The regime of style: cover versions, reality TV, and the aesthetic principles of populism in Israel and beyond

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between the meaning of style in Idol-format TV shows, and the political style which many scholars consider central for understanding populism today. Inspired by Jacques Rancière's notion of aesthetic regimes, I theorise what I call 'the regime of style' as a set of aesthetic principles shared across these fields. I explore the case study of Miri Regev's term as Israel's Minister of Culture and Sports, showing how she implemented a long-term strategy combining deliberate scandals that pitted her against 'the cultural elite', and the endorsement of pop music styles associated with publics that traditionally support her party (Likud). What ties these complementary strategies together is that they perform a 'flaunting of the low' (Ostiguy 2017). In refocusing the conversation on contested hierarchies of taste, Regev's own appeal partakes in the aesthetic economy of Idol-format shows, where style is fetishised as a transparent performance of identity.

If you ask me what drives me in my combative action for Israeli Mediterranean music [. . .]. I'll reply with a single sentence: no more humiliations. [. . .] [O]ur interest is [. . .] looking the elite which appropriated Israeli music for itself in the eye. An elite whose programming excludes and defines what culture is inferior and what is high-quality. [. . .] The public doesn't fake it, because they are the real judges, and they know what's good. (Minister of Culture and Sports Miri Regev, 20 June 2017)[1]

Over the last decade, we have witnessed the global rise and radicalisation of populist movements and politicians, embodied by figures such as Narendra Modi, Benjamin Netanyahu, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán and Donald J. Trump. As some scholars have observed, what these movements have in common (also with their left-wing counterparts) often has as much to do with their style of politics as with

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[1] Knesset protocols, Book 31, meeting 243. June 20th, 2017. https://fs.knesset.gov.il/20/Plenum/20_ptm_386737.doc (accessed 13 June 2022). Unless noted otherwise all translations from Hebrew are by the author.

293

their ideologies and policies (Moffitt 2016; Block and Negrine 2017). If style is so central to these movements, then understanding them requires close attention to their aesthetic (and, specifically, musical) output, not merely as a promotional 'extra-political' instrument, but as an essential component of their political project. Moreover, the increasing mediatisation of politics and popular music means that actors in both fields work towards their success in the same media environments, and apply similar discursive and performative templates to communicate with their audience. Inspired by Rancière's (2004) claim that aesthetic regimes observable in the arts define the very conditions for who and what can be represented in politics, I argue that developments in contemporary popular music represent an aesthetic 'redistribution of the sensible' which informs and conditions the logic of contemporary populism.

I explore this relationship between popular music and populist politics by looking at the term of Miri Regev as Israel's Minister of Culture and Sports in Netanyahu's right-wing populist government. During her tumultuous tenure (2015–2020), Regev implemented a long-term, two-pronged strategy combining (1) the constant and deliberate creation of spectacles and scandals that pitted her against the artistic establishment, which she presented as representative of 'the cultural elite' and (2) the endorsement of pop music artists and styles associated with publics that traditionally support her party (Likud), namely Mizrahi Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern descent). What ties these two complementary strategies together is that they perform what Ostiguy (2017) has termed a 'flaunting of the low' (as discussed below), prompting Regev's supporters and her critics alike to do for her the work of drawing affective battle lines between 'the people' (cast in the image of Likud's main electorate) and the liberal-leftist 'elite'. In refocusing the conversation on contested hierarchies of taste which resemble aesthetic judgments, and on 'dramas of identity' (McCarthy 2017), Regev's appeal draws its logic from another globally circulating aesthetic economy where style is the most important message and is thus the 'real' content: reality TV singing competitions. In these shows, which have become a key avenue to pop stardom in Israel and around the world, contestants build their brand through spectacular and 'new' identity assemblages of gender, race, religion, etc. These border-crossing identities, however, paradoxically remain dependent on the recognition of the very borders they cross as real (Meizel 2011). As this article demonstrates, Regev's case study exposes a structural resonance between these shows and contemporary populism, hinging on the performance of style-as-identity.

Populism as style; populism and style

This article responds to recent developments in the study of populism, which refocus theoretical attention on its socio-cultural performative dimensions. While there are several distinct approaches to understanding populism, a common assumption is that populists promote a division of the political field into two antagonistic socio-political blocs: the people (the plebs) and its Other (the establishment that is unwilling or unable to address the demands of the people) (Ostiguy *et al.* 2021, p. 5). This idea was developed in the seminal works of Ernesto Laclau (2005). For Laclau 'the people' is not a pre-existing entity but a social relation constituted discursively, through the articulation of equivalential (i.e. analogous) 'social demands'

(2005, p. 74). Going back to the Gramscian idea of hegemony, Laclau's influential understanding of populism as a discursive articulation of 'the people' does not distinguish between the political and cultural domains as the loci of such articulations. Alongside Laclau's discursive approach, two other frameworks have emerged as dominant in theorising populism. While one approach considers different populist movements – left and right – as having an ideational common core, describing populism as 'a thin-centered ideology' (Mudde 2007), another sees it as more of a political strategy effective in rallying an unorganised array of supporters using 'personalistic leadership and opportunistic agency' (Weyland 2021, p. 187).

Drawing on elements from all three of these approaches, the socio-cultural approach promoted by Ostiguy, Moffit and others stresses the notion that 'populism is characterised by a set of performative repertoires', seeking 'to make clear populism's relationship to our contemporary media environment' (Ostiguy *et al*. 2021, p. 6). Of particular interest here is Ostiguy's understanding of populism as an antagonistic and transgressive 'flaunting of the low', emphasising spectacles of closeness that intend to shock and provoke (Ostiguy 2017). As part of this 'antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native' (p. 84) Ostiguy argues,

> [populist] political entrepreneurs cast the 'Other' as allegedly both damaged and 'swept under the rug' by official discourse and policies. What these politicians represent is allegedly fetched from 'under the rug' and brought to the political fore in a loud, perhaps ugly (or at best, oddly 'exotic') but 'proud' way – and to many, in a rather annoying way as well. […] the populist politicians and parties claim, loudly, politically incorrectly, and often vulgarly, to be that (truly) authentic people's 'fighting hero'. The 'Other' mentioned above is thereby in reality not an 'Other', but rather, the 'truest' (too often forgotten) Self of the nation, of 'the people'. Proper discourse is the reverse of what it claims to be: the Representatives are in fact not representative, and the Other is no Other but the truest Self (of the nation). (p. 76)

Ostiguy goes on to characterise political appeals as 'high' and 'low' based solely on their performative styles, completely free of their ideological and political content, which can be right, left or neither. High and low appeals allow voters to recognise a politician as 'one of ours'.

