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Miri Gal-Ezer

Communication Department, Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee, Jordan Valley, Israel

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The Visible Hand: economic censorship in Israeli media

Miri Gal-Ezer*

Communication Department, Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee, Jordan Valley, Israel

This article proposes, as test cases, three TV documentaries that underwent economic censorship in Israeli media in 2001–2014. Economic censorship, very rarely exposed, is a relatively new concept, and is as yet uncommon in media research, although it has been flourishing throughout the neoliberal global media economy over the past three decades. Since the 1980s, Israel’s successive military conflicts have been intertwined in a neoliberal hegemony, whereas from the 2000s, neoliberalism was transformed into an extreme version, destroying the former Israeli welfare state, its social order and ideology. The analysis reveals the prominent function of commercial and public TV Channels in the implementation and amplification of neoliberalism proper, neoliberal doctrine, and a culture of neoliberalism to or for Israeli audiences, while ‘Acts of Resistance’, drawn from a relatively autonomous field of production – the TV documentary – challenge neoliberal hegemony, also by continuing to stir activists’ consciences before and throughout the social protests in 2011 and their aftermath.

Keywords: Israel; economic censorship; Israeli media; activist documentary; neoliberalism; Pierre Bourdieu; Nick Couldry; Michael Moore; Social Protests 2011

‘The Invisible Hand’ of economic censorship in the media is very rarely exposed. However, four instances of economic censorship in Israeli media were found between 2001 and 2014: three TV documentaries and one investigative TV programme. This article focuses on the three censored TV documentaries as test cases for exploring ‘the rules of media’ in the context of Israeli neoliberalism.

Economic censorship is a relatively new concept (though not a new act) and is as yet uncommon in media research. Four ‘classic’ censorship modes exist: political, religious, social/moral and military (national security), which are not generally prevalent in democratic regimes. But a constant national military censorship prevails in Israel, the 1945 ‘Defence (Emergency) Regulation’ legislated by the British Mandate (1920–48), which commonly attracts researchers, journalists, political actors and public debates. It should be emphasized though, that in the current global ‘Fear of Terror’ neoliberal national security politics, most Western democracies regularly practise national security censorship.

*Emails: miri-gal@012.net.il; mirig@kinneret.ac.il.

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Economic censorship, which has been flourishing through the global media economy of the past three decades, is the prevention of information that might damage the economic interests of the censorship’s imposing agent, or might advance the interests of his/her competitors.

Every field has its censorship constructed by the symbolic violence of field agents who ‘play the rules’ according to the field’s hidden axes of power. If agents are dominant in the field, they convey their ideological discourse as a direct discourse, or as naturalized ‘common sense’ doxa – a euphemized discourse.

A political-economic regime, such as the neoliberal hegemony, whether in democracies or dictatorships, requires the spreading of a legitimization process through institutional means, such as ‘Think Tanks’, in addition to conservative intellectuals, academics, and – certainly a key apparatus – the media culture industry. Within this process, not only are global actors active, such as the World Bank, but national states are the central producers of ideological discourses promoting ‘democratization’, ‘free trade’, ‘globalization’, ‘privatization’, ‘economic efficiency’, ‘superiority of the market’s Invisible Hand’ and the like, while asserting their legislation and execution by strict regulation (though paradoxically declaring the need for ‘deregulation’), thus deliberately erasing the welfare state and its social-democratic residues.

At the end of the 1970s, Israel’s successive military conflicts also began to function as a masquerade concealing the political-economic order which promoted private capital accumulation. From the 1980s a neoliberal order was adopted, while from the 2000s it was transformed into its extreme version – the oligarchy phase – steadily occupying the entire political, military, economic, social and cultural domains. This phase was helped by devoted conservative intellectuals and academics, the media and private local ‘think tanks’, financed by Jewish-American tycoons, destroying and replacing the former Israeli welfare state, its social order and ideology.

Bourdieu speaks ‘On Television’ as a field of invisible forces saturated by symbolic violence and various modes of censorships. Besides the government’s political censorship on public TV, executed by intervention, control and finance, there is also economic censorship, which, according to Bourdieu’s analysis, is too obvious, but should be taken into consideration. In this case, it is the private ownership of commercial TV that accomplishes economic censorship: ‘For instance, it’s important to know that NBC is owned by General Electric (which means that interviews with people who live near a nuclear plant undoubtedly would be . . . ).’

There is also an invisible censorship that operates by time limits and constraints on issue selection, the formal censorship, a daily routine of control over journalists, and also the journalists’ self-censorship, stemming from the shortage of jobs in the journalism field, making them cautious, obedient and careful for fear of losing their positions in a neoliberal culture with no unions to protect them. Bourdieu analyses these hidden mechanisms as forcing an empty, conformist unified media discourse.

Naomi Klein reveals similar apparatuses which limit freedom of expression, specifying the power of American corporations to control and conduct economic
censorship, such as the Walmart chain and the Disney Corporation. This neoliberal ‘tyranny of the market’, prevails in ‘privatised consciousness’, through indoctrination by the media. Nick Couldry defines the three levels by which this hegemony is implemented:

First there are the market fundamentalist principles of Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman and other thinkers which explicitly install market functioning as the dominant reference-point of economics and, bizarrely as it might once have seemed, political and social order as well. Let’s call this neoliberalism proper. Second, there is a wider set of metaphors, languages, techniques and organizational principles that have served to implement neoliberalism proper as the working doctrine of many contemporary democracies. Let’s call this neoliberal doctrine. One form was ... Washington Consensus; another was the shift towards marketization as an active principles of government ... so when we now try to think beyond the horizon of neoliberalism, it is at the end of extended history of neoliberalism’s normalization, the embedding of neoliberalism as rationality in everyday social organization and imagination: this is the third level of neoliberalism as meaning ... a whole way of life for which neoliberal discourse provides the organizing metaphors, a ‘culture’ of neoliberalism].

The focus of this study on the three censored documentaries as test cases stems from the documentary field’s recent emerging role of resistance to mainstream media. Michael Moore, recipient of outstanding praise and awards, is considered to be the director who changed the marginal position of non-fiction films, since Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) and his subsequent documentaries were screened in cinemas, reaching vast audiences in the USA and Europe. Through Roger and Me (1989) Bowling for Columbine (2002), Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), Sicko (2007), Capitalism – A Love Story (2009), and many more, his persona was created as a guerrilla director, or as a documentary activist, influencing an entire generation of documentary makers the world over. It should be remembered, however, that Moore himself was struggling against an extreme campaign by the Republicans: ‘The right’s efforts to discredit “Fahrenheit 9/11” has succeeded in making many supporters of Michael Moore’s thesis tentative about articulating praise for his movie’. On 5 May 2004, when Moore was to screen Fahrenheit 9/11 at the Cannes Festival, reports on Disney (the parent company of Miramax) revealed that the corporation refused to release the documentary to the movie theatres, since they did not want to be involved in a controversial documentary. Public opinion was stimulated through media exposure and on Moore’s website, so at this point Senator Frank R. Lautenberg called for a senate censorship hearing, and wrote to the senate committee chairman: ‘I am concerned that Americans are facing an emerging threat of political censorship – not from the government – but from some of our nation’s largest corporations’. The public wanted to see the film, public dissent against Disney intensified, and Miramax bought the rights from Disney, releasing the film on 25 June 2004.

While Roger and Me grossed over $7 million and ‘Bowling for Columbine’ $21.5, ‘Fahrenheit 9/11’ reached $113 million and ‘became the first documentary to reach number one at the box office during the opening weekend’. These
handsome profits enabled Moore to be an independent creator and to have his freedom of expression, despite the constraints and censorships of the gigantic corporations.

Israeli documentaries have a long history, parallel to Western documentary history. Since its pioneering days it has been intertwined with the nation-building process. From the time of the early Zionist films, which were used for propaganda and fundraising in the Diaspora, through World War II films and early-state national films, into the more critical TV documentaries in the 1980s whereas in the 1990s, from the establishment of the Israeli new media map, the ‘new Israeli social documentary’ emerged as an auteur cinema with individualistic artistic films styled mostly as cinema verité (literally film truth). The common discourse topics of this new ‘personal’ and ‘social’ documentary are the directors’ personal biographies, ‘identity politics’ of various Israeli groups, the Holocaust, and especially the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – a topic which merits a favourable reception, and receives awards at international film festivals. It should be emphasized that the advance route of directors in the Israeli documentary field is homologous to the Israeli art field and academia, and the trajectory and local posts in these fields are based on global reception and recognition in central Western institutes, be it in international film festivals, exhibitions in museums and galleries, or prestigious academic journals. Thus the ‘new Israeli social documentary’ began echoing the ‘politics of identity’, which is a style and a culture intertwined in the neoliberal hegemony, while Israeli documentaries of the 1990s and 2000s rarely dealt with the genuine real ‘reality’ of the social: poverty, economic problems, government social policy, the decline of the Israeli welfare state, internal racism, etc. These ‘social’ documentaries were created as a result of the legal obligations of commercial TV channels’ franchises committed to the screening of ‘elite genres’ (which were very often violated without any sanctions, due to weak media regulation). Simultaneously, Israeli TV screens are flooded by another reality – that of the popular global ‘reality’ shows: local formats of ‘Big Brother’, ‘Survival’, ‘The Apprentice’, weight-loss TV reality shows, various ‘Idols’, etc.

The three TV documentaries analysed for this study are: *King of the Ratings* (director Doron Tsabari, 2001), portraying a ‘star’ entertainer who became the central Israeli media company’s ‘money machine’; *Strike* (directors Amir Tausinger and Asaf Sudri, 2005), which followed privatized factory workers’ hopeless struggle to unite, which was destroyed by state apparatuses and the Supreme Court; and *The Shakshuka System* (creator Mickey Rosenthal and director Ilan Abudi, 2008) that revealed the state’s underpriced selling (privatization) of public infrastructure corporations to tycoons who were in cahoots with the political elites, at the expense of common citizens. *Fact* (investigative TV programme by woman journalist Ilana Dayan, 2005), which exposes the Israir flight company’s mechanical faults that endangered passengers’ lives, will be discussed shortly.
The test cases

‘King of the ratings’ – state ideology on commercial TV: neoliberalism, entertainment, divided society

Eight years after Doron Tsabari’s TV documentary *King of the Ratings* (produced by Israeli franchise Keshet of commercial TV Channel 2 and independent non-profit Rabinowitz Fund for the Arts) was completed (2001), censored and not broadcast, its protagonist – Israeli entertainer Dudu Topaz, crowned by Israeli audiences as the ‘ultimate Israeli’ – committed suicide by hanging himself in his prison cell. The title given in the online English edition of the Israeli elite Hebrew newspaper *Haaretz* was: ‘Dudu Topaz’s suicide put to rest a life riddled with wit, controversy and ultimately, tragedy’. In June 2009, two months before his suicide, Topaz was arrested and charged with violent assault on woman TV producer Shira Margalit, chief executive of the Channel 2 Keshet franchise, Avi Nir and the actors’ agent, Boaz Ben-Zion. Throughout the year following his death, the collaborators who were sent by him to carry out the criminal assaults were pronounced guilty and sentenced to prison. He seemed to have been taking terrible revenge on the directors of Channel 2 because they were no longer buying his programmes, causing him to lose his primary stardom on Israeli TV, which had lasted some 11 years, between 1993 and 2004.

