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Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

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The myth of the Israel Defense Forces through the lens of critical rhetoric
Mit Sił Obronnych Izraela w perspektywie retoryki krytycznej

Abstract

The subject of this article is the rhetoric of media communication employed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), with the research material consisting of posts published on the IDF's official Facebook profile. The analyzed posts span the period from October 7, 2023, to January 5, 2025. The rhetorical analysis of hasbara (the IDF's propaganda) is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiology and Michel Foucault's discourse theory, as well as in the tradition of critical rhetoric within rhetorical studies. These methodological perspectives effectively capture the processes through which the representation of reality is mystified. In Barthes' terms, this phenomenon can be understood as myth. Through the lens of critical rhetoric, this study examines not only the official narratives but also what has been deliberately omitted. It analyses the rhetorical devices that construct the myth of the IDF as a moral organization, including persuasion through ethos, character and euphemisms. Equally significant in the IDF's process of mythologization and mystification is the exclusion of content that undermines the army's moral virtues. Consequently, the analysis of the IDF's communication considers both the rhetoric of official representations and vernacular rhetoric, as discourse derives meaning from strategies of inclusion and exclusion. This understanding of critical rhetorical inquiry aligns with Kenneth Burke's assertion that rhetorical analysis should always be prepared to expose mystifications.

Tematem tego artykułu jest retoryka komunikacji medialnej stosowanej przez Siły Obronne Izraela (IDF), a materiał badawczy stanowią posty publikowane na oficjalnym profilu IDF na Facebooku. Analizowane posty obejmują okres od 7 października 2023 roku do 5 stycznia 2025 roku. Retoryczna analiza hasbary (propagandy IDF) opiera się na semiologii Rolanda Barthesa i teorii dyskursu Michela Foucaulta, a także na tradycji retoryki krytycznej w badaniach retorycznych. Te perspektywy metodologiczne skutecznie uchwytują procesy, poprzez które reprezentacja rzeczywistości zostaje zmistyfikowana. W ujęciu Barthesa zjawisko to można rozumieć jako mit. Z perspektywy retoryki krytycznej artykuł analizuje nie tylko oficjalne narracje, ale także to, co zostało celowo pominięte. Bada on środki retoryczne konstruujące mit IDF jako moralnej organizacji, w tym perswazję poprzez etos, charakter i eufemizmy. Równie istotnym elementem procesu mitologizacji i mistyfikacji IDF jest wykluczenie treści podważających moralne cnoty armii. W związku z tym analiza mitu IDF uwzględnia zarówno retorykę oficjalnych reprezentacji, jak i retorykę potoczną, ponieważ dyskurs czerpie znaczenie ze strategii włączania i wykluczania. Takie rozumienie krytycznej retoryki wpisuje się w twierdzenie Kennetha Burke'a, że analiza retoryczna powinna być zawsze gotowa do demaskowania mistyfikacji.

Key words

Israel Defense Forces, Gaza and Palestine, mystification, myth, critical rhetoric
Siły Obronne Izraela, Strefa Gazy i Palestyna, mistyfikacja, mit, retoryka krytyczna

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> it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out,
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> in short a perceptible absence
> (Barthes 1972, 142).
>
> Rhetorical analysis should always
> be ready to expose mystifications
> (Burke 1969, 178).

1. Introduction: Pre-text

The subject of this rhetorical analysis is the rhetoric of media communication employed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), with the research material consisting of posts published on the IDF's official Facebook profile. The analyzed posts span the period from October 7, 2023 – the date of the attack on Israel by Hamas and Palestinian organizations, which led to the *loss of more than 1,100 civilian lives* – until January 5, 2025, when the Palestinian Ministry of Health reported that the IDF's *military operations* in the Gaza Strip, ongoing for over a year, *had resulted in more than 45,850 fatalities*. During this time, according to Israeli sources, most of the *individuals* responsible for the attack *were neutralized*, and some of those taken hostage by Hamas *were released*.