Importantly, the nature of this recognition in an age of deeply mediatised politics (Hepp 2019) is increasingly inseparable from the logic governing this recognition in other media contexts, not least of which are popular television and popular music. Political style is therefore 'the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations' (Moffit and Tormey 2014). However, populists rarely 'invent' the materials and forms central to their style. Rather, populism 'entails a particular discursive and praxis-oriented politicisation of existing (and interpreted) social cleavages' (Ostiguy *et al*. 2021, p. 7). Populists draw on structures of feeling already being articulated and negotiated in popular culture. Indeed, drawing on styles, themes and narratives emerging from popular culture in political campaigns – as explored in the pioneering work Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) – is itself a form of 'low' appeal, signalling to voters that the culture they consume is legitimate and relevant.

Several studies have discussed the ways in which actors in the fields of politics and culture operate today in the same media environment, where the accumulation of 'celebrity capital' (Driessens 2013) as a key for success is not merely similar but often one and the same. As Marshall (2020) recently argued, what has developed over several decades is a 'regime of communication and related systems of

representation in both political and popular culture', which 'produced an interconnecting fame apparatus' (p. 92). This new cultural regime of mediatised personal brands is embodied today in the political success of Boomers like Trump (Kellner 2016), but also the musical success of Millennial British Youtuber-turned-rapper KSI (Olajide Olatunji), who went from posting gaming commentary videos on YouTube to toping the UK charts as a rapper and getting nominated for a BRIT award. Scholars contend that the rise of figures like Trump hinges on these transformations in the media environment. In *Fox Populism* (*2019a*) Reece Peck attributes the rise of Fox News as a political force which helped get Trump elected to a skilful combination of conservative agenda and the '"lowbrow-taste" politics of tabloid [entertainment] media' (p. 5), i.e. as the mobilisation of style in the service of politicising identity. Music plays an important role in such quests to 'actively partisanise national taste divisions' (Peck 2019b, p.16). For example, in a process that bears a striking resemblance to the mobilisation of Israeli Mediterranean pop (Horowitz 2010) by the Israeli right, scholars have described how since the 1970s American conservative elites have embraced country music as an affective and rhetorical platform for appealing to the white working-class voter (Pecknold 2007; Peck 2019b).

While American politics has its unique features, the place of music in contemporary populist appeals has also been studied in the context of multiparty parliamentary systems like Israel's. For example, Paolo Magaudda (2020) recently provided an intriguing case study of the mobilisation of music by populists in power, analysing the response of Italian populist leaders to a controversy which erupted following a surprising win by singer Alessandro Mahmood (who made his fame as a competitor in the Italian *X Factor*) in the 2019 Sanremo Festival. Mahmood lost the popular vote, but won thanks to the support of a panel of experts, later portrayed by populists as a tyrannical 'elite'. As Magaudda demonstrates, the way in which populists appeal to their voters with reference to popular music is intimately connected with the rise of 'new systems for expressing judgements, votes, and preferences that digital technologies propelled in many social realms' (p. 149). Practices such as audience televoting in talent competition reality shows, Maggauda writes, 'seem to have reinforced the idea that "the people" can directly express a unified will, without any kind of influence or intermediation [...]' (Magaudda 2020). Contemporary populism, Maggauda contends, leans on this logic to construct the category of the 'people' as a means of reinforcing its own narratives (Magaudda 2020). While Italian populists 'weaponized' a musical controversy as a platform of articulating their nativist (or, minimally, anti-elitist) agendas in an opportunistic fashion, the case of Miri Regev's tenure as Minister of Culture stands out because her appeals to the musical were part of a long-term political strategy, with the potential of giving us a better understanding of how populists in power might mobilise popular music.

Reality TV and the regime of style

Within the mediascape that defines contemporary cultural economy, a special place is reserved for reality TV programmes in general (Hill 2014; Jenkins 2006), to musical talent competitions in particular (Meizel 2011; Cvetkovski 2015), and to their role in what many consider a core characteristic of populism today, namely 'the promotion of vague forms of direct democracy' (Block and Negrine 2017). As Graham (2017) – who goes as far as naming such shows 'populist reality television' – poignantly phrased it:

This bonding of participatory television with participatory politics, a process long-in-the-works but ripe by 2010, represents a symptomatic cringe towards the imperatives of the market. Faith in the market as legislator, and faith in the public as marketized consumers, go hand-in-creepy-hand. If people are happy to 'vote with their feet' as consumers of reality televisions, then why not treat politics as an aestheticized marketplace? (p. 11)

As an empirical counterpart to this critical observation, Inthorn *et al.* (2012) have also found that TV personalities such as Simon Cowell – the progenitor of the *Idol* format – shape perceptions of authenticity and power among young viewers, which are then applied in their interpretation of the political realm.

Despite the desire to dismiss reality shows, often classified as a 'low' genre (Skeggs 2009), as fertile ground for the exploitative reduction of politics to aesthetics, Graham cautions against spilling the baby with the bathwater, reminding us that (like it or not) shows like *The X Factor* are 'an embodiment of the contemporary commons' (2017, p. 19). The idea of 'commons' evokes the possibility of understanding what appears as almost a collapse of the fields of politics and aesthetic production into each other in an era of 'deep mediatization', as a contemporary configuration of what Rancière (2004) famously called the 'distribution of the sensible'. Rancière defines the latter as 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception' which 'establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts' (p. 12). People, groups, things, etc. have a place in the realm of politics in as much as they are perceptible, i.e. registered on a historically contingent sensorial 'map' of accepted social realities. However, being perceptible in this way not only makes them a recognisable part of the accepted social whole (Rancière's 'common') but also determines and redetermines their place within that whole. In making sensible what is common and how it is divided, Rancière argues, regimes of art inscribe 'the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution' (Rancière 2004). This is why, for Rancière, there has always been an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics. Different redistributions of the sensible articulate different ways of dividing the whole, informing 'politics' in the broadest sense. Art and politics are both activities that 'cut across forms of cultural and identity belonging and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception' (Corcoran 2010, p. 2). The combined, mutually defining historical arrangement of the sensible at any given point in time, where 'the arts remain tethered via analogy to the social order from which they derive their force, even as they help constitute that order' (Moreno and Steingo 2012, p. 493), is what Rancière calls a *regime*. Importantly, in the 21st century Rancière identifies the emergence of 'an indistinct sphere in which not only is the specificity of political and artistic practices dissolved, but so also is that which formed the very core of "old morality": the distinction between fact and law, between what is and what ought to be' (Rancière 2010, p. 184).