The opening titles of the documentary appear on the screen, while in the background, people are rushing into the TV studio, technicians are preparing the cameras, cables, lighting system and microphones for the live show, and a director is seen showing the audience how to clap their hands above their heads. Then Hebrew sentences appear on the screen:

Anyone wanting, in the future, to understand Israel’s zeitgeist of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, cannot ignore Dudu Topaz. ‘The First in Entertainment’, his star-rated TV show, from its first broadcast, and continuously over six years, was the most popular programme on Israeli TV. Dudu Topaz symbolized the essence of the Israeli dream for a vast audience. 54% considered him the most desired bachelor (Yediot Aharonot, 1994) and 66% would have elected him as prime minister had he presented his candidacy (Zman Tel Aviv, September 1996). In a survey taken about who is the typical Israeli man of the year 2000, Dudu Topaz came in first place with 12% support, Binyamin Netanyahu came in second with 9%, and Ehud Barak was third with 7% (Yediot Aharonot, May 2000). What makes Israelis consider Dudu Topaz as their ‘utmost Israeli man’? What is it that they identify with so prominently? What is the meaning of being ‘The King of Ratings’? What is the significance of being a success?

Subsequently the sound bites of the show are becoming louder; the projectors are moving quickly, a thunder of hand claps and shouts, and Dudu Topaz the star steps up onto the stage, a wide professional smile on his face, once again.

Documentary director Doron Tsabari accompanied his protagonist Dudu Topaz for about six years (1995–2001), in both his professional life as the prime entertainer of Channel 2, and his private life. Some significant scenes of the documentary will be presented in order to analyse this typical phenomenon as a
test case of franchised Channel 2, in the context of the divided Israeli society, heading deeper into the neoliberal hegemony.

One of the first scenes depicts two women, a mother and her grown-up daughter, dressed meticulously in their best clothes for the documentary shootings, the mother with backcombed hair like a bird’s nest. Both of them, glowing with happiness, are sitting in their modest living room, talking about the fabulous Dudu Topaz and how much they admire him. Many working-class people are presented throughout the documentary, mostly standing in their tiny living rooms, reading their personal letters to Dudu Topaz out loud in front of the camera. Women, and especially children, make their petty innocent requests, pleading with him to help them. After the admiring mother and her daughter are shown on screen, a TV production team is presented, going through the vast number of appeal letters from viewers, reading them out loud to each other, debating whether the letters’ issues fit the programme style and whom to invite for the show to go on stage with Dudu Topaz, to carry out some of the ‘tasks’ on the live show. For instance, a very fat lady, dressed by the production team in blue and red sateen clothes which emphasize her obesity (a very short skirt), is sitting on a chair, and two youngsters – a boy and a girl – are competing in throwing chocolate balls into her open mouth while she tries to catch them by moving her head, her face becoming stained with chocolate, and all the while the studio audience is cheering her on gleefully, clapping their hands and shouting. In another show, a different woman is chosen to fulfil her particular wish: to overcome her terrible fear of cockroaches. She had to enter a transparent cage full of large cockroaches running all over the place; the door closes, and she stands there trembling and screaming for quite a few minutes, while the audience becomes more and more excited. When Topaz opens the door, he holds her as she weeps, and announces that she has a won a ‘prize’ from a travel agency – two flight tickets to Europe.

According to Nick Couldry’s theorization, this kind of entertainment, embodying cruelty, stepping on people and ridiculing them while contesting on stage; fulfilling innocent people’s dreams to overcome their weaknesses, while awarding them commercial ‘gifts’ such as airline tickets, etc., a real game with real people who fulfil tasks, where Topaz is the managerial magician who offers his ‘blessings’ in ‘grace’ – all these represent modes in which the three levels of neoliberalism are implemented: first level- the ideology, and political-economic order are the neoliberalism proper, the second level is its rationality, i.e. the neoliberal doctrine, and the third level is a whole way of life, a culture of neoliberalism which is also assimilated emotionally. 33

Some significant scenes in the documentary incorporate Topaz’s journey to the southern town of Netivot to visit the sacred tomb of the Baba Sali (1899–1984) on his memorial day, an annual event attracting about 100,000 worshippers. 34 Topaz is warmly welcomed by the festive crowds who are dancing around him, kissing and hugging him, while the women make typical joyous yodelling sounds. The Israeli entertainer Dudu Topaz (Dudu is a typical Israeli Sabra short form of David, and Topaz is his professional name; his original
surname was Goldenberg) was of middle-class Ashkenazi descent – Jews who immigrated to Israel mainly from Eastern Europe and Russia. But now Topaz appears in a traditional Moroccan long white hand-embroidered robe and a white Moroccan skullcap, as he enters a large hall filled with religious people sitting around tables eating, walking through their welcoming voices, towards the Baba Baruch’s (Baba Sali’s son) open arms. The Baba kisses him and gives him his blessing, while they are surrounded by photographers. This scene is edited to close-ups of Topaz’s face and sometimes his voice-over is heard:

I am the bridge between these emotional drifters [the North Africans] the passionate believers, drifting after the [leaders’ and Rabbis’] sayings, the emotions [pause]; and the North Tel-Avivians, analytical people, coolim [cool people in Hebrew slang] I’m ‘bull’ in the middle [Hebrew army slang phrase which resembles training in the shooting gallery]. It’s not good, it is an impulsive excitement, which obstructs the common sense from acting [pause] I can tell you that this love can be changed by one word into hatred [pause].

At that moment, the clamour of a large crowd becomes louder and louder, the documentary becomes black and white, the camera is directed onto the huge excited crowd shouting: ‘Begin! Begin!’ and on the screen is written ‘June 1981 The Kings of Israel Square’. Menachem Begin during his first tenure as prime minister (1977–81), campaigning again for the coming election, addresses the cheering crowd with his hands raised, as if he is containing everyone in his hands. Begin speaks: ‘Yesterday in this very place, while what’s-his-name, [deliberate pause] Topaz said that word [loud blast from the crowd] about the “Tshachtshahim” “Tshachtshahim”.’ Begin’s voice echoes via the vast loudspeakers, ‘Tshachtshahim’ ‘Tshachtshahim’ (a derogatory term for Jews of North African descent). Begin lifts up his arms, and the crowd is screaming ‘Begin! Begin!’ while he looks directly at his listeners with a serious face, raising his right hand and pointing his finger in a gesture of warning. The authoritative typical famous voice-over of Haim Yavin is heard: ‘The word Tshachtshahim entered the Israeli folklore. The word was the climax of the ethnic hatred as revealed in the 1981 elections’. When the Likud was in power, especially after winning the 1981 elections, the party overturned the economic system of Israel. Capital accumulation had been a policy of the Labour party since the late 1960s, but now a declared ‘real’ liberal economy was enforced. The aim of the new right wing political elite was to dismantle the economic-political power of the Labour party elite. This move to a liberal ‘deregulated’ economy (a legitimization discourse ‘freeing’ the economy from the ‘stranglehold’ of the ‘hegemonic national state’ and ‘the corrupted exploiting elites’ was characteristic of the 1980s, besides deliberate inflation aimed at accelerating the economic disintegration of Labour establishments. But inflation went out of control, and was consequently followed by the 1985 ‘Stabilization Programme’ involving severe state budget cuts. These political-economic moves were very harmful to the Mizrahi electorate of the Likud, who were economically weak and mainly comprised blue-collar workers, who were dependent on the welfare state.
While Baruch Kimmerling analyses the transformation of the Israeli elites as forming tribes in the midst of cultural struggle on identity, Danni Gutwein examines the same process as a unique Israeli sectorialization phase, on the way to full neoliberal economy. In this phase which was prominent in the 1990s, the ruling Likud elite had to gain legitimization from the Likud electorate. Thus deliberately accelerated privatization was conducted along the lines of sectorialization, accompanied by the nurturing of ethnic hatred, enabling the state to fund every sector according to its ‘unique characteristics’ as ‘compensation’ for its specific parties joining in a political coalition in the Knesset and the government based on economic interests: to get hold of the state’s udders in order to compete for some milk. For instance, the whole lifestyle and culture of the Shas party (whose voters are Mizrahim – traditional and religious Jews originating from Muslim countries) was constructed from the 1980s with the deliberate financial assistance of the Likud governments, while Shas has seats in most of the governments. But as an ultraorthodox ‘Mizrahi’ party, Shas needs a legitimization discourse to sit with the ‘Zionists’. However, paradoxically, in spite the prominent poverty of its electorate, the party backs the harsh neoliberal economy in order to conserve immense poverty, which is the base of its power.

The next scene of the documentary shows the Negev’s open landscape in the early-morning sunlight, with Topaz in the TV production van, heading south, intending to surprise a family in Ofakim, and to enter the house with TV cameras without prior announcement, which he did regularly on his programme. Ofakim (meaning horizons) is a small southern town, similar to Netivot, a ‘development town’ inhabited mostly by Mizrahim who suffer prolonged unemployment and severe poverty, like many ‘developing towns’ in Israel. This state of affairs became worse with the advance of neoliberalism. The chosen family, named Daiy, is similar to other families depicted in Topaz’s show: they are ‘The Second Israel’, whereas the ‘First’ are the wealthy, the educated, of Ashkenazi-European origin, who live in Israel’s centre.

While in the van, Topaz phones the mayor of Ofakim and asks him to postpone his journey to Jerusalem for an appointment with the minister of finance. Topaz gets the mayor’s agreement to meet him with Mr. Daiy, a worker who is about lose his job, and the mayor also promises to stop the dismissal. Now we see Topaz entering the house, in which the two parents are surprised and very embarrassed, as they prepare their children for school. There is a young girl of about seven years old, and two severely disabled children, one being held in his mother’s arms, while the other is strapped in his wheelchair because he cannot sit by himself. Topaz is talking about the honour bestowed on Mr. Daiy, and while Mr. Daiy, his wife and Topaz sit on the girl’s bed, Topaz takes dolls out of a box, declaring the ‘donations’ of the specific companies, asking the family if they are pleased. ‘And that’s not all that I have for you’ he says. ‘I called my friend, the owner of a supermarket chain and he
donated 12,000 Shekels anonymously [then about £2,000], 1,000 Shekels every month to buy food at the supermarket. Are you pleased?’ The couple is so embarrassed they cannot look straight at the camera, and then Topaz takes Mr. Daiy by the hand and they go to the mayor’s office for the ceremony, and the mayor reassures him of the cancellation of his dismissal; there is much shaking of hands, while the cameras roll. In the next scene, the following is written on the screen: ‘This programme was edited differently from what you have seen in the film, and this week “The First in Entertainment” was the programme with the highest viewer rating on Israeli TV’. These titles are written against a background of an audience cheering non-stop in the TV studio, and then Topaz, on the stage, thanks the audience, saying:

Decisions are moments when I say to myself: maybe I’m really [pause], like some of the public says [about me] that I’m so commercial, only looking for ratings, but then I say to myself: it is worthwhile! Worthwhile to reach the day that we have a commercial TV which has money [emphasis on the word money]. I’m not ashamed to say the word [emphasis] because sometimes good things can be done with this money.

Although this declaration seems very simple, it conveys the neoliberal hegemony, the ideology of privatization, commercialization, and commoditization for the ultimate goal – money! Money can do ‘good things’. It is the neoliberalism in which the rich can give ‘compassionately’ and ‘piously’ – a hegemony that eliminates the welfare state ideology of human rights and its Keynesian political-economy. This is the first level of implementation of neoliberalism through media amplification.

Shimon Peres, the late Rabin’s successor, was a guest, among many other politicians, at Topaz’s wedding that took place on top of Masada, in the Judean desert, with its breath-taking panoramic view, while the sun was setting, and the desert was slowly becoming dark, and in the midst of it, the wedding ceremony was conducted by torchlight. The wedding scene concludes in a public area in Tel Aviv, where a new black BMW sports car wrapped with a white tulle ribbon, is presented to relatives, journalists and fans while Topaz declares to the excited audience: ‘The wife of Dudu Topaz ought to have a representative car!’ The divorce took place shortly afterwards.