2. Theory: Critical practice and rhetoric-as-epistemic

The use of italics in the opening paragraph of the article is intentional, serving to highlight both the subject matter and the analytical perspective adopted. The italicized rhetorical strategy of euphemization functions as a means of mystification or distorting representations of reality (Jasinski 2001, 378) and is particularly

prevalent in military and political propaganda. Euphemisms replace emotionally charged words related to violence of soldiers and civilians, the brutality of war, the suffering of starving children, the grief of hostage families and the materiality of human corpses. The purpose of employing euphemisms depends on the status of the message sender. In political and military discourses, euphemisms primarily serve to naturalize concepts, persuading the audience that the message they encounter represents not "a semiological system but […] an inductive one" (Barthes 1972, 130). In the hands of semioticians, however, a euphemism becomes an illustrative example of a rhetorical device used in propaganda to mystify, or mythologize, reality's representations. Kenneth Burke's words in *A Rhetoric of Motives* align with the concise semiotic understanding of the object and purpose of rhetorical analysis presented here:

> [T]here is always the possibility of "mystification," in the sense that language can be used to deceive. And at least as a kind of rough preparation for finer scrutiny, rhetorical analysis should always be ready to expose mystifications of this simple but ubiquitous sort (mystifications broadly reducible either to "unitary" devices whereby a special group gains unjust advantage from the services of other groups, or to "scapegoat" devices whereby an "enemy abroad" is wholly blamed for untoward conditions due mainly to domestic faults). (Burke 1969, 178)

Defining the purpose of rhetorical analysis as an endeavour aimed at uncovering mystification aligns it with critical practice, particularly as discussed in research on the rhetoric of inquiry. John Lyne (1985, 70) argues that understanding rhetoric as a critical practice involves demonstrating "how the tools of rhetorical analysis might be used to expose the hegemonic discourses of the psychological establishment in America." In a piece co-authored with Calvin McGee, he further notes that

> studies of a rhetoric of inquiry should be a kind of cultural or social criticism focused on the problem of domination. That is, rhetoric is viewed as an instrument of power used to clothe political polemics in scholarly garb, making it difficult to see where truth has been shaped and pruned to serve the interests of the prevailing social and political hegemony. (McGee and Lyne 1987, 386)

In a similar vein, Raymie McKerrow, following Michel Foucault, proposes that the critical rhetoric (*rhetorica docens*) he advocates takes as its object of analysis (*rhetorica utens*) both the rhetorical means of domination and freedom:

> As theory, a critical rhetoric examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world. […] The critique of domination has an emancipatory purpose – a telos toward which it aims in the process of demystifying the conditions of domination. The critique of freedom, premised on Michel Foucault's treatment of power relations, has as its telos the prospect of permanent criticism – a self-reflexive critique that turns back on itself even as it promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations. In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society – what possibilities for change the integration

> invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change. (McKerrow 1989, 91)

The shift in communication studies toward the critical theories of Michel Foucault (Foss and Gill 1987), Roland Barthes (Jasinski 2001, 378–382) and Louis Althusser (Charland 1987) redefines the object, purpose and status of rhetoric (*rhetorica docens*). Rhetoric possesses both reflexive and emancipatory potential. Understood in this way, it becomes a "critical practice" (Lyne 1985), a form of "cultural critique" (Hariman 1989, 225), or what Umberto Eco describes as "semiological guerrilla warfare" (Eco 1998, 135), intended to "teach people how to read the newspaper [and other media] in a critical fashion" (Eco 1998, 143). However, rhetoric does not relinquish its claim to the production of scientific knowledge. The emphasis on its cognitive potential aligns with the debate on rhetoric-as-epistemic (Gaonkar 1993). From the perspective of the rhetoric of inquiry, rhetoric functions as the hermeneutics of discourse (Nelson 1987, 426), revealing how rhetorical tools employed in persuasive messages generate specific meanings.

Critical rhetoric presented here, therefore, is not the art of eloquence but an analytical theory and practice that illuminates the relationship between media and state hegemony, processes of mystification and political domination, or, drawing on Barthes (1972, 129) as an inspiration for Foucault, the interplay between myth and governmentality. The rhetorical theories cited here provide sufficient justification for the article's effort to demystify media coverage of the Israel Defense Forces. These issues will be further explored in the chapter dedicated to methodology and empirical material.