In noting this shift Rancière points the way to the characterisation of a contemporary regime, which I propose to call 'the regime of style'. While style is a relatively recent protagonist in the study of populism, it has long been a key problem in aesthetic and cultural theory. If the everyday application of the term always preserves something of the untenable dichotomy of 'form' and 'content', more systematic evaluations tended to view style as a concept that mediates between formal aspects of a work or a performance and their symbolic or semiotic function (Goodman 1975).

Owing to this ambivalent terrain that it occupies between the qualities of a work and its meaning, Susan Sontag (1966) has noted, '[t]he antipathy to "style" is always an antipathy to a given style. There are no style-less works of art. [...] Awareness of style as a problematic and isolable element in a work of art has emerged [...] as a front behind which other issues, ultimately ethical and political, are being debated' (p. 18). This, I argue, is precisely the case when we consider the co-emergence of certain brands of populism (and how they are discussed) and that of reality TV singing competitions – both as a prominent form of entertainment media, and as a central platform for the popular music industry. As I will argue, TV singing competitions in the *Idol* format tend to deemphasise composition, lyricism and instrumental ingenuity in favour of performance style, and fetishise disparate elements of performance (arrangement, vocal technique, phrasing, gesture etc.) as direct expressions of a singer's identity and authenticity. This 'cover version' aesthetics implies a distribution of the sensible wherein every performance is a capsulised iteration of identity. As its mascot, we could nominate the Marvel character Baby Groot, who only ever says 'I am Groot' in different inflections of voice. The regime of style is thus precisely Rancière's 'indistinct sphere' in which the specificity of political and aesthetic performances is dissolved.

In what follows I first locate this regime in the aesthetics inscribed in musical reality shows, and then consider how they interact with the contemporary political field. While this reading is grounded in the ethno-national antagonisms proper to Israel, both sides of the equation – the Israeli field of popular music and that of Israeli right-wing populism – correspond to global trends in popular culture and in politics. As such, exploring their relationship as it appears in Israel is taken here as the first step towards developing a context-sensitive theory of style as a central concept in the articulation of popular music and populism.

Context: music and ethnicity in Israel

The ethno-class cleavage between Jews of Ashkenazi (European) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African) descent has been a central focus of Israeli social studies since their inception (Goldberg and Bram 2007). Over the years, its exploration has moved from perspectives focusing on how the young Israel absorbed incoming Jewish immigration from Arab and Muslim countries to a critical-Marxist approach that recognised Mizrahim as a marginalised socio-economic underclass suffering from systemic discrimination (Swirski 1989). A third wave of scholarship offered a postcolonial approach that focused on the ethnicisation of Arab-Jews as 'Mizrahim' (literally: 'Orientals') – a contrived marker of inferiority which both de-Arabises these communities and marks them as the low-other of Jewish-Israeli society (as opposed to 'Ashkenazim' as the unmarked norm of Israeliness). These scholars also emphasised the role of Israel's relationship with the Arab world and the Palestinians in shaping this ethnicisation (Shenhav 2006; Shohat 1999). Over the last two decades, the intra-Jewish ethnic cleavage has been further studied vis-à-vis developments such as the arrival of subsequent waves of immigration from former Soviet States and from Ethiopia (Mizrachi and Herzog 2012), the rise and fall of Mizrahi political movements (Chetrit 2004), the end of Ashkenazi political hegemony (Kimmerling 2001) and the emergence of a robust Mizrahi middle-class (Cohen and Leon 2008).

While scholars of popular music in Israel were also interested in the cultural aspects of the ethnic cleavage, studies in this field often narrated a unisonal

history of music-making as nation-building, focusing on the Zionist genre of Songs of the Land of Israel (e.g. Eliram 2005). In terms of its musical style, the latter was consciously conceived as a mix of 'East' and 'West', yet bore the mark of its mostly East- and Central-European composers. While Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi's field-defining *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel (2004)* discusses this genre as a marker of 'traditional Israeliness' (a function that it still fulfils to some extent), it has been increasingly identified with Labor Zionism as the dominant force in Israeli politics until the late 1970s, and by association, with Ashkenazi hegemony. A similar fate befell the second dominant local genre discussed in Regev and Seroussi's book – Israeli rock – which dominated the charts in the 1980s and 1990s. Israeli rock musicians often continued the conscious project of articulating 'ethno-national uniqueness' (Regev 2007) through combining 'Western' (in effect, global) and Middle Eastern musical influences, and many of them were themselves of Mizrahi ethnic background. What 'doomed' Israeli rock, however, to a similar association with the Ashkenazi elite was not only the ethnic makeup of its biggest stars' audiences, but the simultaneous ascent of another local genre squarely identified with Mizrahi Jews.

By the 1980s, an independent 'parallel' industry of Mizrahi pop music emerged which – using the affordable technology of cassette tapes – bypassed the systemic (if not institutional) gatekeeping of public radio and military bands, which often kept Mizrahi performers and performing styles at bay (Regev and Seroussi 2004). Despite the fact that this new genre, called *muzika mizrahit* (Mizrahi music), was from the outset a musical hybrid drawing on a myriad of styles (from rock and Italian sentimental ballads, to Greek, Turkish and Arab popular styles), and despite its enormous popularity throughout the 1980s and 1990s (with mega-stars such as Zohar Argov and Haim Moshe), it remained marked as the sonic projection of a 'traditional', ethnic subculture. This Mizrahi subculture was often represented in the media as both an internal other, different from – and inferior to – a Western-oriented, 'cosmopolitan', hegemonic Israeliness that was always somehow beyond its reach.

In the late 1990s and into the 21st century, however, *muzika mizrahit* gradually became the dominant style of Israeli popular music, a sea change that has been attributed to the liberalisation of the media market and the introduction, for the first time, of commercial radio stations and TV channels (Kaplan 2012; Seroussi and Regev 2014, pp. 288–95, 326–7). Importantly, this transformation coincided with the rise of a Mizrahi middle class (Cohen and Leon 2008): a large and influential public whose members were often raised on *muzika mizrahit*, and now possessed significant purchase power that appealed to advertisers. As Kaplan (2012) shows, the perceived threat to the hegemony of public radio stations posed by commercial broadcasting pushed the former to diversify their programming and include more music in what was now being referred to by the less stigmatised term 'Mediterranean pop' (Horowitz 2010). Concomitantly, musicians working in this field adapted their music to increase its appeal for a diverse radio listenership (Kaplan 2012). This new 'lighter' style included more global dance rhythms and a less florid vocal style. Stepping into the breach opened by the chart success of Eyal Golan and Sarit Hadad, young singers and songwriters working in the Mediterranean style (notably, Moshe Peretz and Dudu Aharon) perfected over the previous decade a formula employing the instrumentation and harmonies of global chart pop overlaid with subtle markers of the Mediterranean style, especially in vocal lines.

