacy. God has to protect this supremacy by an act of force, by expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and by thus preventing them from taking the second step toward becoming God—eating from the tree of life. Man has to yield to God's superior force, but he does not express regret or repentance. Having been expelled from the Garden of Eden, he begins his independent life; his first act of disobedience is the beginning of human history, because it is the beginning of human freedom. (21-22)

In a sense, Fromm intimates that the beginning of human history according to the Jewish tradition is not the internalization of the existence of an almighty deity and an implied servitude to it, but rather rebellion, disobedience, and consequently freedom. This, of course, bears a striking similarity to other biblical stories, like that of Sarah's rebuke of God, which we have discussed. But even earlier in the Tanakh, when Cain, having just slain his brother Abel, in response to God's inquiry as to the whereabouts of his brother, answers: "Lo yadati; ha-shomer Achi Anochi?" ("I know not; am I my brother's keeper?").[244] When faced with either knowledge or obedience, Adam and Eve choose the latter, thereby engendering mortal human existence via an act of rebellion. In that transgression as well as Sarah's, there is a pattern of entanglement between disobedience, transgression, and sexuality. The thing, after all, that God's children, Adam and Eve, become aware to, after they break God's ordinance and eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, is their nakedness,

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[244]Genesis 4:9

which then alerts them, or so it seems, to their sexual difference and awakens in them some aspect of their sexual instincts. We could, of course, as I am sure plenty others have, make a big deal of the fact that it is that most phallic of animals, which puts the couple on the path of transgression, sexual discovery, and therefore damnation to corporeality. Thus transgression, from that foundational moment, finds itself bound up with sexuality. Much later, we find Foucault tying transgression to the symbolic death of God and sexuality in modernity. He writes in "A Preface to Transgression:"

> Thus, at the root of sexuality, of the movement that nothing could ever limit (because it is, from its birth and in its totality, constantly involved with the limit), and at the root of this discourse on God which Western culture has maintained for so long—without any sense of the impropriety of "thoughtlessly adding to language a word which surpasses all words." Or any clear sense that it places us at the limits of all possible languages—a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression. Perhaps it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future. (33)

Jewish comedy is clearly marked by this very idea of radical disobedience, independence, and irreverence. We see this in all the various comedians who have staked out a political stance and have tried to use comedy to, as we say, speak truth to power. And we see it thoroughly manifested in the work of Jewish comedians who make sex and sexuality a key aspect of the work. As long as sex and sexuality still exist as a societal third rail, then they are sites upon which Jewish comedy feels emboldened to disregard norms, decorum, and transgress. The complex irony of the Jewish bawdy is tied to the fact that "the Jew" itself is a category that connotes illicitness, impropriety, and sexuality. Much Jewish comic discourse engages with its own corporeal raunchiness and is entrenched in a unique and layered irony, complexity, and therefore ineffability. The Jew's unique particularity as a

marked outsider, but also as marked by his or her carnality and corporeality lends itself to a unique set of historical circumstances that revels in the rebellious particularity of comic existence.

The dissertation presented four examples or test cases of the bawdy as it is manifested in the Jewish comedy of two locations: The United States and Israel. This may be too thin of a cross-section to come to a definitive statement about the Jewish bawdy in general or the specific bawdy in each context. The research also ended up looking at four examples of Jewish comedy of Ashkenazi origin. And simply based on demographics and immigration history, the culture and Judaism of Israel has been influenced by a lot more non-Ashkenazi culture and identity, than American Jewish culture has. This of course, is only a minor aspect of the cultural differences between the two contexts. Context clearly matters and the history of Jewish identity in these two settings is different. And differences in history and culture surely lead to different aesthetic developments and artistic production. What however is clear from all four examples is that the different artists and writers share a realization about two important things that are bed stones of this dissertation. The first is that comedy wields more power than it is credited with. That, more often than not, comedy is the sharpest political tool in representational art, whether employed in literature, film, television, or on the stage. Comedy in the hands of these artists rises to be more than entertainment, even if it also entertains extremely well. Second, their work points to an understanding that the bawdy in its various manifestations is first of all a natural companion of comedy, but that nevertheless, even today to speak it publicly and without inhibition or remorse still carries the taint of transgression. And yet, transgression, for these artists, is not "beyond the pale." It is very much in and "of the shtetl." To these two important bed stones, these artists add, without inhibition or guilt, Jewish identity. It goes without saying that these artists come to their Jewish identity from different historical