3. Contexts: Holocaust, Nakba and apartheid

The primary motivation for conducting a study exclusively on the modes of communication used by the IDF – beyond the obvious factor of their widespread availability on social media, given that there is no official Hamas profile on Facebook or other legal platforms – is the presence of contradictory representations of the Israeli army across academic, political, military and activist discourses. On the one hand, the Israel Defense Forces are frequently described as the most moral army in the world, with this perception largely constructed and disseminated by the military itself and Israeli politicians, though not exclusively by them. On the other hand, Israeli researchers and NGOs analyzing institutionalized apartheid in Israel and monitoring human rights violations by the IDF in the occupied territories, Gaza and the West Bank, present a starkly different perspective. Furthermore, historical knowledge of the formation of the Israel Defense Forces, as well as

an understanding of the contemporary development of Israel's military industry and the IDF's strategic use of social media (Seo 2014, Stein 2012), highlight the rhetorical means of mystification as a subject of particular relevance for critically oriented rhetorical studies.

The Israeli army is more than just a military organization. Daniel Bar-Tal explores the unique relationship between Israeli society and the Israel Defense Forces and he asserts that "Israel is often characterized as an army that has a state, rather than a state that has an army" (Bar-Tal 2024, 63). Bar-Tal expands on this idea, arguing that

> The constant preoccupation with security-related beliefs has turned Israeli society into a "society in uniform." The military is regarded as a key institution – one that once enabled the state's establishment and now guarantees its continued existence. However, the army's special status is not solely a consequence of its formal role in ensuring security but also of its significance as a social institution in the sense that it is composed of all members of society. In Israel, there is no clear division between civil and military society of the kind found in other Western societies. This distinction is absent not only in traditional and national-religious circles but even in secular ones. The army and Israeli society are tightly interwoven and bound by unbreakable ties, forming a unified space and a singular identity. (Bar-Tal 2024, 61-62)

Every Israeli citizen, upon reaching the age of eighteen, is required to perform military service – three years for men and two years for women. Those who refuse to enlist for reasons of conscience, known in Israel as *sarvanim*, are currently sentenced to between 20 and 30 days in prison. Particularly noteworthy is the case of two young Israelis, Sofia Orr and Tal Mitnick, who refused military service after October 7, 2023. Their decision led to accusations of antisemitism and national treason from some segments of Israeli society. In June 2024, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the obligation to perform military service extends to ultra-Orthodox Jews, who had previously been exempt. This ruling underscores the extent to which military service is a near-universal experience in Israeli society, meaning that almost every Israeli citizen is, has been, or will be a soldier in the IDF. According to the IDF code of ethics, a soldier is expected not only to maintain "the security of Israeli civilians every single day," but also to aim "to contribute to the overall safety of civilians everywhere" (*The Spirit of the Israel Defense Forces*). In narratives about the morality of the IDF and Israel itself, the origins of the state and its persistence, reference to the Holocaust plays a fundamental role. Idith Zertal (2005, 7) points out, however, that "the organized Holocaust memory" in the past, as well as contemporary political discourses, serves "to the expansion and justification of Israeli occupation of a land inhabited by another people [Palestinians]." This is not an isolated view (cf. Myers 2024, 16).

The Israeli NGO B'Tselem argues that the IDF is an instrument of Israeli apartheid, operating beyond civilian judgment or scrutiny, and that its human rights

violations in Gaza and the West Bank are either whitewashed or removed from public discourse. In an interview on February 25, 2024, Ilan Pappé, the Jewish "new historian," asserts that Israel's practice of ethnic cleansing in Palestine did not end with the Nakba in May 1948, as extensively documented in his book (Pappé 2006), but continues to this day, currently manifesting as a crime perpetrated by IDF soldiers in Gaza, which he refers to as genocide (Pappé 2024).

South Africa's December 29, 2023, application to the Registry of the International Court of Justice to initiate proceedings against Israel for violations of its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, along with the Pre-Trial Chamber I of the International Criminal Court's November 21, 2024, warrants of arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant for "criminal responsibility for the following crimes as co-perpetrators for committing the acts jointly with others: the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare; and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts" from at least October 8, 2023, until at least May 20, 2024 (*International Criminal Court* 2024), further undermine Israel and his army's reputation for morality.

4. Methodology: Empirical material and tools of analysis

Knowledge of the contexts cited above – though inevitably incomplete and omitting significant aspects of the IDF's actions in the occupied territories – is essential for fulfilling the purpose of this study: a rhetorical analysis of media messages on the IDF's Facebook profile. To use Burke's terms, these contexts can be seen as a stage on which dramas of identification, stigmatization and exclusion unfold.