Since 2003, reality TV song competitions in the *Idol* format have become a central arena for the canonisation of *muzika mizrahit*, and its repositioning as the dominant marker of Israeliness in music (Seroussi and Regev 2014, pp. 322–5), accentuating the 'democratization of taste' as an alleged effect of media liberalisation. As musical and biographical manifestations of *Mizrahiyut* (Mizrahiness) *qua* cultural identity (overdetermined by ethnicity, class, and geography) have been essential to the 'identity drama' of these shows for almost two decades, they have likewise contributed to the maintenance of the idea that *muzika mizrahit* (as a repertoire as well as a vocal style) is proper to Mizrahim, making *Mizrahiyut* both essential to contemporary Israeliness *and* fetishised as ethnic difference within Israeli sonic economies (Erez 2022). The most recent cohort of Israeli pop stars, born in the 1990s, freely combine elements identified with a Mizrahi style with little adherence to outdated genre divisions between an 'ethnic' Mediterranean pop and a 'general' Israeli mainstream (Erez 2022).

Israeli *Idol* shows and the performance of identity

In Israel, reality TV embodies a tension between the demands of the market and the regulation of content 'in the public interest' based on cultural hierarchies. As Lavie (2016, 2020) shows, the Israeli TV industry makes an institutionalised and formal distinction between reality TV and 'elite' genres, owing to the former's relatively low production costs compared with drama. Although reality shows are much more popular in Israel compared with other countries, Lavie (2020) shows, they still struggle with perceptions regarding them as 'trashy' and 'anti-bourgeois' even among the producers of these shows. As their redeeming quality, producers often resort (both on and off screen) to ethical justifications, and especially to the argument that the shows promote inclusiveness and proportional ethnic representation (Lavie 2020).

Despite the scarce attention devoted to them in academic literature on Israeli music, reality TV song competitions in the *Idol* format, such as *Kokhav Nolad* ('A star is born'), *X Factor Israel* and *The Voice* have become the central arena for mainstream Israeli popular music in the 21st century. With the collapse of previous record industry models in the digital age, these shows are now the most important platform for launching new singing careers in the small and crowded local market, as well as a major source of income for established artists appearing as judges or mentors.[2]

Focusing on the longest-running Israeli *Idol*-format show – *Kokhav Nolad* (2003–2012), rebranded in 2013 as *Ha-kokhav ha-ba* ('The Next Star') – Neiger (2012) offers an interpretative framework for understanding the show's strong appeal and cultural impact, highlighting the 'cultural oxymora' that 'serve to negotiate and balance different meanings manufactured by the show' (p. 535). These include institutionalised cultural pluralism; nationalism and militarism celebrated through a transnational format; the showcasing of 'periphery' (rife with ethnic stereotypes); and democratic participation (contriving the consumer-citizen). Of special interest to us is what Neiger calls the 'performance oxymoron', founded on the tension between hegemonic content of the songs and their interpretation or 'vocal presentation', which

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[2] For example, of the 30 singles rated on the 2020 annual chart of the radio station *Kan Gimel* (which broadcasts only Israeli music), 17 featured at least one singer who appeared on one of these shows.

in many cases foregrounds marginalised (or, as Neiger calls them 'counter-hegemonic') identities (p. 541). This is partly the reason why so few of the songs performed in the show are original, while most are canonical Israeli classics or local hits. The emphasis that the show puts on style as a vehicle for identity also entails rendering the professional labour of musical arrangement 'unheard' (Gorbman 1987). This in turn encourages an 'auteurist' decoding where the effects of musical arrangement are also attributed by audiences to the singer's performance, and then to the performers themselves.

As the identity and personal background of contestants are often at the centre of their introduction during the early stages of each season, discussion of their repertoire choices and approach to performance (i.e. 'style') often conflate the musical and the biographical. A discourse of 'truth' and 'authenticity' often obscures aspects of labour and training, so as not to call attention to invisible production of the show itself. And so no unscripted space or 'play' can be allowed between who one is, what they sing and how they sing. For example, during the audition of contestant Evyatar Korkus (b. 1993), the subsequent winner of the first season of *Ha-Kohav ha-Ba* ('The Next Star') aired in 2013, judges debated at length the importance of Korkus as a representative of his hometown of Lod (Arabic: *Al-Lydd*): a mixed Arab-Jewish city in the Tel Aviv Metropolitan area that suffers from high rates of poverty and crime. Korkus, who is of Mizrahi descent, is asked what music he listens to, and answers that he likes *muzika mizrahit*, but also 'gentler stuff'. 'I hope your singing is as *real* as your talk', host Zvika Hadar tells him. Korkus then sings '*Ve'at*' ('And You', composed by Keren Peles), a 2006 torch ballad that was the break-out single for singer-songwriter Har'el Ska'at, runner-up of the second season of *Kokhav Nolad*, aired in 2004, who went on to become a major pop star and gay icon. Following the performance, judge Eyal Golan decries what he believes to be Korkus 'hiding' his true self to fit the mould of the show by avoiding the repertoire of *muzika mizrahit*, which is allegedly his *real* (i.e. proper) style/identity. Another judge, Rita (a Persian-Jewish pop singer who doesn't work in the genre of *muzika mizrahit*) disagrees, but couches her objection in similar terms of authenticity: 'No matter *what* a person sings, they bring their home with them', she says, implying that identity and biography 'ring' through vocal performance regardless of the properties of the composition performed. 'But Eyal', adds another judge, PR consultant Rani Rahav, 'there's an audience who wants to hear not just *muzika mizrahit*, but they want to hear [songs in other genres] from Mizrahi singers, because they like their voice!' (*Ha-Kokhav ha-Ba* 2013). Despite the seeming disagreement then, the underlying consensus is that identity is somehow immanent in vocal style. More than the attribute of a piece of music, style is the guarantor of authenticity, residing at the intersection of performance and identity.

