Transformations of the Orientalist Agenda in Israeli Modernism (1920s-1970s)

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The purpose of the article is to review the dynamics of the Orientalist agenda in Israeli modernism from the 1920s to the 1970s as the establishment of sign-object relations (semiosis) in the national art and music. The article considers, as a key issue, the phenomenon, which was not explicitly voiced as such, but was present at a conscious level in the artistic palette of the first and second generation of Israeli artists and composers. This refers to rather Eastern than Jewish narratives (or at least the delicate balance between them) in Israeli visual art and music created over the decades following World War I and up to the postmodern era. The main milestones in this process are reviewed based on the analysis of several selected artifacts. The scope of the topic begins with artists' acquaintance with the local motif and proceeds to the work with (and conceptualization of) various Eastern, Jewish, and Israeli symbols.

Keywords: Orientalism, modernism, semiosis, Israeli art, Israeli music

Introduction

Historical circumstances have determined that in the heart of the Middle East, parallel to European processes, the modernist art of a unique nature emerged, that has not been identical to European modernism or modernism in countries that were under Western rule, such as India and African countries. European culture, including the modernist ideas, "emigrated" to the Land of Israel together with the artists themselves, so this is not an import of foreign culture rooted in power. The creators themselves turned to the East as a source and basis for national renewal (Heilbronner & Levin, 2010; Manor, 2010). Present article considers some of these processes from the 1920s to the 1970s as the intrinsic semiosis[1] of Israeli modernism, while the main focus will be the Eastern, or Orientalist[2], agenda in Israeli visual art and music, given the changes in this agenda for about half a century.[3]

As a subject common to the history of art and sociocultural anthropology in our day, Orientalism has historically been a tangle of social and cultural trends that started to affect the epistemological and artistic

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[1] That is, "an action or process involving the establishment of a relationship between a sign and its object and meaning," as the Collins Dictionary (https://www.collinsdictionary.com) explains this term.

[2] The author uses this term, recognizing Orientalism as "knowledge of or devotion to the Orient," as defined in the Collins Dictionary (https://www.collinsdictionary.com).

[3] The article develops a topic that was touched upon in a seminar paper (Zarfati, 2016) written under the guidance of the author at Zefat Academic College. The paper was designed as a survey of the Orientalist trends in Israeli art and music from the 1920s to the 1960s. Present article examines the *dynamics* of the Orientalist agenda as a process of establishing sign-object relations in Israeli modernism, which, in turn, has required expanding the scope of the review, turning, for comparison, to the works of the second generation of Israeli artists and composers.

agenda of the West by the middle of the 19th century. The search for social justice and the interest of intellectuals and artists from the colonial powers in exploring a radically different life in the Islamic East were at the crossroads of romanticism, exoticism, eroticism, and critical realism. The emergence of modernism in the early 20th century as a reaction of representatives of various social institutions to the rapidly changing Western society did not bypass the non-Western regions where Western civilization had a foothold. The combination of Orientalism as an artistic manifestation of sociocultural trends of the late romantic period with modernism, which essentially denied both the exoticism and eroticism underlying many Orientalist practices, gave interesting and sometimes unexpected results in the countries which themselves were previously objects of Western Orientalism. Israel is one of such countries where, in addition, artists and musicians of the first generation were immigrants from Western countries. The development of modernist art and music in this country is thus especially illustrative. The postmodern period, which began in the West in the early 1960s and spread to the postcolonial world by the end of the 1970s, marks the end of the period relevant to this review.