contexts and personal identities. But if one could generalize a statement about the two contexts as evinced by this bifurcated project it is this: while Jewish American comedians and comediennes use the bawdy from the vantage point of the outsider or the in-betweener of American culture, their work reveals a yearning to belong, to escape that outsider positionality. However, in the Israeli comedy that I looked at, we see the opposite: a tendency to escape an overwhelming conforming identity and establish new identity possibilities. I am not sure if it was Groucho Marx who said it, or if it was Woody Allen (in the words of his character Alvy Singer) claiming that Groucho Marx did in the opening to *Annie Hall*, but the line that has come to define Jewish identity in the United States, especially of the male variety, is "I would never want to belong to any club, that would have someone like me for a member." The line captures a strange and insecure yearning for acceptance as an Other in the United States, as well as the neurosis that life as such an outsider—according to some because of the Jews' diasporic existence—yields. If one were to come up with an Israeli equivalent or analog to it, it might go something like: "I can't help being a member of a club that doesn't want me to leave."

Despite these differences and their underlying motivation, these artists seem to use sex and sexuality because they understand its deep affinity to the essence of what it means to be human, and more specifically a Jewish person, whose historical relationship to sexuality and embodiment has been a fraught one. They also use it as the impetus or the driving force of a mode of transgression that pushes against conventionality. In the United States, a conventionality that sees even the most upwardly mobile Jewish person as an outsider, to a certain degree; and in Israel a conventionality that constantly tries to temper and inhibit any attempts to establish identity outside of the national consensus and myth.

8.6 Hegel and the Particular

Unlike other subjects, Hegel's discussion of comedy leaves a lot to be desired.[245] The little that he did write about it, he spread across various works and wrote about it adjacently to other ideas and topics. It has therefore been rather hard to pin down.[246] But there may be some value in bringing his argument here as part of these concluding remarks.

What Hegel did write suggests that he held comedy in high esteem. In fact in some ways he views comedy as the pinnacle of representational art. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* under the section "Religion in the Form of Art," the Epic comes first and is surpassed by Tragedy, because in the latter, we are given insight into the subjectivity of regular men. Tragedy is counter-intuitively surpassed by Comedy, as Mark William Roche writes:

> we might expect a hierarchy of dramatic forms to mirror social convention; thus, tragedy with its elevated heroes supersedes comedy with its low characters. Hegel upsets this hierarchy. Tragedy with its affirmation of the substantive is a thetic genre; comedy, in its negation of tragedy, is an antithetical genre and in this sense more advanced (281).

Roche adds that according to Hegel, "In comedy, particularity dominates, and with this particularity came the manifold and the multifarious—both in thought and externalization; thus, realistic portrayal reaches its height not in tragedy, but in comedy" (282).

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[245]Even Peter Berger's magisterial work on comedy barely addresses it and generally finds it lacking.

[246]It might be instructive to ask what is the relevance of Hegel to the current study. Well there is indeed some value in a theory of comedy that might elucidate some of the ideas that we are exploring here. There seems to be a certain scholarly return to Hegel's discussion of comedy in the last few decades. However, the ideas that he develops, which critics like Mark William Roche and Anne Paolucci have been able to synthesize and posit important relevance and significance to comedy in the twentieth century, and more importantly, and in fascinating ways to Jewish comedy.