Even beyond this fetishisation of voice, Israeli *Idol* shows often locate authenticity in the coupling of style and identity. For example, in her memorable audition during the first season of *X Factor Israel* (also aired in 2013), Eden Ben Zaken (b. 1994) took to the stage wearing a revealing leopard print jumpsuit. When asked about it, she said that it cost her 'thirty shekels' (roughly 7 British Pounds), cavalierly letting on that it was an off-brand cheap garment bought in 'Yafo-Tel Aviv', which after further questioning turned out to be the name of a boutique located in her peripheral hometown of Kiryat Shmona (populated largely by Mizrahim). This flaunting of her 'low' dress style positioned her as an 'authentic' and casual ambassador of the Israeli Mizrahi periphery (where 'Tel Aviv' is the name of a boutique) and framed the

rest of her appearance on the show. As Katherine Meizel argued, *Idol* format shows are built on a paradoxical mobilisation of identity and difference. They push contestants to create their individual brands through assemblages and performances that traverse the borders within and across these identities, but, as the novelty effect and individuation-value of these transgressions is entirely dependent on the recognition of the borders as real, they end up reinscribing the very divisions that they seemingly transgress (Meizel 2011).

What I term here the regime of style, involves therefore the combined cultural effects of the following principles of *Idol*-format shows: ready-made musical content (a cover-version aesthetic which effaces and devalues compositional creativity), the fetishisation of vocal performance as a vehicle of identity, and the reduction of identity to a brand, which by definition reproduces the otherness of historically marginalised groups even as it performs their inclusion. In subsequent sections of this article I turn to my main case study in order demonstrate the mobilisation of these aesthetic principles in populist politics.

Populism in Israel: performing the inclusion of *Mizrahim*

Israel has a long history of populism, as described primarily in the work of Dani Filc (2010, 2018). Filc's conceptualisation of populism hinges on the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion which informs the basic ambiguities in the meaning of 'the people' as the entire nation, the plebs, or as an ethno-cultural unit. Populism is prevalent in Israeli politics, according to Filc, because 'conflicts concerning the inclusion or exclusion of subordinate social groups have marked Israeli society since its inception' (Filc and Pardo 2021, p. 101). This is owed to the fact that Israel is a self-defined Jewish state founded on immigration of Jews from many different parts of the world, in a territory with a large indigenous Palestinian population of which some parts were expelled, others made citizens, and others still are governed through a colonial military regime in the Occupied Territories. In such a deeply conflicted state, the meaning of the signifier 'the people' remains incessantly contested, 'making populism a paramount mode of expression of this conflict' (Filc 2010, p. 2).

Filc describes the rise of Israel's largest right-wing party – Likud – which remade itself in the 1970s, under the leadership of Menachem Begin (1913–1992), as an inclusive populist movement that gave increased political representation to Mizrahi Jews. With Netanyahu's ascent to leadership in the 1990s, Filc argues, Likud took an exclusionary turn. Seeking to sustain Mizrahi support while implementing an aggressive neoliberal socio-economic policy, it supplemented its former populist style with direct rhetorical attacks against the left-leaning elites, the media, Palestinian citizens of Israel and African asylum seekers.

Part of Netanyahu's strategy of remaining in power, however, involved maintaining the counter-hegemonic energy of Begin's 'overturn' (*mahapakh*), selling himself (the Ashkenazi son of a historian who was raised in Jerusalem's most elitist environment, received an MIT education in the US, accumulated significant personal wealth, and resides in the ultra-wealthy commune of Keisaria) as a representative of the (Mizrahi) 'people'. As his ability to 'embody' the people by virtue of his personal background and style is limited, Miri Regev's rise through the ranks (and that of a few other Likud Parliamentarians) is often attributed to her

capacity to personify (as a Mizrahi woman from a poor peripheral city) this identity on behalf of Netanyahu's regime, galvanising the Mizrahi base while performing its allegiance to Netanyahu personally. As such, Regev represents a brand of populism which articulates 'the people' through the Mizrahi signifier, with the effect that 'the people' are defined as Jewish, Mizrahi, traditionalist and national. In other words, it is a form of exclusionary nativist populism that constructs 'the people' in the image of Likud's electoral base (or in the image of its image). It thus also represents a local manifestation of Ostiguy's understanding of populism as 'a cultural-affective bond between populist leaders/parties and their followers, established through the antagonistic celebration of the culturally popular and native in politics' (Ostiguy *et al.* 2021, p. 13).

Miri Regev's regime of style

Regev (b. 1965) started her public service with a military career, culminating in her appointment as Chief Military Censor, and later as Israeli Defence Forces Spokesperson (2005–2007). She was first elected as Member of the Knesset (Israel's parliament) representing Likud in 2009. By 2012, Regev put herself in the spotlight by supporting a campaign against the presence of African asylum seekers, exclaiming that 'the Sudanese are a cancer in our body' (as cited in Azoulay and Efraim 2012), which made her a target for left-wing commentators criticising her rhetoric as racist and fascist (Azoulay and Efraim 2012). In general, harsh criticism of Regev from opponents, and sometimes also from supporters, tended to gravitate towards her style. Actor and singer Gavri Banai famously called her a 'beast' (*behema*), and even Netanyahu at times complained that she and others are 'turning Likud into a bazaar' (Ben Nun 2015).

A 2014 story on Channel Two News likened her public appeal to that of a pop star, and the spectacular soundbites she provides to popular song: 'Miri Regev is a superstar. [...] Now she has a strong popular hit, composed as she threw Jamal Zahalka [a Palestinian member of the Knesset] out of a meeting of the Interior Affairs Committee' (Lukach 2014). The segment then cuts to a clip of Knesset ushers manhandling Zahalka, with Regev (then Chair of the Committee) cheering them on: 'take him with the chair like in a birthday party! Count "1, 2, hop!" and throw him out to Gaza!' It then cuts again to show Regev's fans at a shopping mall, cheerfully repeating these words in her presence, helping to turn them into a viral soundbite. Regev then tells the interviewer: 'This is who I am, this is my style, what can you do?' Later the narrator suggests that Regev's 'impulsiveness' is in fact 'calculated and controlled' (Lukach 2014).

Despite having positioned herself at number five in the Likud primaries, which she hoped would secure her a ministerial position of her choosing, after the 2015 election Regev was offered the Ministry of Culture and Sports (MOCAS), which wasn't her office of choice. Although she did not hide her initial disappointment, Regev soon became determined to make lemonade out of the ministerial position she was given. Using her media acumen, she turned her 5 year tenure into a long series of high-profile strife and mediatised scandals in which she clashed with the Israeli arts and culture establishment. Regev effectively used these conflicts to position herself as the menace of this circle, painting its members collectively as elitist, leftist enemies of the state.