During his reign as ‘King of the Ratings’ (1993–2004), Topaz created the Channel 2 culture; he shaped its unique spirit and appeal to mass audiences, with messages embodying the popular, the emotional, excitement, vulgarity, voyeurism, cynicism, hypocrisy, patriarchal domination, arrogance, cruelty and exploitation. It was in this context that the idiom ‘Massouda from Sderot’ was coined, the connotative meaning being that Channel 2, as commercial TV, is shaped to fit the taste and habitus of an imaginary old woman immigrant from North Africa named Massouda (Arabic name for a woman; second-generation Mizrahim have ‘proper’ Hebrew names); Massouda lives in Sderot, another poverty-afflicted ‘development town’ near Netivot and Ofakim, in the Negev desert.
Doron Tsabari, the director of *King of the Ratings*, maintains that Topaz was admired because he was a millionaire – he earned about $20 million during his TV glory days on Channel 2 and declared it openly. In addition, he was a very handsome man, the eternal bachelor, and had relationships with many beautiful women. Tsabari analyses Topaz’s success not only as a TV star: ‘The franchisers didn’t know what commercial TV should be, and Topaz taught them. He was the “inventor” of Channel 2’.49

‘Israeliness’ was transformed by the manufacture of the media into a banal nationalism, although it could be considered ‘hot’ nationalism in an era of severe political violence amid terrorist attacks and interminable war in Lebanon.50 Despite this ‘hot’ context, and maybe in consequence of it, Channel 2 was the site of the alleged ‘normalcy’ by its unique combination of appealing to the very poor and excluded citizens, as if they have honour, status and primacy; as if there is no war, terror and bloodshed, exclusion and exploitation. Topaz became the attractive, good, generous archetypal Israeli and symbol of ‘Israeliness’, and hero of the underprivileged class that had lost its class consciousness through its very identification with these cynical identity politics. The archetypal Israeli avant-garde pioneer, who was also a brave military hero, embodied in the character of assassinated PM Rabin (1922–4 November 1995), was transformed into a TV entertainer, who was considered to be the foremost national ‘star’ – the King. So his success and public admiration reflects the two aspects of ‘Israeliness’: the ongoing conservative patriarchal order in Israeli society, and the strengthening and consolidation of values heading towards conservative neoliberal values of economic individualistic success.

This documentary was the first to follow Michael Moore’s mode of documentary making: the guerrilla documentary.51 Although it was partly financed by the Keshet franchise of Channel 2, it was also financed by the New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and TV, and produced by Marek Rosenbaum, Transfax Productions and Guerrilla Films. The name Guerrilla Films is a very transparent hint regarding Tsabari’s intentions and mode of inquiry. The demand of Topaz and Keshet to edit out parts of the film was refused by the director and producer. It is abundantly clear why the documentary was censored by the media franchisers and their star: their manipulation of Israeli audiences became too obvious.

After its economic censorship in 2001 by all Israeli TV channels, including public Channel 1, the film was screened for years in academic institutes, civic and cultural organizations. This distribution mode is characteristic of radical documentary films, and has been conducted since the 1970s by many feminist, black, social and radical-political directors. Screening in intimate groups is still a technique for consciousness-raising of the activists.52 Over the past years *The King of Ratings* has been available on the internet for free downloading. After Topaz was arrested in 2009, Tsabari and Rosenbaum succeeded in selling it to the Hot Media Corporation; the documentary was screened by Hot to its cable TV subscribers and it is also available on its view on demand services.
The King of Ratings revealed the crucial functioning of the media’s hegemonic apparatus in manufacturing consent of neoliberalism: the stage and ‘behind the scenes’, and the hidden powerful forces of the field. The following two films, furthermore, document excluded and hidden processes: state oppression and exclusion of its workers, and state devotion and donations to its oligarchs.

‘Strike’ – representation of workers in Israel: real and symbolic violence

Strike, a documentary directed by Assaf Sudri and Amir Tausinger (2005), produced by Israeli Public TV Channel 1 and the Rabinowitz Fund for the Arts, is a documentary inquiry into a strike that broke out in 2003, in Haifa Chemicals South, a fertilizer factory, which manages about half of the global potassium nitrate market, processing phosphates out of the Negev desert soil, in southern Israel. The workers, mainly Mizrahim who struggled months for unionization, were legitimized by Israeli labour unions and the Labour Court.54

As strikers tried to stop fertilizer transportation from the factory, and the huge lorries intended to run them over, the management’s hired private police beat the workers brutally with clubs, breaking their bones and causing serious wounds. Then the Israeli state police arrived and forcibly removed the workers from the factory, enabling fertilizer transportation. These climactic scenes from a private video camera, taken by a striker, Hagai Hazan, were incorporated into Strike.

Despite the strike’s legality, union committee workers were ultimately fired along with the other strikers. 55 Defeat was represented in their proclamations: ‘Money wins’ or ‘How can one prevail against one’s own government?’ and also reflected in Strike’s final frame: PM Ariel Sharon, with his two election campaign donors, one being the factory owner, Arieh Ganger, and another is Cyril Kern. 56 The Chief Executive of Public TV Channel 1 demanded this photo to be censored, but the directors refused, and took legal action against the channel. As a result, Strike was not televised as scheduled in November 2005. The directors Assaf Sudri and Amir Tausinger distributed the film the same way as Tsabari: throughout Israel in many intimate screenings, for workers, activists in Israel’s periphery, community centres, human rights organizations, cinematheques, etc. Tsabari and Tausinger are also lecturers in academia, enabling them to screen their films to cinema and TV students, as well as other radical films, and educating a new generation on the radical legacy of documentary. Channel 1 agreed to televise the uncensored Strike only after the general elections in Israel (March 2006), and the film was finally shown in June 2006.

Strike is the only completed film of a planned four-part documentary. The Politics of Money – The Power of Capital in the State of Israel (to be directed by Sudri and Tausinger), was intended to analyse four domains: legislation, privatization, work and the media. The part about the media was filmed, documenting a strike by print workers at the country’s most popular newspaper Yediot Aharonot (Latest News). 57 This paper is owned by the Moses family, one
of the 18 families who own 32% of the entire income of the Israeli economy.\textsuperscript{58} But again the public television executive prevented the editing of this part, thus censoring the entire series.

Strike is analysed according to Bourdieu’s three questions in his article ‘Strike and Political Action’. The following question will be discussed first: ‘What factors determine the strength of the different sides in a strike?’, i.e. the power of state, employers and workers accumulated through previous struggles – the field’s history.\textsuperscript{59} Five stages may be identified in Israel (extending Grinberg’s model\textsuperscript{60}):

- 1948–67: ‘Universal welfare state’: the Histadrut was a strong partner of the new State of Israel (1948) providing housing and work to many new immigrants. Haifa Chemicals was established in 1966.
- 1967–90: ‘Histadrut and Labour party legitimization crisis’: privatization and welfare state deterioration into a particularistic, clientele model, while constructing a settlers’ ‘occupied territories’ welfare state’, dividing the Israeli work force into five sectors: (1) strong unionized educated workers of European origin; (2) union-dependent, low-paid unskilled workers of Eastern origin; (3) non-unionized Israeli Arab citizens; (4) non-unionized occupied Palestinians; (5) exploited, persecuted foreign workers. When Ariel Sharon was minister of industry and commerce, the state-controlled shares of Haifa Chemicals were sold cheaply to his friend Arieh Genger for only $12 million, while $30 million in cash remained in the factory coffers (1985).\textsuperscript{61}
- 1990–2000: ‘Powerless new Histadrut within a free economy’: a high-tech and advanced technology industry flourished, acceleration of privatization and deliberately high unemployment, while a quarter of workers’ came from contracting companies. A new private Haifa Chemicals South was founded in the Negev, with substantial state funding (1994).
- 2000–2014: ‘Globalization and poverty acceleration amid emergence of new consciousness before and after the extensive 2011 social protests’: weakened nation-state, more social security cuts: in 2008 every third Israeli child was poor (34%), and the share of the working population in poverty continued to rise, totalling 46.3% (compared to 45.7% in 2007).\textsuperscript{62} In April 2014 the picture was almost the same;\textsuperscript{63} however, Israel’s social inequality and the concentration of wealth were increasing too, and Israel now is second after the USA, high above the OECD grading according to these measures.\textsuperscript{64}

The second question is ‘when we talk about the state, are we talking about its material force (army, police, etc.) or its symbolic force?’\textsuperscript{65} – i.e. ‘soft violence’ practised by educational, legal and social service systems.
The strikers in the film stated that after army service, they anticipated similar fairness and solidarity in the factory, without the need for contracts. While Israeli schools determine the ‘factorization’ process of certain groups into their ‘appointed’ social class, the state’s ‘common sense’ continues in the army, forming solidarity, where ‘rebelling’ against military decision-making is ‘unthought’ of.66

In addition to causing weakened dependent workers – in stages (d) and (e), a state policy of strike restriction also exists, as in Haifa Chemicals South’s strike (2003), and the 147-day long Metrodan public transportation strike (2005) in Beersheba, Negev’s capital – the longest ever in Israel. The transport minister provided licences to alternative public transport operators, and the Supreme Court did not support the strikes at the crucial moment.67 Thus both strikes, which were about the right of workers to unite, were broken by government backing of the employers.

The government also put forward legal proposals to restrict the right to strike, since in Israel, socio-economic rights are not protected by a constitution (since there is no constitution). These rights could be derived vaguely from the Declaration of Independence (1948) and interpretations of the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty 1992 and from Israeli international treaty assignments. Knesset legislation trials of MKs (members of Knesset) Maor and Peretz (1994) were blocked by supporters of a neoliberal economy.68

The third question – ‘what it is legitimate to fight for and the means that it is legitimate to use is defined?’ – distinguished three levels of legitimization in every struggle: ‘First is the “unthought” aspect, “the taken for granted”, the “doxa” . . .; second, there is the “ unthinkable” (explicitly condemned) . . .; and third, there is the claimable, the demandable, the legitimate object of demands’.69

Legitimization of doxa, reality construction and production of routine, ideological hegemonic frames is one of the central functions of mass-communication. Strike (2005) echoes Eisenstein’s Strike (1925 – produced before Battleship Potemkin of 1925), which depicts historic bloodshed of striking workers murdered by the czar’s army, created to legitimize the new communist revolutionary regime. Eisenstein was impressed by Griffith’s Intolerance (1916), regarding employers’ violent reactions towards striking American workers. Later, both Hollywood and the working class preferred to look at the preferred middle-class vision on the screen.

The Israeli new media map, shaped in the 1990s, when the censorship of the ‘Invisible Hand’ rarely represented the deprived, is now transformed into blunt intervention of owners in ‘their’ media, censoring journalistic investigations that are against their interests, and even firing journalists. Thus, in the public debate regarding privately owned media regulations, public Channel 1 – suffering from political intervention, operating for months without elected directors and public assembly, with a temporary executive who, as previously mentioned, censored Strike – was forgotten. Hence, freedom of expression, which is not legislated but legalized through precedents,70 is now at stake owing to capitalistic interests. The only visual evidence of what happened in the factory was Hagai Hazan’s private
pictures, as *Strike* was mainly filmed outside the factory on the fences and gates, and in strikers’ homes. If the factory had been a state public company as before, freedom of expression would not have been restricted.