The discussion will take into account that the first Israeli artists and composers came to *Eretz Israel* (Land of Israel) on the eve of the World War I and over the next two decades, that is, at the breakthrough or at the peak of the modernist movement. Since World Wars and wars of Israel did not coincide in time and, moreover, the cultural realities of the *Yishuv*[4] weren't consistent with modernism in its classic, namely European, look and agenda, Jewish artists with European education and cultural background, along with local-born Hebrews who were studying in Europe at the time, were looking for a new, "modernist" way of art and music that would both express the trends of the time and correspond to local realities. It should also be borne in mind that the formation of the artist's palette was influenced by contact with such realities, be it light, color, melody, or musical instrument. The changes in the Eastern agenda will be reviewed in line with the formation of the cultural identity of an Israeli artist: from acquaintance with the local motif (taking into account the changing attitude of artists to it) to the work with (and conceptualization of) various Oriental, Jewish, and Israeli symbols. Each of these stages will be represented by the works of its landmark artists. Now the "actors" are ready on the stage, shadowed until the spotlight illuminates each particular character.

Acquaintance With the Local Motif

Visual Art

The stage space slowly lights up. A young girl of Eastern appearance is holding a lamb in her arms. Pinkish light, morning, and state of biblical serenity. A man in a wide-brimmed hat, in which an artist is unmistakably recognized, stands at the easel and paints this touching scene. When the picture is ready, it will be named Rachel (Fig. 1).

Abel Pann (1883-1963) was probably the first Israeli artist to draw biblical scenes and characters using local models, whether Bedouins or Yemenite Jews. A selection of the local imagery taken in a fairly European Orientalist approach prompted the artist to create a series of such scenes from the early 1920s onwards: Rachel, Potiphar's wife, and many other figures in Jewish history. Yet, this was quite a revolutionary approach to the issue, since for centuries the Jewish religious authorities did not encourage reproduction of human images, including those from the Hebrew Bible, while Christian artists painted such scenes using local, that is, European models and motifs. The secular nature of the Second Aliya and subsequent waves of immigration

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[4] *Yishuv* (Hebrew: ישוב)—the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the declaration of the State of Israel.

allowed Jewish artists to develop their personalities while remaining part of the diaspora tradition, which they brought with them to the Middle East, and to express their own views, without restrictions.

Figure 1. Abel Pann. Rachel (from the Bible illustrations series).[5]

A new image emerges from the depth of the stage illuminated by a spotlight: a whitewashed two-story house on a background of dazzling blue sky, and next to it a figure of a religious Jewish person dressed in a black coat with a white beard and a stick. A woman in a red dress and a man on the balcony complete the imagery of the residents of the area. A characteristic detail can be noted: The wall of the house passes into the fence of the patio. This is a building typical of Neve Zedek, one of the earliest neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, enhanced by painter's vision of Eretz-Israeli architecture in the first decades of the 20th century (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Nachum Gutman. Street in Neve Tzedek (1938).

Nahum Gutman (1898-1980), the creator of the painting who was born in Bessarabia (the former Russian Empire), was an Israeli painter, illustrator, sculptor, and writer. As a student of Abel Pann in Bezalel School of

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Arts in Jerusalem (1914-1915), Gutman was one of the students who rebelled against the European way of painting at Bezalel. As Hemi Gutman, the artist's son, explains, "[t]he group that rebelled believed that the different landscape in Israel, one in which summer days are often gray and filled with blinding light (from dust) required a new and different treatment" . A special place in Gutman's work is dedicated to documentation and preservation of the beginnings of Tel Aviv.

Music

During the 1920s-1930s, several European-trained Jewish composers settled in Mandatory Palestine. One of the major obstacles for these people, Youngerman emphasizes,

> [...] was Western art music's dependence on an urban, institutional infrastructure—orchestras, ensembles, music education, patronage and so on. Without it, composers were very limited in their ability to pursue composition, and usually had to find other ways of making a living, such as using their skills as teachers or instrumentalists. (Youngerman, 2014a, p. 2)

As a result of joint activities, Palestine Symphony Orchestra was established in 1936 in Tel Aviv (since 1948—The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra).