The musical genesis of Regev's 'low' iconicity

Regev's use of what was considered by some as contentious or vulgar language unbecoming of a parliamentarian first became highlighted during the J14 social protests of 2011.[3] Videos of her visit to the main protest site in Tel Aviv and videos of her confrontations with leading activists on television went viral, some of them in remixed musical versions by remix artist Noy Alooshe. During the campaign leading up to the 2013 elections, Regev attended a pre-election panel at a school, where she gave an especially animated performance, reminiscent of stand-up comedy. A video of her speech was published online, and Alooshe used this as the basis for another musical remix. It was posted to his YouTube account (Alooshe 2012), featured on multiple mainstream media platforms and eventually reposted by Regev herself on her Facebook page. In his remix, Alooshe chopped-up Regev's words to create a musical refrain where she appears to be saying '*Miri Regev hi shkhuna – kapayim!*' (lit. – 'Miri Regev is "neighbourhood" – clap your hands!'). The Hebrew word *shkhuna* literally means 'neighbourhood', and specifically (in common parlance) a low-income one. From the 1970s on, it was a keyword in Israeli cultural and political discourse surrounding the discrimination of Mizrahim, as represented in Begin's 1977 urban housing plan called '*Proyekt Shikum Shkhunot*' (Neighbourhood Rehabilitation Project; see Filc 2010, p. 38). However, in later slang usage the term came to characterise a person, act or place as having an (often embarrassingly) improper, informal, provincial or amateurish 'low' manner. Alooshe also highlighted through repetition Regev's statement that she is 'not a thief', where she used a grammatically incorrect (but colloquially widespread) feminine form of the noun 'thief' (*ganava*, instead of the grammatically correct *ganevet*), implicitly as a demonstration that she is indeed *Shkhuna*.

Although presumably meant to satirise Regev's antics, the contribution of Alooshe's musical intervention to the iconicity of Regev's political style could hardly be overstated. Its viral musical packaging made sensible (to use Rancière's language) key elements in Regev's public image, and the importance of style therein. She became widely known among her detractors as '*Miri kapayim*', and the very term (*kapayim*) came to represent, in association with her persona, what critics saw as a prevalent contemporary Israeli culture of philistinism. However, such identifications with 'neighbourhoods' populated by Mizrahim, and with a 'hand clapping' popular culture which shuns high art in favour of what 'the people' care for, were quite literally on-brand for Regev, who doubled down and cultivated this image with care and enthusiasm. In September 2015, just a few months after she was appointed as Minister of Culture and Sports, Regev gave an interview to the high-circulation pro-Netanyahu newspaper *Israel Hayom* (Lansky 2015), where she declared:

I, Miri Regev-Siboni [Regev's Moroccan maiden name] from Kiryat Gat, daughter of Felix and Marcelle Siboni, never read Chekhov. I rarely went to the theatre as a child, I listened to songs by Joe Amar and to Sephardi songs, and I'm just as cultured as any consumer of Western culture. You will not dictate to me what is right and what is wrong.

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[3] J14 was an Israeli analogue of protests such as Tahrir Square in Egypt, the Spanish M-15 movement and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, which retroactively received criticism for being limited in scope to the concerns of the middle-class. See Grinberg (2013).

Regev's statement stirred a wide debate on cultural values and valuations, in which there was little room for nuanced responses that reject the basic premise of this dichotomy. By the end of her term, in 2020, Regev claimed that she in fact did read Chekhov as part of her high-school curriculum and that the original statement was intended to 'irritate, shake things up, [and] provoke' (see Ben-Dor Benite 2020).

Regev's musical agenda

While much of the contention she provoked revolved around the film industry and the theatre, Regev had a related-yet-distinct strategy when it came to music. As demonstrated by her 2015 statement about not having read Chekhov, the difference lies in the fact that while Regev lacked a popular and widely recognisable alternative that she could oppose to the culture of the 'elites' in fields such as theatre, film or fine art (to be sure, not for lack of Mizrahi artists who excelled in these media, but because their output was still regarded as 'high culture' and lacked a broad cultural appeal among Regev's target audience), in music Regev found a ready-made counter-hegemonic discourse that she could associate herself with and champion, revolving around the marginalisation of Mizrahim in Israeli national music.

The campaign against the marginalisation of Mizrahi music and musicians, spearheaded in the 1980s and 1990s by Avihu Medina and others, often inhabited a paradoxical discursive territory: on the one hand, popular Mizrahi musicians like Medina rejected the label 'Mizrahi music' as a 'ghettoisation' of their work, effectively excluding them from the unmarked norm of 'Israeli music' (Horowitz 2010; Regev and Seroussi 2004). However, the very act of protesting this exclusion marked who and what was being excluded as an 'other' (separate) group and style. Despite a dramatic change in the media landscape, which repositioned the next generation of musicians working in the (retitled) 'Mediterranean' style as the most successful pop musicians in Israel, Regev's rehashing of those old grievances thrived precisely on this ambivalence: Regev appeared to be speaking about biased aesthetic judgement, when she was really telling her constituents that their sovereignty as 'the majority' (the 'people') was still being undermined by an entrenched all-powerful elite.

As Minister of Culture and Sports, Regev made the real and symbolic promotion of Mizrahi music a central agenda of her office. In the field of concert music, she gave the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra of Ashdod[4] the status of a 'National Orchestra' (formerly reserved only for the Israeli Philharmonic), which doubled its state funding (Ben Nun 2020). She fought high-profile battles with the Minister of Defence, in charge of the popular military radio station *Galgalatz*, criticising its musical programming for being exclusionary. She also changed legislation and significantly increased the arts funding for peripheral municipalities and local authorities, which formerly had been skewed strongly in favour of major institutions in Tel Aviv (Ben Nun 2020). Regev also initiated large summer festivals, funded directly by her office, which took place in cities where support for Likud was the highest. The flagship

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[4] Founded in 1994, The Israeli Andalusian Orchestra is a performing body dedicated to Arab Andalusian Music, as the cultural heritage of North African Jews. The orchestra's founders premised its creation on the idea that presenting their heritage as form of 'classical' art was the only way to secure recognition and funding from the state (see Aharon-Gutman 2013; Wasserman 2012).

event in that cluster was the *Keter ha-Mizrah* ('Crown of the East') Festival, celebrating Israeli Mediterranean popular music. While the festival, held annually between 2016 and 2019, often paid homage to veteran performers of *muzika mizrahit* (some of whom were struggling financially), unusually large sums went to already rich and popular artists, and especially to Eyal Golan and artists signed to his label (Ben Nun 2020). Regev herself was the star of these festivals and was featured prominently on stage, on mega screens on-site, and in a live video broadcast on the MOCAS Facebook page. In 2019, the Elections Committee ruled that videos featuring Regev and Golan together at the festival violated the election laws by using public resources to produce and disseminate election propaganda (Anderman 2019).