The new Israeli social documentary film, also born in the 1990s, a discourse analysis of which revealed its ‘capitalistic exotic gaze of the other’, that seldom represented workers, is taking a paradigm shift: *Strike* and a few other TV documentaries do represent workers’ problems.

In *Strike*, workers themselves redefine Bourdieu’s three levels: the struggle’s purpose is not only higher wages, ‘the demandable’ – the employers’ (and state’s) legitimate objective – but also unionization by the ‘new Histadrut’, giving rise to the ‘*unthinkable*’ (which is explicitly condemned). Their ‘strike’ is not only economic, but also political, as they want to change the neoliberal state’s policy, national budget and reinforcement of class order, as they say in the film: ‘Poverty is not about having food or a house to live in’; ‘We don’t want our children to be poor because we can’t provide them with a computer and a good education’. So they struggle against ‘factorization’, the ‘taken for granted’ and the employers’ and state’s ‘doxa’. In accurate, high-register Hebrew, they announce the ‘*unthought*’ of neoliberal discourse, without assistance by intellectuals who are considered to be workers’ ‘spokesmen’, also by Bourdieu. 71

The workers’ representation as ‘talking heads’, the regular mode of interviewing managers, is an important implication. In a seemingly unsophisticated depiction of steady quiet frames, workers are interviewed mainly at their homes and convey a sense of power despite their lost battle. We are introduced to workers’ revolutionary consciousness which detects the entire political-economic neoliberal hegemony as causing their defeat. The directors’ constraints, the impossibility of filming within the private factory, are transformed to the presentation’s advantage: the ideological authority of workers talking as intellectuals is conveyed through their emotional restraint, rational thinking, sharp analysis, wisdom and vision.

As mentioned previously, in the context of the strike and the disputed photographs of PM Ariel Sharon, Cyril Kern and Arie Ganger, the strike broke out in 2003, in the Haifa Chemicals South fertilizer factory. On 12 January 2003, a short news item was published on the online site of *The Telegraph* entitled: ‘I just wanted to help a dear friend’. These were the words of 72-year old South African businessman Cyril Kern, who was alleged to have given £1 million to Ariel Sharon, Israel’s prime minister and close friend for 50 years, to finance his election campaign in violation of Israeli laws that ban foreign political donations.72

On 14 February 2006 ‘Sharon’s Son Sentenced to Jail’ was the headline on Fox News. The news item stated: ‘An Israeli court sentenced the eldest son of ailing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to nine months in prison Tuesday for illegally raising funds for his father’s 1999 political campaign’.73 On 17 August 2012 Gidi Weitz gave the following title to his reportage in the English elite Israeli newspaper *Haaretz.com* (online), ‘State set to close landmark bribe case against former PM Ariel Sharon’: ‘The case, known as the Cyril Kern affair, involved
allegations that Sharon had received millions of dollars of bribes from Kern, a South African businessman, and from the Austrian businessman Martin Schlaff, through Sharon’s sons’. Weitz added that: ‘Prosecutor Noa Tavor subsequently recommended that the case be closed due to lack of evidence, Haaretz has learned. Contributing to the decision was the fact that Ariel Sharon has been in a coma since suffering a massive stroke in January 2006 and is therefore unfit to stand trial’ and Weiz also stated that ‘Former Attorney General Menachem Mazuz said just before he retired in 2010 that he had decided not to close the file because “the suspicions under investigation were so serious and with great public interest”. And towards the end of the reportage, after he cited other affairs involving the Sharon family which were also examined during the investigation, Weitz wrote that there were ‘allegations of huge profits made by Gilad Sharon on property deals in Canada along with Israeli businessman Arie Genger’, who bought Haifa Chemicals South in 1985 cheaply with the assistance of his friend Minister Ariel Sharon, as mentioned previously.  

The huge social protests 2011 deliberately broke out on 14 July – the symbolic date of Bastille Day – on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. In September 2011, activists invaded an old empty house on this boulevard, cleaned it, and made it their cultural centre and a headquarters they called the ‘People’s House’, where many lectures, events, meetings and screenings, radio, music, art performances etc. were organized. The owner welcomed the protesters’ activities, because he was waiting for the building renovations’ documents approval. For instance, Danny the Red – Daniel Marc Cohn-Bendit – who was the leader of the students’ protests of May 1968 in France, visited the ‘People’s House’ in September 2011, lecturing and conversing with the activists.

In 2012, a docu-drama series entitled Strike, a five-episode mini-series, and its second season Strike – The Day After, a three-episode mini-series, created by Rani Blair and screened by Yes Drama – appeared on their producers’ satellite channel Yes. The original documentary Strike was screened at the ‘People’s House’ – ‘the people’s cinema’ – at 69 Rothschild Street Tel Aviv, with another four documentaries.

Beit Ha’am Cinema, the people’s cinema, has a list of five ‘films to see before you vote’ – Israeli documentaries made in recent years, reflecting the issues – and will be screening them at 69 Rothschild Street, from 17–21 January 2013. Screenings at the cinema are free and open to the public, the films will be shown at 20:30, followed by a discussion with the filmmakers.

Three of the films were against the occupation and two against the political economy of Israel. Strike (Assaf Sudri and Amir Tausinger, 2005); To See if I’m Smiling (Tamar Yarom, 2007); The Law in These Parts (Ra’anan Alexandrowicz, 2011); Five Broken Cameras (Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2012); and Awakening – Becoming Sober (2011–13). The project creators were Tali Shemesh and Asaf Sudri; and the directors were Asaf Sudri et al.. The farewell party took place on 14 February 2013, as the building should be evacuated by the activists and underwent preservation and renovations.
‘The Shakshuka System’: the oligarchy phase of neoliberal hegemony in Israel

The Shakshuka System (2008) is a documentary created by investigative journalist Mickey Rosenthal and director Ilan Abudi. The focus of the investigation is the Ofer family, one of the 10 families controlling Israel’s economy.78

Money and power always walk hand in hand. All over the world, rulers and capitalists keep a share of the state fortunes for themselves. The only question is – how much is left for us? In the 1970s, less than 10% of Israel’s capital was owned by those defined as comprising the ultra-high net worth of society. Today, 40% of state capital is owned by 20 families, and this is becoming increasingly more concentrated.

These opening sentences of the documentary are written in white on a black background, in July 2005, the initial date of the documentary. The camera is rolling at Rosenthal’s office: newspaper cuttings cover the notice boards, many thick files line the shelves, and Mickey sits at his ordinary desk, reading the computer screen.

‘A short while ago I began to work with Mickey and he told me that if I really wanted to understand this state I should collaborate with him in making a film about the Ofer brothers. Where do you want to start?’ asks Abudi. ‘I see on the internet that Sammy Ofer donated $20 million to the Tel-Aviv Museum.’ They discuss the donation at Mickey’s office, and their voices are heard along with edited black frames on screen: ‘Channel 10 didn’t want the film’; ‘The Lev cinema chain was afraid to get involved with the film’; ‘The New Israeli Foundation for Cinema & TV didn’t want to support the film’; ‘The Marc Rich Foundation for Education, Culture and Welfare announced they would support the film but then backed out’. Next is an animated ‘Monopoly’ game board (in which the game rules show how so many monopolies become bankrupt, with only a few becoming extraordinarily wealthy). Four dolls stand at the start of the game: two yellow dolls representing Sammy Ofer and his son Idan, a blue-and-white State-of-Israel doll (the colours of its flag), and a green camera. Then a comparison is presented of the biographies of the Ofer family and the Rosenthal family.79

Abudi narrates:

In 1969 the Israeli market is too weak for the Ofer’s shipping company, so they started expanding to global businesses. The big money also attracts the Israeli Minister of Finance, Pinchas Sapir, of the Labour Party, and he starts collecting dozens of companies, grouping state assets, providing state grants and tax reductions, and sells the ‘Israel Corporation’ to Shaul Eisenberg, a Jewish millionaire. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Mickey, the young naïve war veteran wants to improve the world by becoming a journalist. In 1999 Eisenberg dies and ‘in 24 hours, we decided and I’m sure, not just sure, I know – based on what we learned over the years – that we had won a great deal’, said Sammy Ofer on Israeli TV.

Abudi continues, before closing the scene:

They bought hundreds of companies from the State of Israel [he lists few companies and concessions] at the ridiculous price of $330 million […] Eight years after they bought the Israel Corporation, the company’s estimated worth was $8 billion. None of this could have happened without the support of their loyal partner, the State of Israel.
Abudi continues narrating:

In 2002 the state decides to privatize Zim, the national shipping company, and offer its shares to buyers. But because the controlling interests are owned by the Israel Corporation, in practice, the future buyer would be holding minority shares, hence the state’s offer to sell its share for only $143 million’.

Quotes appear on the screen: ‘The containers of Zim worth $260 million’; ‘Sources in the sector estimate the base value of Zim to be about $3 billion’. Passionate interviewees, MK Avshalom Vilan of Meretz (left-wing party) and member of the Knesset Economy Committee at the time, and Shmuel Slavin, former director-general of the Ministry of Finance, are on screen heatedly discussing the price; Abudi continues: ‘The State made every effort to exclude potential buyers [yellow marked parts of the State Comptroller’s report on the privatization of Zim appear on the screen]. Its efforts were successful and the Israel Corporation was the only buyer’. Photo-ops then appear of Netanyahu shaking hands with the Ofer negotiators. ‘The state’s share was sold to the Ofer family for $115 million, $28 million less than the Ministry of Finance demanded.’

‘The main negotiator of the Ofer family in the Zim deal was Ram Caspi, one of the sharpest and most expensive lawyers in Israel’, says Abudi, while listing his ‘friends’ and clients in the business and political elite, ‘such as Shimon Peres who was represented by Caspi pro bono’. Caspi is shown describing to Rosenthal how the ‘system’ works, using ‘Shakshuka’ as the metaphor. Caspi suggested to the state’s representatives that the Zim price would be settled at the average of all prices offered during the negotiation: ‘like the famous egg-and-tomato dish, mix all the components together and fry them’, he says to Rosenthal, while moving his hands in circles as if he is stirring the Shakshuka in the pan.

This way Caspi uses a comical folkloristic metaphor while obscuring the modes in which the state actively gives preferential treatment to its oligarchs. This is a prime example of strict intentional regulation by the state, while presenting it as ‘deregulation’: the state used euphemized discourse – i.e. privatization, and although Shakshuka is a slang word, it covers up the real benefits deliberately given as gifts to ‘friends’ of the politicians. The Ofer family is only one example of the neoliberal political-economic procedures by means of which the State of Israel executes its policy of market ‘deregulation’, in order to ‘free the economy’ of its ‘constraints’, according to Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman and other advocates of neoliberalism. Indeed, selling Zim and the refineries illustrates the analysis of David Harvey and Nick Couldry that states deliberately regulate ‘the market’ in order to enforce neoliberal policy. Declarations of ‘deregulation policy’ are direct or euphemized false discourse enabling the state to gain public legitimization.