The empirical material analyzed consists of posts published daily between October 7, 2023, and January 5, 2025. Only a select number of complete statements and several dozen key mythical signs are referenced in the text, following the principles of sampling and content representativeness. Quotation marks are used throughout the article to denote statements and mythical signs. The chosen timeframe excludes content published during the Intifadas and other events significant from the perspective of the message sender; namely, events that, according to the rhetoric prevalent in Israel and rooted in Holocaust-related narratives, are framed as existential threats to Israeli Jews (Bar-Tal 2024; Zertal 2005). However, an analysis of the IDF's Facebook profile, which has over 3.8 million followers, frames the 2023 Hamas attack as a fundamental event, insofar as it structures the symbolic order of threat by evoking the spectre of the Holocaust. It is therefore unsurprising that this event activates an entire propaganda apparatus known as *hasbara*.

Hasbara, broadly understood as a form of "explanation," operates as both an official and unofficial means of Israeli state propaganda. The concept, introduced into public discourse by Polish Zionist activist and journalist Nahum Sokolow in the early 20th century, is instrumental in promoting Israel's perspective on its policies and actions. It builds, maintains or defends its image in foreign audiences. Characterized by selective framing as well as distortions and fabricated elements, hasbara serves to legitimize and justify *controversial* state decisions while shaping and controlling the broader narrative (Schleifer 2003; Murphy 2015). It is also known as public diplomacy. In the contemporary media landscape, it takes the form of videos, infographics, viral social media content and strategically promoted hashtags, all designed to reinforce Israel's messaging and influence global public opinion. In the digital age, one can speak of hasbara 2.0 (Aouragh 2016). This is the form of Israeli propaganda we are also dealing with on the IDF's official profile.

The rhetorical analysis of hasbara presented here is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiology and Michel Foucault's concept of discursive mechanisms of power. As demonstrated above, these methodological perspectives align with the framework of critical rhetoric and effectively capture the processes through which reality picture is mystified. In Barthes' terms, this phenomenon can be understood as myth.

Barthes (1972) emphasizes that popular culture and visual media play an increasingly significant role in the creation and dissemination of myths. At the age of mass communication, myths are no longer transmitted solely through oral traditions or religious texts but are widely spread via television, cinema, advertising, and, most notably, digital and social media. The visual nature of contemporary media makes myths especially powerful, as images can evoke strong emotional responses, bypass rational scrutiny, and create a sense of immediacy and authenticity. This dynamic is particularly evident in modern warfare, where visual representations – whether photographs, videos, or digitally altered images – are weaponized as part of propaganda efforts. The widespread circulation of visuals on social media reinforces mythic narratives, shaping public perception of conflicts and influencing global responses. In the context of warfare, myths often serve to dehumanize opponents, justify military actions, and portray one side as victims and the other as aggressors. These narratives are carefully curated to generate outrage, solidarity, or moral justification, making myths not just reflections of reality but active forces in shaping it.

According to the French semiotician, myths are mainly constructed by ruling classes or groups that wield the power to shape social relations, and they function to impose a particular interpretation of reality on subordinate classes, groups and

individuals. The dominant group has gained its social advantage precisely due to the specific course of history. The primary function of myth is to naturalize concepts, transforming historical and ideological constructs into seemingly self--evident truths. As a result, the recipient of a myth perceives it as reflecting an objective state of affairs rather than as an interpretation shaped through semiotic mystifications; "myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system" (Barthes 1972, 130). Although Barthes' primary focus was on popular culture, and his aim was to unmask and "account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature" (Barthes 1972, 8), his methodological framework closely aligns with rhetorical approaches, such as those advanced by Kenneth Burke, which seek to demystify representations of reality. The statements by Burke cited at the beginning of this article reaffirm this perspective.

As a methodological complement to the analyses conducted, Foucault's theory further underscores the importance of examining not only what is articulated within a discourse (or myth) but also what is omitted – both at the level of official narratives and within their social reception. Analyzing the rhetorical tools of mystification (mythization) employed in the IDF's communications is insufficient to fully grasp the mechanisms of power relations. Equally significant is the exclusion of certain elements from discourse and their reappearance through alternative channels. Thus, the analysis of hasbara must consider both the rhetoric of official representations and vernacular rhetoric, as the meaning of discourse is shaped by rhetorical strategies of inclusion and exclusion (Foucault 1981).