Placed in the new environment and having received the institutionalized conditions for creating Western-type music, immigrant composers, nevertheless, tried to connect a little more with the cultural context of the place. Self-Orientalism as part of Jewish identity[6] served them as a compass for human and artistic curiosity to study local motifs and incorporate them into the initially modernist way of creating music. As Seter (2014, p. 248) notes, they "desired a synthesis of Eastern and Western musics to create a fresh, coherent national voice that would proudly join the Western classical music tradition". Thus, Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984) who has been one of the first Israeli composers believed that "every Israeli author may take a way of merging and look at the newly created style, if he so desires" (as cited in Hirshberg, 1983, p. 194).[7] One of the early examples of such classical style with a respect to local tradition would have been considered Ben-Haim's *Variations on a Hebrew Melody* (1939)—the adaptation of an ancient local tune incorporated into the texture of the Western-modernist musical style of the period.

Another way to incorporate local motif, without using the existing melodies, was implemented by Alexander Uriah Boskovich (1907-1964). Boskovich was an Israeli composer born in Transylvania (then part of the Dual Monarchy) who studied music in Vienna and Paris. After his arrival in British Mandate Palestine in 1936, Boskovich developed his own personal style. For Boskovich, Soker argues, the East was

> [...] the radical other of *his* Western civilization—the music of the East was depicted by him as essentially vocal, stagnant, sensual, extroverted and communal, while its occidental counterpart was instrumental, historically progressive, restrained, rational, and the product of personal creativity and genius. (Soker, 2013, p. 86)

Unlike other composers, Boskovich did not use the tunes of local songs or dances but, inspired by them, worked out his own musical ideas. An example of this approach is his *Semitic Suite* (1948). The names of the movements combine traditional for Western music titles, such as Prelude and Toccata, with rather invented Hebrew names *Amamiya*, *Nofiya*, and *Hodaya* (נופיה ,עממיה and הודעה), which can be loosely translated as folk, landscape, and thanksgiving, respectively.

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[6] In recent years, this viewpoint steadily replaces Said's (1978) view of Orientalism in respect to the European, in particular German, Jewry between the World Wars of the past century (see Brunotte, Ludewig, & Stähler, 2015).
[7] Translation from Hebrew here and onwards is mine—A.R.

Unlike the aforementioned composers (as well as some others of this generation, such as Marc Lavry, Mordecai Seter, and Josef Tal), Benno Bardi (1890-1973) came to the *Yishuv* in 1939 after considerable experience in the study of Oriental music. A German composer and ethnomusicologist of Jewish origin who during the 1920s explored African and especially Egyptian music, Bardi was forced to leave Nazi Germany and first moved to Egypt, where, among other things, he took part in creating the soundtrack for the first Egyptian film *Wedad* (1936), in which, as Youngerman (2014b, pp. 544-545) shows, fragments of his earlier work *Egyptian Suite* (1926) can be heard. A few years later, arriving in Jerusalem, Bardi tried to reinvent himself as a Jewish/Israeli composer. However, it turned out that being a German Orientalist and a Jewish composer who employs self-Orientalism to function in the new reality is not one and the same. In 1950, after a decade of relatively unsuccessful attempts to fit into the local creative team, Benno Bardi moved to London, where he remained until the end of his days.

Work With the Symbols

The first post-state decades in Israel (from the 1950s to the 1970s) witnessed new trends in visual and musical art: the search for more intrinsic symbols or the conceptualization of symbols related to Jewish history and Israeli realities.

Visual Art

The spotlight fades up and reveals a terrace with tiled floors, open doors with shutters and a flowing curtain beyond which lies a landscape of the outskirts of Rehovot with its undulating hills dotted with olive trees. No people on the terrace, only musical instruments: a grand piano and chairs on which two violins and a cello froze waiting for the musicians. Stands with music sheets trembling in the *hamsin* air indicate that the musicians have taken a break. This scene is entitled *Quarter*, and this is a painting by Israeli artist Reuven Rubin (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Reuven Rubin. Quarter (1950).

The lack of human imagery underscores the importance of other details that speak for themselves: signs of Western culture embedded in the Middle Eastern context. Reuven Rubin (1893-1974), who belongs to the first generation of Israeli artists, was one of the greatest Israeli painters. Born in Romania, he came to Israel in 1912 and, along with Nahum Gutman, was among the rebel Bezalel students who opposed the European vision of

light and color applied to Israeli painting. Rubin was famous in both the pre- and post-state periods for expressing the sense of light and spirituality of the Land of Israel.

