

[A Film Scholarship without Films? Reimagining Israeli Cinema History through the Archive](#)

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Symposium

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July 5, 2022 to July 6, 2022

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Israel

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Cultural History / Studies, Digital Humanities, Film and Film History, Jewish History / Studies, Middle East History / Studies

In the introduction to the 2007 anthology *Looking Past the Screen*, Eric Smoodin points to a methodological lacuna within the conventional form of film historiography. This form - which “has at least since the mid-1950s been dominated by the study of the film itself, often organized around genre, nation, or authorship” - is not without its great benefits for historical knowledge; yet by emphasizing cinematic text over context, it has also missed out on important historical insight that may be garnered from closer scrutiny of nonfilmic archival holdings. In order to offer a corrective, Smoodin suggested that we imagine an alternative form of historiography, one which decenters the film in favor of other types of film-related material found in the archive.

Since pointing to this possibility of a “film scholarship without films,” Smoodin's suggestion has materialized into exciting new avenues of research within various precincts of cinema studies. In the growing body of academic work on Israeli film history, however, the impact of such developments has rarely been felt. As early as 2001, historian Moshe Zimmerman lamented the tendency of Israeli cinema scholars to “analyze the content, narrative, ideological and aesthetic aspects of finished films,” while showing an “almost total disregard” of primary sources that may reveal “the conditions of technology, funding, production, distribution and mediation [of] filmmaking in Israel.” A few worthwhile exceptions notwithstanding, over the past two decades little has changed: Israeli film scholarship continues to leave nonfilmic archival materials unexplored, and by extension, its own historical paradigms largely unchallenged.

This symposium proposes that we reconceptualize Israeli film historiography in light of cinema studies' recent focus on exploring the archive. As such, the event aims to

highlight two interconnected sites of concern. The first of these has to do with accounting for the current state of archiving for Israeli film-related primary materials. To date, there is no central archive dedicated to these materials, with main archival activities concentrating on the films themselves. Accordingly, and in spite of contemporary digitization efforts, copious amounts of relevant content remain inaccessible, or worse – unarchived. This is particularly disconcerting in the case of disenfranchised constituencies such as the Palestinian people, whose film history stands under erasure due to the eradication of material traces, or their sequestering and dispersal within classified archives (as those of the Israeli Defense Forces). Yet even archives of more “sanctioned” objects and texts suffer from neglect due to an absence of rigorous archival attention or sufficient government and private funding. Thus, if we are to move Israeli cinema studies “in the direction of new sources of material and toward the possibility of film histories in which films themselves might have a modest place and none of the singular importance that marked the discipline for so long” (Smoodin 2014), then we must first map out what types of sources are actually out there in both public and private collections. On this foundation, we may begin planning for an adequate platform that networks these sources and therefore allows for their more effective induction into film history.

Concurrently, the quest for redefining the archive must be intertwined with a revision of how film scholarship may work with archives. Here, in our second site of concern, we take inspiration from examples of “writing film histories without films” outside of Israeli cinema studies. For many years now, such research has not only pointed to undervalued yet potentially worthwhile objects of film culture, from posters to press kits, fan books to trade journals, production memos to government files; they also made us aware of new and creative ways to use these sources of information, which a constant disciplinary focus on filmic textual analysis has unfortunately marginalized. Implementing these methods onto Israeli film-related archival sources could produce new histories, which are particularly sensitive to Israeli cinema's place within a transnational landscape of moving image traditions; it could also redefine what skills are necessary for film scholarship to deepen its historical engagement – especially with respect to recent developments in Digital Humanities, which offer cutting-edge avenues of research and data visualization. These are ambitious goals, yet we hope our symposium will serve as a modest first step towards their realization.

With these emphases in mind, we invite scholars of various disciplines to submit paper proposals that fall under the following headings:

1. Completed or ongoing research projects on Israeli film history, whose findings testify to substantial and meaningful use of archival materials that are not the films themselves (such as reviews, memoirs and testimonials, production and censorship files, financial data, trade journals, advertisements, on-set photos, etc.).
2. Proposed research projects on Israeli film history, which can point to particular databases/collections/archives of nonfilmic film-related materials, and provide methodological insight into how these may be used.

Selected papers will be presented in-person at Tel Aviv University, **July 5-6, 2022** (online participation also possible). In addition to scholarly panels, the symposium will also include commissioned workshops by archival specialists, who will introduce the range of different film-related materials under their supervision and discuss how these may contribute to future research.

Paper proposals should include an abstract (no more than 300 words) and full contact information (with institutional affiliation). Please submit them via email to symposium organizers Dr. Dan Chyutin (dchyutinfilm@tauex.tau.ac.il) AND Yael Mazor (yaelmazo@tauex.tau.ac.il) by **March 15, 2022**.

The symposium will take place under the auspices of Tel Aviv University's Steve Tisch School of Film and Television. Winner of the 2021 IAMHIST Challenge, this event is generously sponsored by the International Association of Media and History, with the specific aim of encouraging graduate students/early career scholars to develop their professional networks and acquire research-related skills.

We look forward to your proposal!

Dan Chyutin and Yael Mazor

The Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University

Advisory committee: Prof. Dr. Raz Yosef (Tel Aviv University), Dr. Boaz Hagin (Tel Aviv University), Prof. Dr. Rachel S. Harris (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), Dr. Ori Levin (Tel Aviv University), Dr. Hilla Lavie (Hebrew University)

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