The questions that seem important from the critical rhetoric's perspective of cognitive benefits are as follows: How does the IDF present itself and its actions after October 7, 2023? How does it justify the necessity of war in Gaza? Who is the enemy and how are they portrayed? More generally, how does Israeli military propaganda (known as hasbara) operate? What myths are employed in shaping the media message and what purposes do they serve? What has been excluded from the discourse and why? These issues fit into the rich tradition of studies on the relationship between the military and public communication (Ornatowski 2021; Kochan 2023).

5. What has been included: Moral virtues and common enemy

On the IDF's Facebook profile, representations of Israeli soldiers can be seen in relation to a mode of persuasion based on ethos (the character of the speaker and the military organization). Ethos, it is important to emphasize, is not a thing or an essence of the speaker but, as Gerard Hauser (2002, 147) notes, an interpretation that emerges as a product of the interaction between the speaker and the audience.

Thus, ethos is a social and rhetorical construct and, most importantly, in the context of the analyses undertaken in this article:

> it is developed through rhetor choices of inclusion and exclusion. How we appear to others depends on the choices we make in presenting our message and ourselves. We can guide interpretations of our mental, emotional, and moral dispositions by the ways we argue, including the language we select, the tone we take, and the nonverbal cues we present. (Hauser 2002, 149)

One might get the impression that the creators of hasbara have done their homework in rhetoric. They are undoubtedly aware that, more often than not, people "trust people who speak with integrity, who make virtuous decisions, and whose actions inspire confidence that they know what is right and have the courage of their convictions" (Hauser 2002, 155). Accordingly, they construct a persuasive image of the IDF soldier (and the army) by emphasizing their moral habits. The IDF soldier is thus portrayed as "magnanimous," "noble," "generous," "just", "brave in combat" and as someone who "has the courage to believe in their Zionist convictions and defend them." This type of narrative reflects the principles outlined in the ethical code *The Spirit of the IDF*, which, as mentioned earlier, asserts that the IDF takes actions to protect even "civilians everywhere." Finally, the IDF soldier is also portrayed as "beautiful." To soften the army's image, a campaign was launched highlighting the presence of women in the IDF. A post from March 8, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024a), titled "These are the women of the IDF," is tagged with #internationalwomensday and #womensday and features a video in which young female soldiers proudly and cheerfully talk about their roles in the military (as a helicopter pilot, etc.) in order to protect Israel. Military service is conceptualized not only as a duty and sacrifice but also as a privilege. The character of the IDF soldier, as well as the entire army, is thus constructed in reference to moral virtues.

A representative example of IDF's magnificence, nobility and generosity can be found in a series of posts published between January and February 2024, of which the primary theme is that of the IDF's provision of "humanitarian aid" to Gaza. A post from January 9, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024b), asserts that Israel provides humanitarian aid, but Hamas steals it. A post from February 7, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024c), presents "evidence" stating that "Since October 21, in cooperation with COGAT, the IDF has facilitated the entrance of 12,378 humanitarian aid trucks into Gaza to provide aid for the people of Gaza. Unfortunately, a lot of that aid gets stolen by Hamas before it reaches Gazan civilians." A post from February 29, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024d), supports the image of moral virtues attributed to the IDF soldiers. Beneath the statement "We recognize the suffering of the innocent people of Gaza. This is why we are seeking ways to expand our humanitarian efforts," there is a five-minute video

featuring a statement by IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari on "the unfortunate incident" regarding "the humanitarian aid convoy the IDF facilitated."

In turn, a representative example of the IDF's moral virtues such as courage and sacrifice is found in the set of nearly 100 posts devoted to the IDF's operations in "Hamas' terrorist tunnels" located beneath "hospitals," "cemeteries," "schools" and "humanitarian institutions" in Gaza. Videos from inside the tunnels show some IDF soldiers navigating the "dangerous" corridors, discovering "weapons and explosives stockpiled by Hamas," "comfortable living quarters for Hamas leaders," "places where hostages were held," etc. A post from February 21, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024e), illustrates the scale of the "terror infrastructure." It presents a map of Gaza, on which "marked in red are just some of the areas where Hamas embedded itself and built an underground terrorist tunnel network. Almost no area is safe from Hamas." These include among others sites labelled as: "Terror tunnel used as a Hamas outpost," "Tunnel route used for weapons production by the Hamas terror organization," "Tunnel route with workshops and a rocket production factory," "Significant Hamas intelligence asset underneath UNRWA HQ" and "Tunnel underneath the Shifa Hospital." The tunnel beneath Shifa Hospital receives particular attention on the IDF's profile. For example, a post from February 25, 2024 (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024f), titled "'Hospitals' has become a key word in this war, solely because Hamas has made it that way," includes a video titled "Explained: Hamas' Exploitation of Hospitals."

