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## **Tamar Liebes: a *scholar extraordinaire* of audiences as citizens in public and private spaces**

By Sonia Livingstone, London School of Economics and Political Science, and Peter Lunt, University of Leicester

In researching this short piece, Sonia contacted Elihu Katz, long-time co-author of Tamar Liebes, who mentioned that one of Tamar's persistent ideas had been to compare the personal diaries of correspondents during the 1948 War of Independence (of which she had collected a few) with the dispatches they sent to their overseas readers. This reflects a running argument Sonia had with Tamar in which Tamar wanted to overhear casual conversations among the public waiting at bus stops, to learn what they spontaneously discussed about media, to see how these compared with what they told us in research interviews, but which Sonia thought was potentially unethical, although certainly intriguing.<sup>1</sup> And, in turn, it reflects her work with Rivka Ribak comparing the political arguments in the domestic living room, especially between parents and children in front of the television news, as the former sought (or fought!) to socialize the latter into their political worldview, with the public opinion as revealed in opinion polls. As Liebes and Ribak found, one reason that Hawkish views seem to win in the polls is that their discursive features fit better in the cut and thrust of the parent/child argument at home (while the more nuanced and contextualised views of Dovish liberals are hard to convey convincingly within a family argument).<sup>2</sup> This fascination with naturally occurring discourse also reflects Tamar's intellectual origins in ordinary language philosophy and her engagement with pragmatics, especially Jakobson. In *The Export of Meaning*, she and Elihu Katz used focus groups composed of people known to each other and in their domestic contexts as the closest proxy they could manage for everyday conversation. And they drew on Jakobson in contrasting 'referential' and 'metalinguistic' (or critical, in the sense of literary critical rather than politically critical) readings of *Dallas*, on the part of the audience – a distinction that has proved insightful to many researchers in the years since in theorising the nature of audiences' interpretive 'activities.'

These recollections remind us how Tamar Liebes liked to use multiple research methods across multiple sites of data collection. But they also tell us something important about how she conceived of the relation between public and private, and how the values and structures of the private do or don't find expression in the public sphere. She was particularly sensitive to the ways in which the media are prone to do injustice to the nuance and flexibility

of public discourse. Before she became an academic, Tamar was proud to have introduced children's story-reading on Israeli radio - full versions, mind you, of Charles Dickens or Kenneth Grahame or Frances Hodgson Burnett. She would brook no talking down to children but, rather, sought to inspire their private lives and imaginations with the richness of classic literature. The contrast with the press and broadcasting was not accidental as she saw great literature as an extension and expression of common sense in the sense of deep cultural understanding, according a special place to radio in this larger effort. Her purpose was to inspire their public lives and she set this as a standard by which to judge the press and television.

In other words, Tamar Liebes did not want to listen in to conversations at bus stops in living rooms as a kind of eavesdropping, to discover the dirt, mess or muddle of the everyday behind the public façade, as perhaps do some researchers. She understood that research with audiences worked best as a dialogue rather than an interrogation, and she wanted to show how people's private imaginations and conversations can be inspiring, complex, rich, full of conflicts worth having and fights over what matters.<sup>3</sup> Thus she was disappointed intellectually (as well as politically) that the Dovish families couldn't make their views influential and the Hawkish families won through repeating stereotypes and platitudes and wondered about the role of the media in this. No wonder that she loved to peel back the superficial gloss of the soap opera, to reveal the complexities and struggles that people in their everyday lives really are struggling with,<sup>4</sup> just as she explored, in *The Export of Meaning*, the subtle variations in the responses and engagements of audiences from different cultural backgrounds to the mythic quality of *Dallas*. A key aspect of this engagement was drawn from Jakobson's conception of the ludic functions of language – the interplay of characters in soap opera invites the serious play of audiences' use of media representations as resources to work out their commitments and differences. Thus the quality and potential of those resources was crucial to her.

In Liebes' view, study of the audience reveals how life is lived privately yet it continually and necessarily draws upon and spills over into the public sphere, with both domestic and public spheres now being mediated.<sup>5</sup> Hence, debates held in the domestic sphere – variously called by other scholars the proto-public or pre-public – lay a necessary foundation for the public sphere,<sup>6</sup> and personal troubles reflect broader social and cultural contradictions. Without the audience, there is no (now mediated) public, and without a mediated public there is no global public, not even much chance of a national public (even in a relatively small country such as Israel). As a rationalist, Liebes hoped that the media, both

local and especially transnational, would bring more significance and so more wisdom to both private experiences and the public sphere. She was thus perpetually and increasingly critical and disappointed by the gap between the promise and the reality of the media.