The documentary creators have struggled and made supreme efforts to decipher the complex connections between the state and the oligarchs, although professional economists admit that the corporations’ ‘interrelations are complex and we find it difficult to understand the connections between them [...] there is a problem in market concentration which causes a threat to democracy’, as
Constantine Kosenco, a researcher at the Bank of Israel, commented during a public lecture on 19 July 2010, while presenting new research from the bank here are few more quotes from his lecture:

The Israeli economy is one of the most concentrated in the Western world […]. The situation in Israel resembles the Asian markets. […] 10 Israeli families gained control of nearly 30% of the market. The problem is also sectorial: the gigantic groups hold 50% of the financial market and 70% of services and trade in the Israeli market […]. In this research we proved that the market is pyramidal. When analysing data, it was revealed that 80% of the companies in the giant business groups are in a pyramid structure. When analysing the market share of the groups, we discovered that 22 business groups control 50% of the market […]. We discussed the question if the companies are too big or too complex to collapse. The answer is that they are on their way there, […] and in some phase they will reach a condition in which we should save them […] the most common is a vertical control business group, structured as a pyramid control. [This structure] enables these groups to take excessive risks and roll them on the back of the public. Thus it is dangerous to macro-economic and finance stability of the market.86

The documentary shows how journalistic investigating reportages are censored before being published in Israeli media, by key persons who act according to the interests of the Ofer family (or other oligarchs). Rafi Ginat, Yediot Aharonot editor-in-chief, tried to censor an investigative reportage by Nir Bachar, the editor of the weekend magazine Shiva Yamim (Seven Days), which, for the first time, exposed suspicions that Israel Electric Corporation Chairman Eli Landau was trying to bias a tender in favour of the Ofers. During Bachar’s interview in the documentary, he claimed that Ginat was accusing him of trying to prevent Landau’s appointment as CEO of public Channel 1, and that Ginat was also criticizing the reportage as a ‘shit’ investigation, aimed at representing Landau as corrupt at any cost. The reportage was published and led to a police investigation on 13 November 2005. Bachar was dismissed by Ginat shortly afterwards.87

Yoav Yitzhak, an independent journalist, talks on screen about this routine economic censorship, in which journalists are prevented from investigating or publishing news that can harm the interests of the media owners, their ‘friends’ or their business partners. He said that this economic censorship is very common when the media is just a plain business. He argued that every capitalist has to own a media channel in order to construct his public image aimed at influencing public opinion and fostering his business. His wording is similar to definition of economic censorship presented by Bourdieu, Klein, Limor and Nossek.88

Rosenthal began his documentary in May 2005, and at the end of that year, on 21 December 2005, Globes (Israel business news, in print and online) and Haaretz published an item about the economic censorship of an investigative TV programme. The title of the report by Anat Bien on Globes was: ‘Keshet pulls TV programme on Israir Kennedy Airport near-miss’. Subtitle: ‘Update: The cancellation of Ilana Dayan’s investigative programme on July’s incident followed a threat of legal action by Israir’. The item continues:
The cancelled programme deals with the near-miss incident involving an Israir aircraft at New York’s Kennedy Airport in July this year. The cancellation decision followed a letter from Israir’s lawyer to Channel 2 franchisee Keshet, which broadcasts Ilana Dayan’s programme. In his letter, the lawyer asks why Keshet was in such a hurry to broadcast the programme at this time, when Minister of Tourism Abraham Hirchson is due to decide in the next few days on the matter of a second designated carrier on the Tel Aviv–New York route. Israir has been lobbying hard to obtain designated carrier status on this route, on which it currently operates charter flights, against the opposition of El Al Israel Airlines. The letter claims that the programme contains one-sided, biased information liable to hurt Israir, and thus expose Keshet to lawsuits. The same law firm also represents the IDB group, whose chairman, Nochi Dankner, controls Israir.

This economic censorship, named ‘cancellation’, was implemented by Muzi Wertheim, the owner of Keshet, who also owns Coca-Cola Israel. In Yedioth Aharonot, he wrote (25 December 2005): ‘We were mistaken in bringing Uvda [the TV programme Fact] to Keshet’. His attitude was that there is no need for investigative programmes on Keshet. However, the general assembly of the Second Authority (the regulator) did not support the freedom of expression, and did not intervene in the case. Public outrage ensued, following the publication of Wertheim’s letter: four days later Wertheim took back his words, and gave Avi Nir, CEO of Keshet, his full agreement to air the Dayan’s investigative programme.89

On 27 December 2005, the Haaretz editorial declared, ‘Channel 2 is Ours’ (title), followed by the opening sentences:

Not long has passed since Keshet promised to broadcast investigative programmes on Channel 2, and to give the public what a media company should for the franchise it got from the public. In the meantime, Keshet and Reshet [franchise held by the Ofers] were given the franchise for 10 years, and now Muzi Wertheim is less willing to broadcast investigative programmes. Now it’s better to keep good relationships with Nochi Dankner, the owner of Israir and other business groups. Wertheim sells Coca-Cola and Dankner buys Coca-Cola for the supermarket chains he owns and also spends millions on advertisements on Channel 2.90

Mickey Rosenthal, the investigative journalist, is the protagonist of the documentary, and Ilan Abudi, the director, talks to him, narrating the facts as a voice-over, invisible on screen. Rosenthal, in his fifties, is wearing ordinary simple clothing, a black short-sleeved T-shirt, jeans or plain black trousers, talks politely but in very simple register, aiming deliberately at the hearts and minds of ordinary people. He is following the example of Michael Moore, not only attempting to be ‘the working class hero’, 91 through his ordinary appearance, but also by constantly chasing after his protagonists, the Ofer family, their collaborators in government and their ‘friends’ in politics and business. Rosenthal is blocked by security guards, fences, gates and closed doors, the same way as Moore was blocked, for instance, by the guards and secretaries of Roger Smith, the CEO of General Motors, in Roger & Me (1989). In Bowling for Columbine (2002) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) Moore was pursuing the president, disappearing politicians, movie stars, etc.; chasing after any sort of elite had become one of the docu-activist’s conventions, a live show for the excluded
audiences to see their undemocratic leaders, fortified in their castles and armed with their privileges: spokesmen, guards, secretaries, fences and gates.

The similarity to Moore’s mode of inquiry and representation is significant too in the deep and intense journalistic investigation displayed on The Shakshuka System screen: numerous documents, lengthy business reports, graphs and data charts, thoroughly examined by Rosenthal, are shown to the viewers highlighted with yellow markers or bold sentences in the papers, in addition to many newspapers titles, TV interviews and news, sometimes wrapped with humour and irony, and also with a serious tone. All these means are invested in order to colour and revive the ‘dry’ statistical numbers in the lengthy charts, names and facts, for their viewers – a network of data dug up during times of hardship and effort. Some documents are open, such as stock exchange announcements, and some are leaks deliberately revealed by civil servants with high moral integrity in corrupt governments, and by corporate sources who deliberately expose hidden business records. While a smear campaign was launched against Michael Moore, and Fahrenheit 9/11 underwent economic censorship when it was released, later making $113 million, Rosenthal experienced hardships for four years. While the documentary was being shot, the Ofer family filed the first lawsuit against him, and consequently no cultural fund or company was willing to support him or finance his documentary, and the TV channel Yes, which was supposed to show the film, refused to do so. In 2005, at the time the documentary began, Mickey Rosenthal created Bulldozer, an investigative programme in documentary activist style, for Keshet, following Michael Moore’s programmes on US television. Later, he was dismissed from Keshet, then owned by Wertheim (mentioned previously regarding attempts to censor Fact), when the Ofer family became the main owner of the TV Channel 2 Reshet franchise. Rosenthal took out loans and went into debt trying to finance the film, risking his family’s future but never giving up. The film finally underwent total economic censorship: no one would dare screen the documentary. The premiere took place at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, a public institute, on 1 September 2008, attended by many friends, directors, journalists and intellectuals, after which Rosenthal went on a lecture tour, screening the documentary throughout the country in public institutes, as Doron Tsabari did with King of the Ratings, and Assaf Sudri and Amir Tausinger with Strike, which is how radical documentaries are distributed.

The second lawsuit against Rosenthal was for 3.5 million shekels (about $1 million). Subsequently, a group of friends initiated a list of willing ordinary people as donors via the internet: each of the people who signed up committed to donate no more than 2,300 shekels (about $660), thus protecting Rosenthal from losing his case. About a year later, the Ofer family withdrew their suit with the arbitration of two reputable journalists: Motti Kirshenbaum, a former general director of public TV Channel 1, and Yaron London, a respectable author, documentarist, TV star and anchorman. Ofer declared in the agreement that the ‘massive public criticism against both the lawsuit and the vast amount of money, created the wrong impression of Mickey Rosenthal’s persecution and also
damaged the freedom of the press – a public consequence that I never meant and that is totally contrary to my attitude that respects freedom of the press’. 95

The Shakshuka System was screened on 28 July 2009 on public TV Channel 1, followed by the screening of the Ofer family’s documentary film, which cost half a million shekels and opposes The Shakshuka System. The screening of the two documentaries sparked off a furious debate on TV between Rosenthal and the former MK Elie Goldsmith, the Ofer representative, who is now a vice-president of Israel Corporation. 96

As mentioned earlier, The ‘Shakshuka System’ begins with the story of the Ofer’s donation to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and was entwined with it. Rosenthal is seen walking in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art square, telling Abudi: ‘Don’t you understand that it is not a donation? They are donating half a wing, and now the museum bears their name! Unbelievable – this man gets so much money from the state and now he also wants honour, he will even become the patron of culture!’ As a result of the public outrage of many distinguished families who were the museum’s founders, and their threat to withdraw their collections, a petition (initiated through the internet) published in the Haaretz daily newspaper by Israeli artists protesting against the donation, and an unauthorized public campaign by anonymous protestors, putting up posters all over the city denigrating Ofer, Sammy Ofer (224 on Forbes.com) eventually withdrew his donation, transferring it instead to the National Maritime Museum in the UK. 97 This donation of £20 million earned him an honorary KBE (Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth II. 98


A tax reform taking shape stands to greatly benefit Zim, the shipping company belonging to the Ofer family. The finance and transportation ministries are sponsoring the bill, which would significantly reduce the tax burden on maritime shipping companies – such as Zim Integrated Shipping Services. . . . Experts say Zim expects to record profits for tax purposes over the next few years, and therefore is working to advance the legislation, which would give it significant tax benefits.

Elections were held on 22 January 2013. The election results gave PM Netanyahu a mandate to form a coalition government as the largest party (after uniting with Israel Beitenu – a right-wing party that received about a quarter of the votes) although his party – the Likud – was weakened. Two of the young leading activists in the social protests – Ms Stav Shafir and Mr Itzik Shmoly, former head of the national Union of the Students Association – were elected as members of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) in the Labour party that won about 12% of the votes. Mickey Rosenthal, video-activist journalist and director of the censored documentary The Shakshuka System, was also elected as a Labour MK. The Labour party head, MK Shelly Yachimovich, who was the leader of the Knesset opposition, is a former journalist who worked in radio, TV and the printed media. The leader of the ‘There is a Future’ party, MK Yair Lapid, the ‘election surprise’
which won about 20% of the Knesset seats, succeeded in his negotiations with Netanyahu about their mutual coalition government, in which he was appointed by PM Netanyahu to be the treasury coalition minister. Minister Lapid was also a journalist in the print media, an anchorman and interviewer on TV, a TV and film producer and actor, an author and a prominent celebrity.

These new, famous personages who have become MKs – protest leaders, journalists and media professionals – seem to have accumulated their appeal and charisma through the media, and know how to use the media in the political field; 15 MKs in the new Knesset formerly worked in the media. The new MKs constitute about half of the Knesset: 67 new members out of 120, who were elected to the new Knesset – a very high percentage in comparison to previous elections in which about one-third of the Knesset members were new. Maybe this phenomenon reflects the desire of the Israeli public for total social and political change.

The years 2011–12 were significant for the public consciousness and their improved understanding of the ways by which the neoliberal political economy apparatuses are acting to exclude and deprive the 99% and advance the wealth of the 1%. This new consciousness gave power to the will of the citizens, and to their struggles for better quality of life and equality. Many polls had revealed that most of the Israeli public support welfare state policies. Thus, for instance, the Business Concentration Law passed by the Knesset on 9 December 2013 aims to strengthen competition and curtail the excessive clout of a relatively small number of business groups over the Israeli economy.