While all these interventions pertain to state-funded media, institutions and events under (or adjacent to) Regev's ministerial jurisdiction, we should understand them in the context of the mainstreamisation of Mizrahi-associated styles outlined above, driven largely by privately owned commercial media, and especially by the high ratings of musical reality shows. By the beginning of Regev's term in 2015, this mainstreamisation was largely complete. More than affirmative action then, Regev's policies were meant as symbolic gestures of reclaiming the state's institutional patronage in the name of the socially mobile Mizrahi middle-class that kept Likud in power.

Violating civil rites: Regev and the torch-lighting ceremony

So far, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which Regev's political style structurally resonates with the performance of style-as-identity which lies at the core of musical reality show, and described how Regev mobilised music as part of her appeal through policy and funding. In this section, I take a closer look at a platform where Regev intervened more directly in musical programming, drawing on the reservoir of music reality shows and on their instant-stars: the Independence Day torch-lighting ceremony. The ceremony is the main event of the official state Independence Day celebration (Handelman and Katz 1995), which takes place on the fifth day of the month of Iyar, according to the Hebrew calendar. It is an originally quasi-religious ritual that performs the emotionally complex transition from the sombre Memorial Day to the festive Independence Day which immediately follows it. The introduction of television broadcasts in 1968 turned the ceremony into a larger and more elaborate show, as it became 'less sacred, and more carnivalesque' (Kook 2005, p. 163). It eventually took on the form of a mass spectacle featuring hundreds of choir singers and dancers. One of the biggest media events on the Israeli calendar, the ceremony is broadcast on all major channels – commercial and public – and usually garners a combined rating of 30–40% (Adar 2021). These figures put it on a par with the peak ratings of commercial broadcasts such as the final episodes of popular reality shows. Traditionally, the involvement of politicians in the content of the ceremony was relatively minor, and it was considered one of the last bastions of Israeli Republicanism (*mamlakhtiyut*).

Regev's high involvement in the organisation of the ceremony was evident from her first year in office. The 2016 ceremony received commendations for a record representation of Mizrahim among the torchbearers and featured musical artists, but otherwise demonstrated continuity with previous years. In the 2017 ceremony, however, two new trends emerged which intensified over the next years: the

increasing politicisation of the ceremony – including the personal cult of Netanyahu and his wife, as well as of Regev herself – and the inclusion of young singers who had recently become famous through their participation in *Idol*-format shows. The 2017 ceremony, for which the theme was '50 years since the reunification of Jerusalem', included a musical number featuring a medley of 'Jerusalem songs' arranged in a Middle-Eastern style. These were performed by Avner Gedasi, Nasrin Qadri, Sapir Saban, and multiple choirs. Saban (b. 1994) was the winner of the fourth season of *The Voice: Israel*. For her performance in the finals of that show, Saban, who is of Turkish-Jewish descent, performed the Turkish song '*Haydi söyle*' ('Come on, tell me') from the repertoire of Turkish *arabesk* superstar İbrahim Tatlıses. Turkish *arabesk* music has long held a prominent place in the assemblage of styles that informed *muzika mizrahit* in Israel, yet its foregrounding in the original language on prime-time Israeli television pushed the envelope on its recognition as part of the Israeli cultural repertoire. Only two months after her win, in what was perhaps the shortest leap from newly found fame to participation in a hallowed national ritual, the 23-year-old Saban was already cast to perform in the torch ceremony. Bestowing the recognition of appearing in the national ceremony on a singer who had no musical achievements outside of her TV fame seemed to follow on Regev's statement, made upon assuming her ministerial office (Ashkenazi 2015), that 'the importance of culture was to give the people of Israel "bread and circuses"' (using the Hebrew form for the Roman phrase *Panem et circenses*, which stands for superficial gratification without actual political representation).

Saban was joined on stage by another singer who rose to fame after winning a song competition show – Nasrin Qadri. A Palestinian citizen of Israel from a Muslim family, Qadri is probably the most successful Palestinian Arab pop artist in Israel's history. She was the co-winner of the second season of Eyal Golan's *Idol*-format TV show *Eyal Golan kore lach* ('Eyal Golan is Calling You'), first aired in 2012 on the Israeli Music Channel, and was signed to his label. Qadri went on to court the Jewish-Israeli mainstream with songs that combined Hebrew and Arabic. Her participation in the ceremony, as well as in the state ceremony for Memorial Day which had taken place on the previous day, was not her first performance in a state event but was still sensational. It was received by many Jewish Israelis as a testament to both the multicultural and democratic merits of the state, and to the possibility that Palestinian citizens of Israel will relinquish their separate national identity and accept their subordinate place in Israel as a Jewish state (Karkabi 2021). This symbolic gesture of acceptance had, however, more transactional aspects as well. Under the guidance of her personal manager Hagai Uzan – a staunch supporter of Regev – Qadri paid personal homage to the minister on several interviews. 'She gave me the privilege of belonging', Qadri said of Regev (Rath 2017). The following year, Qadri was one of three artists represented by Golan's label to receive the exorbitant amount of 50,000 NIS (roughly 10,500 British Pounds) – close to the fee for a full length show – for the performance of a single song at Regev's *Keter Ha-Mizrah* festival (Ben Nun 2020).

Even more interesting, however, is how the arranger of the medley, Dani Meged, envisioned Qadri's place in his musical 'distribution of the sensible'. During much of the sequence, Qadri sustains long ornamental melismas reminiscent of the Arab vocal genre called *layālī*, almost as a musical illustration of the atmospheric sound of the Jerusalem *adhan* (call to prayer), mentioned in the lyrics of one of the songs included in the medley: *Yerushalayim shel shalom* ('Jerusalem of

Peace'). This assignment both fetishised Qadri's 'Oriental' vocal prowess and 'style' in the manner characteristic of the *Idol* format, and made her voice an ornamental appendix to the national content of the Zionist lyrics, delivered by the multitude of (Jewish) singers, rather than an integral part of it.