What unites all posts depicting IDF soldiers is not only the argument about the soldiers' moral virtues but also the emphasis on the idea that the enemy in the "war" taking place in Gaza is not Palestinian civilians but Hamas terrorists. One of the reels features a video showing Hamas crimes committed against both Israeli civilians and those living in Gaza: launching rockets that hit residential buildings, using ambulances and infrastructure to carry out attacks, produce, and store weapons, and using civilians as human shields. The video ends with the following statement: "The IDF operates precisely and strategically because we understand that our enemy are NOT the Gazan Civilians. The people of Gaza and the IDF have the same enemy: Hamas" (*Israel Defense Forces* 2024g). Hamas terrorists, as the "common enemy" are portrayed as devoid of any moral virtues. On one hand, they are "nonhumans," "murderers" and "butchers"; on the other, they are "thieves," "cunning manipulators" and finally, war criminals who cynically exploit the deaths of Gaza's civilians while living "comfortably" and "luxuriously" with their families. The IDF's argument is as follows: simply eliminating Hamas will bring peace to Gaza.

6. Where is myth, how does it work and why?

The series of posts about "humanitarian aid" and "Hamas' terrorist tunnels" constitutes a myth in Barthes' sense – a rhetorical mystification in Burke's and others' sense – that employs rhetorical means in the acts of inclusion to make the IDF's message more persuasive. Myth obscures and mystifies the methods of action and its effects, the aims, and the origins of the IDF, as well as its political and social power. The IDF's myth, while carrying history, simultaneously erases and reshapes it to benefit the Israeli army. It then presents this altered version as something natural, historically valid and socially true. The IDF's myth serves as a vehicle for disseminating images of Israeli soldiers as moral individuals. As mentioned above, it uses a mode of persuasion based on ethos and character. Its function is naturalization of a concept. Additionally, it creates the opposite image of Hamas terrorists as the primary enemy of Palestinians and the obstacle to peace in the Gaza Strip.

As myth operates as a second-order semiotic system, it is based on the first level of the process of significance. The first level is purely descriptive – the signifier and the signified merge to form a denotative sign. At the second level, this denotative sign becomes a new signifier, which is then linked to a culturally derived meaning, producing a connotative sign. At the mythical level, schools, humanitarian institutions such as UNRWA, and ambulances are not seen as places of education, peace, and health, but as homes, factories, and shelters for terrorists. This is clearly demonstrated in the abovementioned post from February 25, 2024, titled "'Hospitals' has become a key word in this war, solely because Hamas has made it that way." The use of quotation marks around the word "hospitals" places the IDF's narrative on a mythical level. The assignment of connotative meanings provides an alibi for the bombings in Gaza.

Obviously, myth erases these facts and, in turn, uses euphemisms. "The unfortunate incident" referred to by Hagari in the abovementioned post from February 29, 2024, is a euphemism used to describe the deaths of 112 starving individuals who were waiting for a food delivery. His phrase "The suffering of the innocent people of Gaza" is also a euphemism for, as *The Guardian* wrote on this day, the following facts: "Israeli strikes have killed 29,692 Palestinians in Gaza since October, two-thirds of them women and children, and injured 69,879, according to health authorities in the Hamas-run administration" (*The Guardian* 2024). On April 24, 2024, the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2024a) reported that "Israel has dropped more than 70,000 tons of explosives on the Gaza Strip, in addition to its bulldozing operations." Additionally, "the humanitarian efforts" are euphemisms for such situations. On December 12, 2023, seventeen Israeli human rights and civil society organizations addressed a letter to US President Joe Biden,

urging him to take action to halt the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. The letter informed that

> UN agencies and humanitarian organizations report that the situation in Gaza is catastrophic and they have almost no way left to help the population. The few truckloads that are allowed in – a drop in the ocean, according to the reports – cannot be distributed due to the ongoing bombardments, the destruction of infrastructure and restrictions imposed by Israel. This leaves more than two million people hungry and thirsty, without access to proper medical care, and with infectious diseases spreading due to unhygienic overcrowding and lack of water. This inconceivable reality grows worse by the day. (B'Tselem 2024a)