Some of the impacts of this law resulted in the Nohi Dankner court verdict as reported by Haaretz.com:

Tycoon loses control of IDB, Israel’s biggest holding group. Bank Leumi: We will treat Dankner like any other borrower. A decade after acquiring the biggest conglomerate in Israel, Israeli businessman Dankner lost control of the IDB group on Tuesday. Tel Aviv District Court Judge Eitan Orenstein approved a bailout plan devised by Moti Ben-Moshe and Eduardo Elsztain, who were, until some weeks ago, unknown in Israeli business circles.

Despite difficulties in the bailout, investors on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange cheered the decision. ‘Still, Orenstein said IDB’s creditors stood to lose about 30% of their investment.’

About a year later, ‘Indictment filed against Dankner for securities fraud. Dankner charged with working to inflate price of IDB stock during group’s IPO by using connections in banking sector to fund secret purchase of stock at low price, thus pushing up prices, while covering losses’.

And in addition, the Ofer brothers were losing control of ZIM Integrated Shipping Services: ‘Zim creditors nearing biggest “haircut” in Israeli history. Israel Corporation will forgo debt of 1.5 billion shekels, give up control of the shipping company.’

These events demonstrate the fact that Israeli politicians were more attentive to their voters after the social protests of 2011–12, and were more willing to ‘repair’ the faults of the conservative neoliberal financial system in favour of
liberal classic capitalism – thus enforcing another kind of capitalist ideology – and deliberately not advancing welfare state policies. However, whereas most of the Israeli neoliberal political-economic domains were undergoing a few moderate common analyses that resulted in proposals for ‘reforms’ by PM Netanyahu’s government and its appointed committees, one domain was concealed: the media. It should be emphasized here that throughout the social protests of 2011–12, many demands were vehemently expressed and included in the ‘Alternative Committee’ of the protestors; yet despite the fact that many protest leaders were media professionals, none of the demands related to the media. Thus, Netanyahu appointed himself minister in charge of the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA – in charge of public TV and radio) for a few years during the 32nd Government of Israel (31 March 2009–18 March 2013), while Moshe Kahlon was the minister of communication. While Kahlon’s popularity was increased by him taking measures to regulate the mobile phone companies, thus reducing the huge cost of cellular services, Netanyahu ensured the appointments of his loyal subjects in the public media. For instance, his former media consultant was appointed as CEO of the IBA, and many important professional journalists were fired. Then, in the 33rd Government (18 March 2013 onwards), Netanyahu appointed his loyal ally Gilad Erdan as minister of communication. In July 2014, Erdan is promoting a new ‘reform’ in the public authority: the closure of public TV Channel 1, and the dismissal of all the journalists and professionals. Reportage on these processes by an anonymous journalist who had worked for many years for the IBA was published in the elite newspaper Haaretz. In addition, during these years, Netanyahu loyal friend Sheldon Adelson, a donor of the conservative republicans in the USA, invested in the newspaper Israel Today (Hebrew), which is distributed free, and is Netanyahu’s mouthpiece. Other media channels are also owned by Israeli tycoons. Thus, it is only Haaretz and its financial newspaper The Marker, and a few journalists in various media, and bloggers, who are still practising professional and ethical journalism, somehow managing to keep the democratic public sphere alive.

Conclusions

Analysis of these test cases, the documentaries and investigative programme, which underwent economic censorship in the Israeli media, exposed the apparatuses by which the neoliberal political economy governs state and society; these hidden complex interests and interrelationships which bind the state, its elected political elite and high-ranking civil servants to the Israeli and international oligarchs, and the maintenance, reproduction and methods of these multilayered networks, which continue to preserve the status quo, became apparent. This multifaceted composite neoliberal hegemony challenges democracy, since it is solid, very strong and hidden: it was established over three decades and came to be taken for granted. It has been revealed how the
Israeli media is a key apparatus intertwined deep in the political-economic networks, by the oligarchs’ ownership of the mainstream media, and their control of large portions of the journalistic field, which facilitate and secure the media’s amplification of neoliberal hegemony, by constructing it as a dominant culture, whilst excluding the most resistant voices by means of invisible economic censorship.

Study of these economically censored ‘visible’ test cases reveals domains of neoliberal order ‘behind the scenes’, while at the same time presenting modes of resistance, which ‘should’ be censored, eradicated and excluded in order to maintain and reproduce neoliberal hegemony in Israel. Each case revealed another occupation of neoliberalism: the legitimization discourse of the privatized media and the modes of construction of a dominant neoliberal culture while manipulating audiences; the hidden misery, the exploitation and oppression of common citizens, especially workers and their social suffering, the corrupt political-economic interrelationships between industrial and financial corporations and the privatized media ownerships controlling vast crucial shares of the Israeli economy and the media (which also alarms the public media), and the dangerous dependence of the governmental authorities on local and foreign oligarchs.

As mentioned earlier, only a few Israeli documentarists, some of whose films were censored and are analysed as test cases in this study, struggled to decipher the complex dangerous hidden neoliberal hegemony. These documentarists have been following Michael Moore since the mid-1990s and especially in the 2000s, adopting his mode of inquiry and presentation: docu-activism (short name for documentary activism which is used in the Israeli field) or guerrilla documentary. This mode of resistance originates from a relatively autonomous field of production: the documentary field. Studies of Israeli documentary and art fields by the author, following Bourdieu’s ‘Distinction’ and ‘The Rules of Art’, show that in parts of the documentary field the rules of modern art field so far prevail: The ‘Loser Wins’ (as Bourdieu first theorized in ‘Distinction) is the unique principle of these guerrilla documentarists. Since the documentary market in Israel is very small, the documentarists cannot depend on handsome profits such as those of Michael Moore, and Israeli documentaries about neoliberalism do not have many prospects in the international media market, although political documentaries dealing with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict enjoy a favourable reception, receive awards and are purchased by foreign media companies. In addition, production time for Israeli documentaries is long. The documentarists finance it with some relatively autonomous public funds which still exist, they work for their living as lecturers, journalists, directors of other TV films, series and programmes whilst undertaking production of their guerrilla documentaries. They and their families are at economic risk, being dismissed and persecuted by the oligarchs and their collaborators in lawsuits and public campaigns. Hence they ‘lose’ money, jobs and efforts but they ‘win’ the struggle and high levels of symbolic capital.
It should be stressed, however, that despite the economic censorship in mainstream media, and the oligarchs’ attempts to abolish these films in other ways revealed in this study, an alternative community of resistance is taking hold in Israel. The support of the community backing the documentarists is conducted through public assemblies, documentary screenings, lectures, news, petitions, demonstrations, campaigns, etc., in order to protect public interests. This community is composed of journalists, directors, artists, intellectuals, key persons in public institutes, including the media, cultural funds and academia, politicians, political and social activists, youth movements, which all support these new voices. The classic distribution mode of documentaries since the 1970s in the USA and elsewhere for consciousness-raising and empowerment of the activists was conducted in these cases too. Many organizations of human rights, feminists, unions, as well as political and environmental civic organizations screened the documentaries for their activists, accompanied by the creators’ lectures, travelling through Israel’s social and geographic peripheries. This alternative supportive and distribution network depends on personal ties (similar to the government–oligarchs–business–media bonds), but it increasingly uses the internet for signing petitions, raising money and support, spreading news and announcements, and the distribution of censored documentaries through the web.

Support is also provided by the mainstream media: the elite newspaper Haaretz and its business newspaper The Marker, in print for subscribers and free online, are changing their classic liberal agenda and editorial line into a struggle against neoliberalism, as was also demonstrated by this study (for instance the Haaretz editorial criticized the Wertheim and Dankner collaboration in the economic censorship of the Fact investigative programme). Haaretz and The Marker advance news, reportage, investigations, opinions criticizing the conglomerates of the oligarchs controlling Israel’s natural resources: gas, electricity, minerals, etc., and against the market concentration of gigantic industrial and finance conglomerates, and economic-political corruption. Haaretz is free do so because it is relatively autonomous, being a strictly media corporation owned by a private family since the 1930s, who are cultural donors, not owning businesses or industrial corporations like the other Israeli media do.

While public opinion begins to focus on Israeli neoliberal political-economic internal affairs (known publicly as corruption and distrust of citizens in the state) and not only on national Israeli–Arab conflicts, a new class is emerging, which can be called ‘the educated proletariat’, or ‘precariate’ (precarious proletariat). These are graduates of Israel’s extended higher education system, many being higher education’s first generation, ‘inheritors’ of working-class parents. These young workers in temporary technological and economic service positions without security or a future career, are class-unconscious, eager to succeed, obediently accepting the capitalistic doxa, paradoxically supporting the neoliberal order.

However it should be remembered that the conservative neoliberal political economy stands upon two central foundations: the conservative neoliberal
economy and the militaristic political economy of promoting wars and armed conflicts. These two domains are being regulated economically and politically only for its benefactors – the 1%, and even less, of the citizens; the 1% forcibly occupies the neoliberal conservative dominance of the 99% of the citizens by symbolic and real violence. The cultural ‘dominance’ of the ‘paranoid style’ is produced by the popular ‘culture industry’ whose discourse apparatuses operate within Israel and the USA, merging and blending into reality itself, and constructing a vicious cycle which is becoming analogous to a reality of fear, suspicion and increased militarization combined with growing social injustice. This also causes Israeli democracy to deteriorate into ‘illiberal democracy’ (ill-democracy, or not liberal democracy), as suggested by Horwitz’s analysis of the USA democracy which turned out to be ‘illiberal democracy’.108

Guerrilla documentaries like *King of the Ratings*, *Strike*, *The Shakshuka System* and others demonstrate media manipulation, real violence and exploitation of workers, as well as hidden power and capitalist interests of oligarchs and their collaborators – the state robbers. Because they promote comprehension of the vast neoliberal hegemony, these documentaries should become ongoing learning platforms in academe, to nurture students’ political-economic and class consciousness, and to allow them to understand and act within a very complicated power structure in a struggle for change.

Notes on contributor

Miri (Miriam) Gal-Ezer is Lecturer in the Communication Department, Kinneret College, on the Sea of Galilee, Israel.

Notes

14. Ibid.
17. Danni Gutwein, “Prof. Danni Gutwen: To Nationalize Israel Chemicals, the Cellular Companies and Google and to Take the Gas from Tshuva” [in Hebrew], *The Marker*, April 15, 2010.
23. Ibid. 163.
24. Yosef Halachmi, *No Matter What – Studies in the History of the Jewish Film in Israel* (Jerusalem: Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, 1994). It is not known to the author whether Herzl watched the Lumière Brothers’ documentaries,
particularly those from the Holy Land that were screened throughout Europe and Paris where he lived and worked as a journalist. However, in 1900 Herzl did send a cinematic camera to Eretz Israel but this initiative failed; Moshe Zimmerman, *Signs of Movies: History of Israeli Cinema in the Years 1896–1948* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001).


30. Ibid.


32. Ben-Tovim, “Dudu Topaz.”


34. The ‘Baba Sali’, Rabbi Israel Abuhasera, was the scion of a leading rabbinical family in Morocco. The Baba Sali (Baba is a nickname that means ‘Papa’ – Sali is short for Israel), came to live in Israel at the age of 70, and people would gather to receive his blessing, especially for healing. Since his death, the sacred tomb has been attracting some 600,000 visitors annually, most of them Israelis of North African Jewish descent. Israel’s official tourism site: [http://www.tourism.gov.il/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Jewish+Themes/Jewish_Sites/Baba+Sali+jew.htm](http://www.tourism.gov.il/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Jewish+Themes/Jewish_Sites/Baba+Sali+jew.htm) (accessed September 5, 2014).

35. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, initiated in the 1950s a campaign to change the ‘Diaspora’ names to new Hebrew Israeli surnames. Even today, Israeli delegates and ambassadors are required to have new Israeli surnames.

36. ‘North Tel-Avivians’ are considered to be upper class, educated, of Ashkenazi descent, and the apartments in North Tel Aviv are the most expensive in Israel for purchase or rent.

37. ‘The Kings of Israel Square’, in front of Tel Aviv’s modern iconic municipal building, is in the heart of the city. This square is the main location in Israel for mass public events, such as election rallies, public demonstrations against government policy, or support assemblies, public concerts during holidays, etc. The biggest ever demonstration in the square was the ‘400,000 Protest’ on 25 September 1982 demanding a national committee to investigate the massacre in Sabra and Shatila, Beirut (personal attendance). After a huge public assembly in this square, in support of the peace process on 4 November 1995, while stepping down the side stairs Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing religious fanatic, and the name of the square was changed in his memory to ‘Rabin Square’.

38. Haim Yavin is a Israeli national symbol known as ‘Mr. Television’ (Hebrew: *Mar Televisia*), in the era when the TV broadcast was the ‘Tribe Bonfire’. He was the
legendary anchorman of the Israeli Public Broadcasting Channel 1, from its very first days of establishment (1968) until his retirement (2008). During the 1977 elections, Yavin made a short historical statement on TV Public Channel 1 (the only channel at the time): ‘Gvirotai Verabotai, Mahapach!’ (Ladies and Gentlemen: revolution, or dramatic change, turnover!). Seventy years of the Israeli labour movement were coming to an end when Menachem Begin (1913–92), leader of the right-wing nationalist party Likud (unification), won the elections by gathering the Mizrahim (‘Eastern’ Jews) electorate with his classical liberal bourgeoisie and right-wing nationalist voters of Ashkenazi descent (Jews who immigrated to Israel from Europe).

43. Hacohen in Zvi Efrat, “The Israeli Project”: Building and Architecture 1948–1973, 2 vols. [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, Exhibition Catalogue, the Tel-Aviv Museum of Art, 2004). Fifteen ‘Development Towns’ were established between 1949 and 1951, and till the end of the 1950’s about fifteen more. Thus, through the first decade of the state 1948–1958, most of the development towns were founded, about 30, to provide housing of about 1.2 million immigrants, mostly Holocaust survivors and arrivals from Muslim states.
44. The unveiling of the ‘real’ process of the production, the exposure of ‘behind the scenes’ cynicism and arrogance which is regularly edited as a more ‘clean’ discourse without the prominent humiliating scenes, seems to be one of the reasons for censoring this documentary.
45. ‘The New Israeli Media Map’ was forming in the 1990s, the decade in which the public TV Channel 1 (modelled after the BBC and founded in 1968) lost its singularity while the Israeli Second Authority Law was legislated for regulation and control of commercial media (1990); next, TV Channel 2 was created as a franchised commercial TV station (1993), followed by new regional franchised radio stations (1995), and then TV Channel 10 (2002). The Council for Cable TV and Satellite Broadcasting is a public council established under the Telecommunications Law (1982). Its fundamental work is to regulate and control the Satellite TV broadcasts (1999) and cable TV broadcast (2003), which are funded by subscriber: http://www.rashut2.org.il/main.asp; http://www.moc.gov.il/130-en/MOC.aspx (accessed December 13, 2010). This ‘New Media Map’ was established during a decade of political and economic turmoil. The Oslo agreements between Israeli PM Rabin and PLO chairman Arafat were signed on 13 September 1993 on the White House lawn. The peace agreement with Jordan was signed in 1994. Throughout the three years after the signing of the Oslo agreement, numerous terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens occurred, many of them by suicide bombers opposing the peace agreements. In the midst of this bloodshed Rabin was assassinated.
47. Shimon Peres became prime minister after Rabin’s assassination in November 1995 until May 1996, when he was defeated by Likud’s Benjamin Netanyahu.

48. Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Masada, one of the more nationalistic mythic symbols of the State of Israel, is the site where combat soldiers of elite units swear on the bible to be faithful to the State of Israel. Masada presents the desperate struggle of the Jewish rebels against the Romans in 66-73 AD who decided collectively to commit suicide when they realized they were going to be defeated. Masada is a symbol of Jewish heroism constructed by the Zionist and Israeli culture, the education system, the army, archaeological research and more, but this symbol is in deep dispute: rabbinic literature was against this act of collective suicide, and researchers such as Ben-Yehuda claim that although the rebellion was a historic and political failure, it was constructed to be a Zionist myth. Masada is a national heritage site, and does not function generally as a wedding site.

49. Personal interview with Doron Tsabari, November 22, 2010.


51. Barnouw, Documentarv.


55. Hanna Kim, “When Pinto Wanted to Establish a Union Committee” [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, June 24, 2003. The dismissed Haifa Chemicals South Union Committee were travelling with the directors Tausinger and Sudri and holding lectures. The author attended the *Strike* screening and the directors and workers lectures at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, on 7 October 2005.

56. Ganger and Kern connections to Ariel Sharon were subject to public debate and legal investigations in Israel, and discussed later in this paper.

57. Personal interview with Amir Tausinger, November 11, 2005.


60. Grinberg, “Socio-Political Economy.”

61. Kim, “When Pinto Wanted to Establish a Union Committee.”


63. ‘In a nutshell, there are two Israels’, said Dan Ben-David, executive director of the Taub Centre for Social Policy Studies in Jerusalem. Taub’s research has found a growing mass of Israelis unequipped to work in its high-tech-oriented economy. ‘Not only is it huge, but its share of the total is growing’, Ben-David said. One in every three children lives in poverty in Israel, which joined the OECD, generally
made up of the world’s wealthiest states, in 2010. A year later, about 800,000 Israelis took to the streets to protest at the lack of affordable housing and high living costs. (It seems that the protestors numbered about a million people, a relatively high percentage of about 8 million Israeli citizens.) Jonathan Ferziger and David Wainer, “Startup Israel Suffering Most OECD Poverty as Poor Surge,” Bloomberg, April 17, 2014, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-16/startup-israel-suffering-most-oecd-poverty-as-poor-surge.html

64. Adrian Filut, “Israel is Already in Second Place after the US in Gross Income Inequality,” Globes English, July 2, 2014.
66. ibid.
70. Limor and Nossek, “Fifty Years in a ‘Marriage of Convenience’.”
73. “Sharon’s Son Sentenced to Jail,” Fox News, February 14, 2006, Omri Sharon pleaded guilty in November to falsifying corporate documents, perjury and violating party funding laws. Under a plea deal, prosecutors dropped charges of fraud and breach of trust but demanded imprisonment on the other counts. Prosecutors claimed Sharon received more than $1.3 million from groups in Israel and overseas, an amount far exceeding legal limits. Ariel Sharon was not implicated in any wrongdoing. Omri Sharon resigned his parliamentary seat in January in anticipation of the sentencing. His activities were meant to conceal illegal contributions during the 1999 campaign, when his father won the chairmanship of the Likud party, ultimately becoming its successful candidate for prime minister in the 2001 national elections: http://www.foxnews.com/story/2006/02/14/sharon-son-sentenced-to-jail/
74. Gidi Weitz: “State Set to Close Landmark Bribe Case against Former PM Ariel Sharon,” Haaretz.com, August 17, 2012: ‘The businessman at the centre of a corruption scandal that could bring down the Israeli government is a British fashion multi-millionaire who attended glittering parties with Diana, Princess of Wales, the Prince of Wales, the Princess Royal and Margaret Thatcher. Cyril Kern, 72, is alleged to have given £1 million to Ariel Sharon, Israel’s prime minister and a close friend for 50 years, to finance his election campaign in violation of Israeli laws that ban foreign political donations. [...] Mr Kern angrily rejected the allegations made against him over the loan to Mr Sharon. [...] Israeli prosecutors have launched a criminal investigation into the contributions and have asked South Africa’s Department of Justice to help to discover how and why Mr Kern paid the money. The loan was allegedly used as collateral to obtain another loan to help Mr Sharon to repay “irregular” campaign funds. Mr Kern added: “I am not a public face. I am a retired businessman. This is a personal matter. I am not interested in politics”’. http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/state-set-to-close-landmark-bribe-case-against-former-pm-ariel-sharon-1.460846
75. Kim, “When Pinto Wanted to Establish a Union Committee.”


79. The early family biographies will be briefly presented here. Both immigrated to Israel in 1924 during the British Mandate. The Ofers’ grandfather settled in Haifa, bought a horse and cart and sold goods to ship owners in Haifa port. Sammy and Yuli, the sons, joined their father at the port, bought a ship and started a small shipping company. The Rosenthal grandfather settled in Tel Aviv and found a job as a carpenter. His son, Mickey’s father, opened a small factory, and in the major recession of 1966, while the Ofers were hiring cheap foreign sailors on their ships, Rosenthal the father refused to fire his workers, went into deep debt and then ‘his heart couldn’t stand the stress and he died of a heart attack’ (narrates Abudi in the documentary).

80. Searching the ZIM Integrated Shipping Services Ltd English internet site, the ‘History’ section reveals that ‘From historic beginnings in 1945 as a carrier of immigrants from war-torn Europe to the nascent state of Israel, ZIM has become one of the world’s largest shipping companies with operations throughout the world’. It should be remembered that ‘The name Zim was suggested by the first Minister of Transportation, David Remez, and relates to a sentence from the bible (Numbers 24: 24) in which the word Zim means ‘large vessels’. The name was chosen as fitting the main goal of the company – to build a big commercial fleet (the Zim Hebrew site), and the logo of Zim – seven Stars of David above the word ZIM – is still Theodor Herzl’s proposal for the Israeli flag, dated 1896. In his book *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State): ‘The Flag. We have no flag, and we need one. If we desire to lead many men, we must raise a symbol above their heads. I would suggest a white flag, with seven golden stars. The white field symbolizes our pure new life; the stars are the seven golden hours of our working-day. For we shall march into the Promised Land carrying the badge of honour’. *The Jewish State*, trans from German by Sylvie D’Avigdor, Adapted from the edition published in 1946 by the American Zionist Emergency Council, p. 43, http://www.mideastweb.org/jewishstate.pdf (accessed December 18, 2010). The ZIM English site section of ‘Marine Crew Positions’ reads: ‘Challenging Career, Commitment & Stability Carrying Company – For career opportunities on ZIM vessels, please apply to the following contacts according to your location’. There are local offices in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia & Montenegro, Ukraine, Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar’, http://www.zim.com/Default.aspx?l=4 (accessed December 18, 2010). *The Shakshuka System* declared on screen: ‘Counting Dollars, Not People’, and interviewed Israeli sailors who claimed that as soon as the Ofers got the Zim ownership (2002) they fired them, with minimal compensation and restricted pension provision.