The 2018 ceremony was the occasion of Israel's 70th Independence Day, mandating (by precedent) a larger, more extravagant celebration. Regev and Netanyahu were even more audacious than in previous years in politicising the event, breaking with the tradition that the only politician speaking at the ceremony is the Knesset Chairperson. Regev allowed Netanyahu to speak, in open defiance of the Chairperson's decree. The ceremony, which once again featured *Idol* format winners of newly found fame (Eden Elena and Neta Barzilai) opened with Sarit Hadad performing a 'Songs of the Land of Israel' classic: '*Mi-Shirey eretz ahavati*' ('From the Songs of My Beloved Land'). Alongside Eyal Golan, Hadad was the major figure in breaking the 'glass ceiling' of *muzika mizrahit* performers in mainstream media during the late 1990s, and she is also a former mentor on the show *The Voice: Israel* (2012–2014). Hadad performed the song in an arrangement (by Ya'akov Lamai) that featured the oud as a solo counterpart to Hadad's masterfully embellished vocal style. The implication of this opening to the ceremony, so closely associated at the time with Regev's public agenda, was unmistakable: the Middle Eastern musical redressing of poet Leah Goldberg's words, which are widely associated with the song's original performer, Hava Alberstein, expropriated the national repertoire of Songs of the Land of Israel from its erstwhile protagonists, and redistributed its symbolic capital to 'the people', i.e. to Mizrahi Jews. To be sure, there was nothing inherently antagonistic or even new about Hadad performing an old Israeli classic (formerly perceived as Ashkenazi) in her own style, nor about recognising her as a national singer. It is only in the context of Regev's politicising of the event as part of a Trump-esque never-ending campaign that this musical gesture received an oppositional meaning. It is significant, however, that the 'changing of the guards' at the heart of Likud's populist narrative never abandoned the core repertoire of the previous labour-Zionist hegemony as a musical symbol of the nation. That the meaning of this repertoire could be diverted by replacing the performer, and (more importantly) replacing the style of the performance to articulate the new protagonist through its inferred 'we the people', underlines the regime of style as a common aesthetic programme shared between popular culture and populist politics. The regime of style, in this sense, partakes in the *Idol* logic of a cover version: it needs no new songs, because the change it brings is about how this 'we' is performed, and by whom, with the 'how' asserting the identity of the 'who' against the stable reference of the 'same old song' – tried and true – and still pregnant with the authority, the sovereignty of the old guard.

A final example from the 2018 Independence Day celebrations demonstrates Regev's deep commitment to such symbolic acts of succession. As the official song of the celebrations Regev accepted the recommendation of the programme committee in selecting the Song 'Hallelujah' (1979) by lyricist Shimrit Or and composer Kobi Oshrat. The song was Israel's entry to the 1979 Eurovision Song Contest held in Jerusalem, which Israel went on to win for the second year in a row. However, as the song's lyrics are rather general and neutral, expressing the exuberance and thankfulness folded in this biblical word (which literally means 'praise god'), Regev insisted that the lyricist add a new verse, specifically exalting the state (Eichner 2018). It was then announced that the performer of the song would be the

23-year-old *X Factor Israel* winner Eden Ben Zaken (mentioned above), Israel's most popular female singer of the 2010s. This decision caused a scandal as it side-lined the original performer for the song, Gali Atari (b. 1953), who was still an active performing artist at the time. Eventually, a compromise was reached, and Atari performed the song with Ben Zaken as a duet. Yet controversy continued to mar the celebratory re-recording of the song. Outrage broke out when the official video of the song was released (MOCAS 2018): it featured the two singers on stage with an all-female string quartet, surrounded by a large crowd of 'all-Israeli' fans, singing the lyrics and waving the national flag. Among them was Regev herself, who appeared several times on camera, singing and dancing among the people, and received a long close-up halfway through the video. Finally, several commentators, including the lyricist herself, lamented the new electronic dance arrangement, tying this aesthetic criticism with their dissatisfaction with Regev's overinvolvement in the minutiae of the production.

The identity of the singers involved in the 'Hallelujah' affair is pertinent in exposing the populist configuration of 'us' *vs.* 'them' promoted by Regev. Atari is of Yemeni descent, and therefore, by the narrowest ethnic definition, a Mizrahi woman. However, she is not considered Mizrahi as far as this category denotes the 'plebs': she never worked in Mizrahi-associated genres, and rarely foregrounded her ethnicity. She also comes from a family of famous artists and media personalities. The affront to Atari and the endorsement of Ben Zaken represent therefore the antagonistic and performative 'changing of the guards' at the core of Regev's agenda.

Concluding thoughts

The decision to highlight a nostalgic Israeli classic, 'Hallelujah', and then amass new layers of sound and meaning that transform its identity exemplifies the oppositional narrative of right-wing populism, which takes on increased performative vigour as populists reach positions of power. Retaining the symbolic potency stored in canonical national symbols, it resignifies them by substituting their implied subject, reclaiming them as the capital of the new Mizrahi middle-class, embodied by the pop star (Eden Ben Zaken) and her patron (Miri Regev). The efficacy of this performative substitution is in part measured by the controversy it generates, which serves to reaffirm the populist division of the political field.

What I have demonstrated here for the Israeli case illuminates the relationship between the populist style of politics and the pop-cultural repertoires that facilitate the reproduction and negotiation of social identities today. The collapsing of state-sponsored and commercial ways of signification into each other produces an ideal platform for populist appeals, which effectively echo 'the popular', using the fast refresh rate of entertainment media (e.g. the instant stardom generated by reality TV), as well as its market-oriented structures of meaning. Regev's mobilisation of music represents therefore the aesthetic agenda of contemporary populism in several ways: by 'giving the people what they want' (meaning, what they get anyway on commercial media platforms), by promoting a perception of the 'people' (the protagonists of national culture) which conflates the nation and those groups in which a ripe balance of aggrievement (often socio-economic, cultural) and entitlement (often ethno-national, religious, or racial) can be politicised, and by flaunting an identitarian 'low' style whereby the politician herself partakes in

the contemporary repertoires of identity and celebrity formulated in pop-cultural contexts. Style emerges in this relationship as the central axis connecting populists, their base and commercial models which provide the 'grammar' for their interaction. It defines both an aesthetic regime and the aesthetic of the regime.

Acknowledgements

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