On January 8, 2024, B'Tselem wrote that

> Aid organizations are struggling to operate under current conditions, and most of the limited aid allowed in remains in Rafah instead of reaching residents throughout the Strip. Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, listed several reasons why aid cannot be efficiently distributed. Among other things, he noted that trucks are inspected several times before Israel allows them into Gaza, and even then, long lines form due to the conditions at Rafah Crossing. The little food that does get in is very difficult to distribute due to the constant bombings, destroyed roads, frequent communication blackouts, and shelters overflowing with of hundreds of thousands of IDPs crowding into smaller and smaller areas. (B'Tselem 2024b)

On November 12, 2024, Refugees International published a report with the following estimates:

> An estimated 100,000 people have been displaced from North Gaza to Gaza City and between 75,000 and 95,000 people remain besieged in North Gaza without medical or food supplies. The Israeli military reported that 11 trucks of food and supplies were delivered to North Gaza on November 7, but the World Food Program reported that not all of them reached agreed drop off points. All of North Gaza's remaining hospitals have been attacked by Israeli forces, with some staff detained or forced to flee, vital equipment and aid supplies destroyed, and patients left without access to basic care in a conflict zone. (Refugees International 2024)

A more significant real history has vanished from the narrative of the Israeli heroic defense of Palestinian civilians against Hamas. This is the ideological role of myth, according to Barthes: "The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence" (Barthes 1972, 142). The function of myth aligns with what Foucault writes about acts of exclusion understood as exercises of power.

7. What has been excluded: Martial pleasures and victims without organs

The problem of what has been silenced or excluded necessitates a shift in focus from the rhetoric of representation – i.e., the examination of official discourse (hasbara) produced by military leaders – to vernacular rhetoric (Hauser 2011),

which entails analyzing how "ordinary soldiers" communicate. This approach also requires an effort to uncover messages that, due to their problematic nature, are censored and removed from the media space through Facebook's algorithms, political pressure and other mechanisms of control.

A statement by Herci Halevi, Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, dated February 20, 2024, addressed to IDF commanders, in response to the investigation pending against Israel in the International Court of Justice, turns out to be extremely important in this context.

> In the Torah portion Kedoshim, the commandment "Do not curse the deaf" appears. This is perplexing: why not curse if a deaf person cannot hear? The answer is simple – when you curse, you tarnish yourself. We act like human beings and, unlike our enemy, uphold our humanity. We must be careful not to use force where it is not required, to distinguish between a terrorist and one who is not, not to take what is not ours – a souvenir or parts of a weapon – and not to shoot revenge videos. We are not on a spree of killing, revenge, or genocide. We have come to defeat a cruel enemy, who deserves a bitter loss. We will not err and allow it an achievement in the international arena. A true soldier is one whose values do not waver in the face of a challenging reality, he is one whose values are firm and do not change according to the direction of the wind. (Halevi 2024)

In this statement, the key focus of analysis is no longer the rhetorical condemnation that frames "enemies as non-humans," the euphemization of the possibility of killing Palestinian mothers and children instead of Hamas fighters or the appeal to ethos-based persuasion. Rather, attention is drawn to the existence of a second, uncontrolled centre of message production and information circulation – one that operates outside the command of the Israeli military. This refers to so-called "revenge videos," recorded by Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip and shared on social media. These videos are also known as TikTok War Crimes. The images they contain starkly diverge from the idealized vision presented in *The Spirit of the IDF*, as constructed in Facebook posts. What, then, is absent from the official IDF profile? What does the vernacular rhetoric seek to convey?

In "revenge videos," one can see some Israeli Defense Forces soldiers expressing joy and exhilaration as they demolish and bomb buildings – homes, hospitals, schools and humanitarian facilities – burn books and destroy or loot personal belongings left behind by Gaza's civilian population (TikTok War Crimes 2023–2024). What stands out in these videos – and perhaps even exceeds the scope of rhetorical analysis – is the observation that war can be a source of pleasure. The statement by Vietnam War veteran Larry Gwin that "there is no glory in war – only good men dying terrible deaths" (Moore and Galloway 2008, 121) does not apply in the case of TikTok War Crimes. The laughter that erupts from soldiers' throats is not merely a subject of intellectual curiosity. The exclusion of soldiers' desire and laughter from the official IDF profile is not an attempt to draw attention to them.