Tamar's disappointment was visceral as well as intellectual. During Sonia's first academic visit to Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1988 and, indeed, every other time she visited them, Tamar exemplified the 'active' audience, always engaged with and contesting the news, shouting back at the TV set, criticising whatever was on, drawing anyone in front of the screen with her into the action taking place on it, on screen and in front of screen merging in a mediated and common interaction, simultaneously public and private. However abstract her interpretation might be it was always rooted in a recognition of the commitments and diversity of contexts of viewing. In the 1980s and 1990s, audience researchers helped make that public visible, at home, thinking, wanting, shaped by divergent positions and joined in the mutual act of shaping the political. All this was in stark and deliberate contradiction of the mythic passive audience of 'couch potatoes' somnolescent on the sofa. From her work on mutual aid in the reception of Dallas,<sup>7</sup> to political parenting with Rivka Ribak,<sup>8</sup> through her account of hegemony in relation to news,<sup>9</sup> to the 'export of meaning' through global television, the dialectic of any argument was, as Liebes saw it, played out through the debates among ordinary people, at home, in the street, at work, in front of as well as on the screen.

This conception of the audience was far from homogenous, passive, uncommitted; it stood out against the image of 'the audience' so often conjured into the imagination by those scholars who carefully keep their distance from actual audiences, in their messy homes, with their domestic strife and flaky politics (notwithstanding those scholars' willingness to pronounce upon their lives). Tamar Liebes was fascinated by the fact that today's public - being a mediated public, necessarily - is not to be reached simply by money or law or institutional demands or whatever else it is that makes people act in the world because she understood the commitments that came from family, community and ethnicity. This is why, in all their diversity they are to be reached by words and images. And the power of words and images, inevitably enacted in real contexts as part of distinct cultures, is what she knew most about, being a philosopher, a humanist, a sociolinguist, a discourse analyst, a critical observer of cultures. Through words, people are drawn into understanding or misunderstanding, into action or inaction, into consensus or conflict.

Tamar Liebes was fascinated by the words that society recognises formally as important - the news. But she was also fascinated by overlooked and supposedly trivial words too - think of the gossipy yet mythical world of the soap opera, the chatter of the radio that also constructs a nation, the advice that magazines meet out to working class women (- the subject of an early academic discussion in which Andrea Press, Tamar Liebes and Sonia first met). In the classic and now-foundational research literature on media audiences, *The Export of Meaning*<sup>10</sup> is a paid-up member of a small and much-cited canon. Yet it contrasts interestingly with other members of the canon<sup>11</sup> (itself something of an irony for someone who relished writing against the canon<sup>12</sup>). It's not like the outputs of Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies, where the women struggled to get a look in;<sup>13</sup> not focused on the peculiar rituals of the British street corner or any other particular corner of the world but outward in orientation, already embracing the global flows of media and asking critical questions about the future. Not reducing audiences to subject positions in ideologies. Not obsessed with texts alone, though she loved them, but recognising that texts come alive when they are realised - interpreted - through the mutual aid, the collaborative activity of their audience; neither socially determined nor individualistic but part of cultural flows, shaped across place and, increasingly important in her work, over time.

Tamar inhabited many academic spaces, but one of her enduring favorites in which Peter shared was the annual meetings of the Broadcast Talk group in the ancient Scottish house, Ross Priory on the banks of Loch Lomond.<sup>14</sup> Here she was in her element amongst a small group of scholars exploring the boundaries of media and discourse. And here she enjoyed being part of the audience as much as presenting, always waiting to be challenged, to hear what was new or difficult. Tamar had a spontaneous and quick verbal intelligence and when presenting her own work demanded nothing less than the most stringent criticism. If that was not realized in the public sessions it would be insistently demanded in private. Tamar always believed that the ideas were more important than individual reputations and could only be extended through critical and collaborative dialogue. For example, in a presentation with her long term friend and colleague Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Tamar bravely explored Goffman's *Frame Analysis* in order to open up a shared conversation grounded in the first principles of pragmatics.

Sonia's first meeting with Tamar never happened. For someone writing a PhD on the soap opera, Sonia's perfect conversational space had been constructed thanks to Ellen Seiter and her colleagues at an invited conference in the picturesque little German town of Blaubeuren in 1986, when 'everyone who was anyone' had been invited.<sup>15</sup> For personal reasons, Tamar had to cancel at the last minute, and it wasn't till later that we met and began a long-term collaboration and friendship. She would have enjoyed that conference, full of interdisciplinary intersections, with people she agreed with and disagreed with, generative of new ideas, erudite also in honoring the old ideas. But ever since, the intellectual conversation in the rooms she created, will always stay with us. Since then, we shared many conversations, several articles, always someone for Sonia to go shopping with at ICA conferences, while Peter would look forward to the next philosophical argument. Her voice and persona were vivid: she is still in the room, arguing with us, criticizing us, expecting us to keep the ideas moving forward.

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