For Hegel, comedy's power of negation is so strong that it brings about the dissolution of art itself. That of course is not inherently a bad thing in Hegel's aesthetic system, for such dissolution is another step on the way to reaching Absolute Spirit. According to Hegel tragedy is the genre of objectivity, order, and power, and comedy as tragedy's negative, its antithesis if you will, is the genre of subjective individuality and the disempowered. Hegel thus agrees, with other commentators that I discussed in the introduction, that tragedy is the mode of kings, princes, and weighty matters of state, whereas comedy is the genre of the everyman and the lowlights. As Anne Paulucci writes, "only princes can be represented as essentially tragic characters," whereas, "the genres that can appropriately draw upon the lower classes of civil society for their character, writes Hegel, are those of comedy and the comical in general. In comedy, he says: individuals have the right to 'spread' themselves however they wish and can. In their willing, if not in their acting they can claim for themselves an independence" (94). All of this is related in Dramatic poetry to a character's relationship to the Gods. That is, tragedy still functions under the presumption of a hierarchy between the Gods, the fates, and the regular hero. Hegel writes, "the self-consciousness that is represented in Tragedy, knows, and acknowledges, therefore, only one supreme power, and this Zeus, only as the power of the state…the Zeus of the oath and the Furies, the Zeus of the universal, of the inner being dwelling in concealment" (*The Phenomenology,* 449). In other words, there is something at once standing apart and aloof in tragedy, whereas comedy, in a rather fascinating way, opens a door to the real: "Comedy has, therefore, above all, the aspect that actual self-consciousness exhibits itself as the fate of the gods." (*The Phenomenology,* 450). The tragic hero may have agency and self-consciousness, and audiences are given insight into their interiority, but they ultimately lack the ability to spar with or surpass God. Comedy is different. Comedy is the mode of the particular, the everyday, and the subject. It is not, to be

clear, that comedy all of a sudden gives the comic hero superhuman power to reach the heavens and toil with the Gods, or even the Fates. The hero remains bound to earth, to his or her foibles and fallibilities. The difference is that comedy exposes the authority of the Gods as a sham. As Alenka Zupancic writes,

> When comedy exposes to laughter, one after another, all the figures of the universal essence and its powers (gods, morals, state institutions, universal ideas, and so on) it does so, of course, from the standpoint of the concrete and the subjective; and, on the face of it, we can indeed get the impression that in comedy, the individual, the concrete, the contingent, and the subjective are opposing and undermining the universal, the necessary, the substantial (as their other). And this is, to be sure, the view that a great many authors propose as the paradigm of comedy. Hegel's point, however, is that in this very "work of the negative" (through which comic subjectivity ap- pears) comedy produces its own necessity, universality, and substantiality (it is itself the only "absolute power"), and it does so by revealing the figures of the "universal in itself" as something that is, in the end, utterly empty and contingent. (27)

With everything just said in mind, let us consider the Jew, as we have already described him or her throughout this dissertation. The "Jew," perhaps not a subject of history whose every minute of existence, as historians of the lachrymose variety would have us believe, was calcified in the saltiness of its tears. But nevertheless, it was mostly an existence lacking in power, an existence whose survival required believing that those in power, whether Gods or kings, are actually **meant to be trifled with**. An ur-historical minoritarian group that did not fight for its rights and its existence, would most likely not have survived for thousands of years. It was probably this powerless minoritarian view that colored the concept of God that was eventually committed to holy writ. In such a world, the boundary between the sacred and the profane becomes not so much a barrier, but more of a gate through which human action must be funneled for some measure of survival. Similarly, the liminal space between the sacred

and the profane in comedy, becomes for the Jew the fertile soil upon which incongruity, absurdity, and irony can grow. Comedy, the mode of the particular, is thus just sensible to people who have had to exist and thrive in the particular. Could the Jews have succeeded more in any other form? Comedy is the mode that resists the universal. As the mode of the particular, it is, to use a phrase from Seinfeld, the mode about nothing.

Should it then, even be a surprise that Jews and Judaism have been comically and comedically inclined. Tragedy may have been the historical circumstance of the Jews, but their language was comedy. And not so much because laughter was an antidote to the darkness, but because comedy, its particularity and materiality, as Hegel would suggest, is the universality of their existence. And should it be a surprise that sex and sexuality, the most taboo and most particular of modern subjects, found itself a fertile ground for the Jew in the twentieth century? In some ways, the Jew's particularistic bawdiness was always there, everyone else may be just catching up, as implied by Yuri Slezkine in his fascinating book on Jews in the twentieth century, *The Jewish Century.*