81. In a previous scene, a part of a newspaper interview with Caspi was presented in which he was saying: ‘I was in the negotiating team of the Kadima Party [on forming the Olmert coalition government of 4 May 2006–31 March 2009] and I expressed my opinion that if Perez [Amir Perez was the former leader of the New Histadrut, the Israeli workers unions and the then leader of the Labour party] becomes the Finance Minister there would be clouds over the monetary market, so it would be better if he were the Defence Minister. I don’t think that we paid any price for it’. His advice was accepted and the Second Lebanon war broke out while Olmert was the PM and Perez the Defence Minister: ‘In the 33 days of the war, its toll of lives stood at 164 Israeli citizens (119 soldiers and 45 civilians) and hundreds injured. Approximately 4,000 rockets were fired at the north and significant
economic damage was incurred. Hezbollah had also lost hundreds of its members and the organization’s strategic fighting ability was hurt. Its headquarters in Dahieh quarter of Beirut was destroyed’. The Knesset Site, http://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/Lebanon_war2_eng.htm (accessed December 19, 2010). However, Amir Peretz was the Defense Minister from 2006 to 2007 who decided against his advisors to invest in the development of the Iron Dome - “and is widely seen as the godfather of Iron Dome”. This system succeeded in interception of 90% of Hamas missiles targeted on civilians in Israeli cities on the war of 50 days July-August 2014, thus it is the reason for relatively few deaths of Israeli citizens. Griff Witte and Ruth Egalsh, 7 July 2014, “Iron Dome Israel’s Antimissile System, Changes Calculus of Fight with Hamas”. Washington Post, 7 July 2014, accessed 6 September 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-shoots-down-hamas-drone/2014/07/14/991c46da-0b47-11e4-b8e5-d0de80767fc2_story.html

82. Shakshuka is a North African dish (very similar to many Mediterranean dishes which have different names). It is a mixture of eggs cooked in a sauce of tomatoes, peppers, onions and spices, usually served with white bread, introduced by North African Jews who immigrated to Israel. Shakshuka has also become a typical Israeli dish. The word Shakshuka in Berber languages (Tamazight) means a mixture.

83. Coudry, Why Voices Matters; Harvey, Brief History of Neoliberalism; Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power; Bourdieu and Wacquant, “NewLiberalSpeak”; Phelan, “The Discourse of Neoliberal Hegemony.”

84. The documentary then presents another state ‘gift’ to the Ofer family: the refineries. During the purchase of Israel Corporation in 1999, the Ofer family received 26% of the refineries’ shares at a very low cost, when the refineries’ concession given by the British Mandate (70 years earlier in 1933) ended in 2003. So the Ofer family were then obliged to return their share in the refineries to the state. But they refused, and hired the best lawyers who examined every word in the British concession, and found the four words embodying British politeness: ‘The High Commissioner [of Palestine] will consider sympathetically the continuation of the concession (these words were marked on the screen)’. A high-ranking civil servant in the Ministry of Finance told Rosenthal that the Ofer’s demands were especially arrogant in the light of the fact that they paid such a low price for the refineries knowing that it was only for four years. In spite of the government’s decision not to extend the concession and to privatize the refineries immediately they were returned to the state, an agreement was signed between the general accountant Nir Gilad and the Ofer family, with the support of PM Ariel Sharon, extending the refineries’ concession for the next 25 years. (Netanyahu as minister of finance is seen on screen shaking hands with the family negotiators.) Several months later, the index agreement’s details were leaked to the media. It was agreed there that the Israel Corporation has the option to convert the concession into money: i.e. to sell their share in the refineries back to the state. Thus in exchange for their share to the state, which would be returned gratis, the Ofer family would get half a billion shekels, about $150 million. Guy Leshem, an investigating journalist of Haaretz, The Marker, said in the documentary: ‘Not everyone gets such a gift, and it is hard not to suspect it was arranged specially for the Ofer family’. From then on, the outrageous contract was called ‘The Nir Gilad Agreement’. When the family decided to take the money, the new general accountant, Dr Yaron Zelicha, in a surprise move, refused to pay, but PM Olmert overturned Zelicha’s decision and the state paid for the return of the refineries. The Movement for Quality Government in Israel appealed to the Supreme Court, but the appeal was rejected. In David Wainer and Calev Ben David, “The Controversy Over Israel’s Business Elite,” Bloomberg Businessweek,
October 7, 2010, was written: ‘The top families have been accused by government watchdogs of dishing out well-paid private sector jobs to government officials who eventually end up dealing with their ex-colleagues in the ministries. Nir Gilad, the former accountant general at the Finance Ministry, now works for the Ofer family as chief executive officer of Israel Corp. and as a board member of other Ofer-controlled companies. Arie Mientkavich, who in the 1990s served as chairman of the board of the Israel Securities Authority, the Israeli equivalent of the Securities and Exchange Commission, joined Dankner’s company Elron as chairman in January 2007. Yoram Turbowicz, chief of staff to former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, works for Isaac Tshuva as chairman of Delek Energy Systems. . . The bottom line: The Israeli government is worried about excessive concentration of economic power in the hands of a few families’ (italics original). Mickey Rosenthal was also interviewed for this report.

85. Harvey, Brief History of Neoliberalism; Couldry, Why Voices Matter.
86. Coren, “Israel Bank: Ten Families Control the Israeli Market.”
87. Assaf Carmel, “Yediot Aharonot Editor-in-chief Rafi Ginat to Step Down,” Haaretz.com, March 12, 2007; Assaf Carmel, “Supreme Court: Inconvenience from Yitzhak Livni and Rachel Ben Ari Dismissal Procedure” [in Hebrew], Haaretz, August 1, 2007. Carmel tells the story of Nir Bachar’s dismissal by Rafi Ginat and goes on: ‘Over the last two months, Ginat has been cited as a prime candidate for the position of CEO of Channel 2 News Company, recently vacated by Shalom Keitel. Despite the support of major Channel 2 stakeholders, Muzi Wertheim (of Keshet) and Udi Angel (of Reshet), Ginat’s candidacy has been strongly opposed by public representatives on the committee set to appoint the new CEO, by Chairman of Channel 2 News Company Yitzhak Livni, and by attorney Rachel Ben-Ari’. Shortly afterwards Yitzhak Livni and Rachel Ben-Ari were dismissed from Channel 2 News Company Board, and the Supreme Court rejected their appeal against the dismissal.
90. Not only Dudu Topaz had made a pilgrimage to the Baba Baruch to gain legitimacy; pilgrimage to rabbis of the Mizrahim (Israeli ‘eastern’ people) continues until today. The sacred rabbi is now Ifergan from Netivot, the rival of the Baba Baruch. Haaretz.com, The Marker reports: ‘X-Ray Rabbi Hyping Nohi Dankner Connection in Netivot Elections (title). . . A document to be publicized today on the television talk show “Hamakor” (“The Source”) reveals how his close friend Yaakov Yisrael Ifergan, known as the “The X-ray rabbi”, plans to use the assistance of his close friend, Dankner, for his party’s election campaign for Netivot’s municipal government. A secret, internal document prepared by the party obtained by The Marker boasts that supporters of Rabbi Ifergan and his party, Netivot Shalom, include Israel’s leading businessmen, ministers and Knesset members – and well-known personalities including Dankner (who was said to have paid NIS 600,000 for the privilege of being the first to pay tribute at the grave of the Baba Shalom, Ifergan’s late father). The letter goes on to say that the party plans to make intensive use of the “Dankner brand and his direct relation to the rabbi and the declared aims of his party. The extent of Mr. Dankner’s philanthropic activities are to be mentioned frequently, hinting at future expectations for Netivot”. The results have not been long in coming. Dankner’s image and name, appearing beneath the slogan “The nation will be built by the generous, can be seen on Netivot Shalom’s campaign posters. The rabbi appears with Dankner inaugurating the Cellcom
Volume centre in Netivot”. Dankner owns Cellcom, one of the very profitable cellular companies in Israel, he is considered be one of the 10 families who control the Israeli economy. Recently, he benefited greatly by his connections to Shas: the Shas MK Amnon Cohen succeeded in his suggestion in the Knesset Finance Committee: Zvi Zrahiya, “The MKs Surrendered to Pressure and the State will Lose $36 Millions”, by tax reduction of the cement company owned by Dankner while the tax on gasoline, diesel oil, kerosene and coal would be raised for two years”. Haaretz, The Marker, December, 27, 2010. Thus Shas deliberately supports neoliberalism, in order to conserve its electorate’s poverty, according to Gutwein’s analysis. A day before the hearing, a deal involving the sale to ChemChina of Makhteshim-Agan, a huge privatized chemical plant formerly owned by the state, was made by Dankner: Zvi Zrahiya and Ora Coren, “Yachimovich vs. Dankner: Nochi is a Job Terminator,” Haaretz.com, December 26, 2010. ‘Knesset member Shelly Yehimovich yesterday attacked Nohi Dankner at a meeting of the Knesset Finance Committee called to discuss the putative sale of pesticides maker Makhteshim-Agan Industries, one of the many companies the billionaire businessman owns via his group IDB’.

97. “The Sammy Ofer Wing: A Sea Change”. ‘The National Maritime Museum (NMM) is planning a major new wing. Scheduled to open in the summer of 2011 in time for the London Olympics, the custom-designed exhibition spaces and highly accessible archives will drive a sea change in the way the Museum presents its programme to an ever-growing volume of visitors, both from within the UK and internationally’. The museum site: http://www.nmm.ac.uk/about/sammy-ofer-wing/. (accessed December 25, 2010).
101. ‘The law consists of three parts. The first bans groups from owning both financial and non-financial enterprises. Any group that has both must divest one or the other. The second section of the law dismantles multi-tiered corporate holding
structures – or ‘business pyramids’ as they’re known as in Israel – and sets a worldwide precedent. Under the law, no group may have more than two tiers of publicly listed companies (whether they have issued stocks or bonds). Among other things this aims to stymie controlling shareholders who call the shots at companies low down in the pyramid despite owning just a small fraction of a company’s equity. The third part deals with something never before addressed by legislation in Israel or around the world: the concentration of power in the hands of tycoons in multiple sectors, securing them undue influence over decision makers – to the extent of endangering democracy’. Ido Baum, Zvi Zrahiya and Ora Coren, “What is Israel’s New Business Concentration Law and Why Should We Care? It Sets a Global Precedent in Tackling Tycoons With Too Much Power,” Haaretz.com, December 29, 2013.

102. IDB Holding Corp sits at the apex of the IDB group. The group includes some of Israel’s leading businesses, including the mobile operator Cellcom Israel, Clal Insurance and the Super-Sol supermarket chain. IDB Holding itself owes 1.7 billion shekels ($486 million) to bondholders and another 300 million shekels to Bank Leumi, Credit Suisse and Bank Mizrahi-Tefahot. Shelly Appelberg and Michael Rochvarger, “Tycoon Loses Control of IDB, Israel’s Biggest Holding Group,” Haaretz.com, December 18, 2013.

103. “‘Indictment filed against Nohi Dankner for securities fraud. Dankner charged with working to inflate price of IDB stock during group’s IPO by using connections in banking sector to fund secret purchase of stock at low price, thus pushing up prices, while covering loses. Calcalist reporters,” Ynet, June 30, 2014, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4536286,00.html

104. As of Wednesday afternoon Zim Integrated Shipping Services is reportedly within hours of a debt settlement that included writing off half of the 3 billion shekels ($860 million) it owes to three major creditors: banks, bondholders and shipyards, and ship lessors. Under the deal, Zim’s sole owner, The Israel Corporation, will give up its shares in the company and inject $200 million into it, in exchange for a 30% stake in the restructured company. Yoram Gabison, “Zim Creditors Nearing Biggest ‘Haircut’ in Israeli History,” Haaretz.com, January 15, 2014.


106. “This way a broadcasting authority is not built” [in Hebrew], Haaretz, April 19, 2014.

107. “Sheldon Adelson returns to the top 10 richest in the world for the first time since 2007 after making an average of $32 million a day over the last year, third-most of anyone on the planet,” Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/profile/sheldon-adelson/