One of the most renowned Israeli artists of the second generation whose works, especially sculptures, are exhibited in many countries is certainly Igael Tumarkin (b. 1933). The artist, who studied sculpture in Ein Hod, an artists' village in northern Israel, was heavily influenced by *Nouveau Réalisme* having created "assemblage paintings, embodying totem characters, crucifixions etc., and composed of car parts, boards, ropes, printing type that had been blackened and gilded, and covered with 'bleeding' body signs, words and protest formulae" (Fuhrer, 1998, p. 126). This modernist expression was not typical of Israeli art of the late 1950s and even the 1960s, and it took the artist a little time to adapt the "imported" technique to the symbols associated with his own country, its traditions and history. An early example of such an adaptation is a female figure (c. 1960), now in the Jewish Museum, New York (Fig. 4). A quick glance immediately identifies Judith holding Holofernes's head in her hand. This is an ancient Oriental rather than a Jewish symbol, for the Book of Judith, which is the source of this story, is among deuterocanonical books recognized by the Catholic and Eastern Churches as canonical but not recognized as such by both Rabbinical Judaism and Protestant churches. Be that as it may, the image of Judith beheading Holofernes was among scenes characteristic of Renaissance and early Baroque paintings but which somehow disappeared from the topics of European painting for about two centuries until Gustav Klimt created two notable pieces (in the first of which Adele Bloch-Bauer, a young Jewish woman who has been a model for many of Klimt's paintings, is clearly recognized). Tumarkin's work, as a reminder of the topic and an artifact created by an Israeli artist, is a vivid manifestation of the national modernist school.

Figure 4. Igael Tumarkin. Female figure (c. 1960).

The most famous Tumarkin's work in Israel is the Holocaust and Revival Monument on Rabin Square (the former Square of Israel's Kings) in Tel Aviv (Fig. 5). The monument was created in 1974. Steel interlocked triangles vaguely reminiscent of concentration camps fences. Yet, from above it looks like a Star of David. The

conciseness of means and the fusion of visible and almost hidden symbols make this monument a landmark in establishing the sign-object relationship (that is, semiosis) in Israeli modernism, since it combines the sign of the Holocaust of the Jewish people with the historical symbol of the nation in the center of the revived Jewish statehood.

Figure 5. Igael Tumarkin. The Holocaust and Revival Monument in Tel Aviv (1974).

The association of Israeli artistic imagery with scenes from the Hebrew Bible, historical symbols, local residents, or Holocaust reminders was expanded in the late 1970s. We are approaching the Israeli pavilion at the 1978 Venice Biennale. From a distance you can hear the bleating of sheep. We are getting closer: The smell leaves no room for doubt: indeed, a real flock of sheep, not an audio recording. Each sheep has a blue stain on its back, which renders the flock a kind of living painting. Menashe Kadishman (1932-2015), the author of the installation, built on his personal experience as a kibbutz shepherd to create a new symbol of the country. However, it would take years before this rather provocative artwork served as the basis for the artist's series of numerous individual portraits of sheep's head decorated with several lines and spots of different colors (for example, Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Menashe Kadishman. Sheep's head (c. 1995).

While among the most criticized works of the artist (Hoffman, 2005), these portraits became the most recognizable trademark of both the artist's personal style and modern Israeli art in general.

Music

In the 1960s and 1970s, new trends appeared in the Eastern/Orientalist agenda of Israeli music, even in the most meager area of national art music—liturgical music, or, as Hirschberg (2017, p. 227) defines it, "music of the synagogue service, rather than concert music, which uses prayer texts". The historical circumstances around music of the synagogue service in Israel were such that the rich musical tradition of Ashkenazi Jewry found itself neglected if not outlawed. The rare orders received by Israeli composers from Jewish communities in the United States were the only tangible contribution of the national school of composition to the centuries-old national tradition.