> The Modern Age is the Jewish Age, and the twentieth century, in particular, is the Jewish Century. Modernization is about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible…. Modernization, in other words, is about everyone becoming Jewish.
>
> Some peasants and princes have done better than others, but no one is better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves. In the age of capital, they are the most creative entrepreneurs; in the age of alienation, they are the most experienced exiles….(11)

8.7 A Jew Never Forgets, and Never Leaves

At the end of the episode dedicated to Carl Reiner on Jerry Seinfeld's web-series, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* which surprises viewers by also including Reiner's best

friend and comic legend Mel Brooks, Reiner notices that Seinfeld and Brooks seem to be "taking their sweet time" leaving his home, and he offers a joke:

> Reiner: Jerry, know the difference between a Frenchman and a Jew?
>
> Seinfeld: No.
>
> Reiner: A Frenchman leaves without saying goodbye, a Jew says goodbye and never leaves."[247]

There was always going to be a conclusion to the conclusion. The Gods of comedy would not have it any other way. The conclusion in some ways skirted some of the questions that were asked in the introduction, including what is the purpose or role of the bawdy in Jewish comedy. Instead, the conclusion has tried to offer different tendencies and inclinations within Judaism, past and present, that may have opened the door for Jewish humor's bawdy aspects. In a strange but fascinating way, part of this relationship may be connected to Judaism's relationship to the concept of memory, which is outlined, in powerful details in the book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982) written by historian and philosopher Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, who writes:

> We[humans] ourselves are periodically aware that memory is the most fragile and capricious of our faculties.
>
> Yet the Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal. Altogether the verb Zakhar appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both. The verb is complemented by its obverse—forgetting. As Israel is enjoined to remember, so is it adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times. Indeed, in trying to understand the survival of a people that

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[247]Seinfeld, the automobile fanatic, matches a car to some of his favorite comedians and picks them up for coffee, food, and conversation.

> has spent most of its life in global dispersion, I would submit that the history of its memory, largely neglected and yet to be written, may prove of some consequence. (5).

Is it possible that in their fascination with comedy and the bawdy that the Jews have simply never forgotten: never forgotten what it means to be human? To be human, to be like Adam and Eve, as Fromm suggests, is in its purest essence, is to rebel, or as Lenny Bruce famously quipped, "If you can't say 'fuck,' you can't say, 'Fuck the Government.'" Zupancic correctly, I believe, warns that the true materiality of comedy does not lie in some utopian return to our shared humanity and its beauty as such, but in its truest of forms, comedy's materiality ridicules and challenges the idea of learned civility, "The reason for which comedy is, indeed, profoundly materialistic is not simply that it reminds us of, and insists upon, the mud, the dirt, dense and coarse reality as our ultimate horizon (which we need to accept), and as a condition of our life. Comedy is materialistic because it gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality itself" (47).

So, perhaps the rebellious bawdy of Jewish comedy is so powerful because it is a Jewish clarion call for memory and commemoration, the memory of the human essence as one of rebellion, and a reminder, not of our shared civility, but our shared corporeality. For who would know better than the Jews of the twentieth century, the "mice" of Art Spieglman's *Maus* and vermin of history, that, what we have forgotten is not our civility, but our ancestral animality? Adorno and Horkheimer try to remind us in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* arguing that in the process of fashioning the Enlightenment, so-called enlightened and civilized society tried to dominate nature and thus to **deny and forget** mankind's deep connection to nature:

> This very denial, the nucleus of all civilizing rationality, is the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality with the denial of nature in man not merely the telos of the outward control of nature but the telos of man's own life is

> distanced and befogged. As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive—social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself—are nullified, and the enthronement of the means as an end, which under late-capitalism is tantamount to open insanity is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity. (54-55)

As long as we are alive, the club we all belong to, whether we want to or not, is that of prehistorical animality, instinct, and materiality. And it is therefore funny when we assume that we can become "masters of our domain." It is my belief that Judaism, especially Jewish comedy manifests a unique reliance on the subjectivity of the individual and his or her corporeality as a meaningful (hopeful) resistance, and not only to any imagined universal spirituality.

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