Yehezkel Braun (1922-2014) was among the few Israeli composers who received such an order. The composer was asked to write a Shabbat Evening Prayer for the Cleveland Jewish community (Ohio, USA) to celebrate its centennial. The work, composed in 1964, was first performed in Cleveland at a festive Shabbat service in 1966. The composition which lasts approximately 20 minutes is written in quite a traditional tonal manner for a cantor, mixed choir and organ. The composer's interest in Gregorian chant helped him establish in this work a kind of bridge between the old Jewish musical tradition, which was one of the sources for early Christian music, and its later development in contact and dialogue with the Western tradition of *bel canto*. Although the composer recreates the emotional state of pre-war Jewish European life, *Shabbat Evening Prayer* is, nevertheless, a post-war modern composition in which the Oriental flavor given to Western musical means rather emphasizes that it is written at a time when this musical tradition no longer exists in its historical place or in Israel. This is a "hidden plan" that may not have allowed the work to become part of a repertoire regularly performed in American synagogues. *Shabbat Evening Prayer* remains "the only liturgical-functional piece written by Braun, and its choral-responsorial style is an exception among his other choral works" (Hirshberg, 2017, p. 231). The premiere of the composition in Israel took place only in 2003, during the festival "Days of Music in Upper Galilee", where in the author's conversation with the composer some details of this work were discussed.

The musical tradition of Eastern Jewry was conceptualized in Israeli classical music during the 1970s. Heterophony—a method of performing monophony by several performers with some degree of improvisation—became a kind of delicacy and at the same time the visiting card of Mark Kopytman (1929-2011) who immigrated to Israel in the early 1970s. The composer himself describes heterophony "as though there is a cosmic melody, an external musical event, parts of which reach the earth and are combined" (as cited in Kreinin, 2008, p. 45). Uscher (1986, p. 19) reports that heterophony has been known since the time of Plato who discusses this term in his *Laws*, Part VII. The technique was used by the 12th-century composers of the Notre Dame School, but is most commonly associated with the indigenous musical practices of the Middle East and Africa. Heterophony came to Israel in the 1950s as part of the musical tradition of newcomers from North Africa, and Kopytman applied this ancient symbol of Oriental music in several of his works, beginning with *October Sun* (1974) for voice and chamber ensemble written to text by Yehuda Amichai about the Yom Kippur War.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to outline some of the essential characteristics of Israeli modernism, focusing on the dynamics of the Orientalist agenda as a process of establishing sign-object relations (semiosis) in the national art and music. The discussion reflected the author's vision of the subject and examined the

transformation of (and delicate balance between) Eastern and Jewish narratives in Israeli visual art and music created over half a century—from the 1920s to the 1970s. Major milestones in this process were considered based on the analysis of several selected artifacts. The intrinsic semiosis of Israeli modernism was reviewed alongside the formation of the cultural identity of an Israeli artist: from the reflection of local motifs to the conceptualization of various Oriental, Jewish, and Israeli symbols.

Although the article is divided into sections in chronological order and in accordance with the stages of the phenomenon under discussion, behind the schemes and artifacts are the fates of individuals and their desire to find a home and get used to the conditions of the place, which they had consciously, or by the will of fate, chosen for further life. Over time and due to various sociocultural changes, the attitude of artists and musicians to the local motif has also changed, not losing its "orientality" but having acquired a more symbolic form and sometimes moving into the domain of speculative concept. The years of creation on the spot and the slow consolidation of self-determination and belonging to the new Israeli national and cultural identity were accompanied by a change in the self-perception of artists when the acuteness of the sense of novelty was replaced by a sense of belonging to the place, which naturally affected the form of Orientalism as a modernist concept and artistic practice.

The curtain slowly rises up and, illuminated by the lights of the ramp, the artworks that served as objects of this story appear at the back of the stage. From behind the scenes the heroes emerge—artists and composers, about whom these pages were written, and many others whose skills and lifetime search for a connection with the Oriental/Israeli context created the artistic phenomenon that has remained in art history as Israeli modernism.

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