This is not an instance of praeteritio, the rhetorical device through which something is mentioned precisely by declaring the intention to omit it. In praeteritio, the act of signalling omission foregrounds what is supposedly being ignored. The case of "revenge videos," however, is different. Here, we are dealing with the deliberate exclusion of content that contradicts hasbara – the official propaganda that justifies bombings and glorifies the heroic deeds of soldiers. A soldier playing with the underwear found in a destroyed building, the martial pleasure, demystifies the myth of Israeli morality. There are other excluded elements that do the same.

The "inhuman" attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians demands condemnation. It was a "horror" that must never be repeated. "Never again." IDF posts evoke "terror," reminding audiences of human suffering, the brutal deaths of over 1100 people and the uncertain fate of those held hostage. These posts also serve to justify the repeated bombings of Gaza. Murdered Israeli children, raped mothers and Schrödinger's hostages – simultaneously alive and dead – are invoked so frequently in the IDF posts that it is impossible to ignore the immense grief experienced by the Israeli society. Are these the only victims of the war that, according to those who write history, began on October 7, 2023? Palestinian (as well as, among others, Australian, American and Polish) victims of bombarding will not be seen on the IDF's Facebook profile. What has happened to them? To answer these questions, one must turn to the rhetoric of what is excluded, censored, and, too often, accused by Israeli (and not only Israeli) politicians, military personnel, intellectuals and ordinary people, of antisemitism.

Non-governmental organizations monitoring human rights violations in the occupied territories and international institutions gathering evidence of Israel's commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity are here in the crosshairs. On January 7, 2024, the independent non-profit organization Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor reported that, since October 7, 2023,

> Israel's army has attacked at least 12 cemeteries in the Gaza Strip by deliberately bulldozing and desecrating hundreds of graves and stealing dozens of bodies from them as part of its genocidal war on Palestinians in the Strip […]. One such cemetery, Al-Batsh, was targeted on Friday 5 January. It was subjected to extensive levelling operations that included digging up graves and tearing apart some shrouded corpses. […]. During the Israeli army's raid last week, Al-Batsh Cemetery was entirely levelled, and its graves were dug up to the extent that the majority of the bodies were removed, dismembered, and looted, along with some of the tombstones that identified the people buried there. […]. In a separate incident, the Israeli army stormed Al-Tuffah neighbourhood's cemetery, east of Gaza City, and dug up more than 1,000 graves, removing over 150 freshly buried dead bodies from the cemetery. (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 2024b)

What does all this mean and why go to all this trouble and deploy Caterpillar bulldozers? On November 27, 2023, an article was published in the *Middle East*

Monitor posing the question: "Is Israel stealing organs from dead Palestinians?" The article reads:

> Questions are being asked about possible organ theft with the Israeli army holding the bodies of dozens of Palestinians killed during its genocide in the Gaza Strip since 7 October. […] Concerns about organ theft from the corpses were brought up by the organisation [Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor] citing reports from medical professionals in Gaza who examined a few bodies quickly after their release. These medical professionals found evidence of organ theft, including missing cochleas and corneas as well as other vital organs like livers, kidneys and hearts. (Middle East Monitor 2023)

This observation is supported by an article by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Donald Boström, titled *The Body of the Enemy*, which details a journalistic investigation and an ethnographic study conducted in Israel on the black market organ trade. Authors of the article argued, that "in 2009, an international scandal erupted after Donald Boström published an article in Sweden describing the mutilation and harvesting of organs from the bodies of Palestinian fighters, who had been transported" by IDF soldiers to the Israeli National Institute of Forensic Medicine in Abu Kabir on the outskirts of Tel Aviv for autopsies during the First Intifada (Scheper-Hughes and Boström 2013, 246). Some of the bodies from which these organs were taken had been obtained by IDF soldiers during military operations in the occupied territories. Reconstructing events from more than a decade ago, Scheper-Hughes and Boström (2013, 243) added that "as long as these actions were concealed in Israel, the government and the Israeli Ministry of Health supported these illegal, even criminal, practices." However, for the sake of accuracy, it should be noted that

> The mounting evidence and Dr. Hiss's [the Israeli pathologist who served as the director of the Abu Kabir Forensic Institute from 1988 to 2005] confession in his candid interview with Scheper-Hughes in 2000 revealed that the victims were Palestinians, IDF soldiers, secular and religious individuals, recent immigrants from Russia and Africa, tourists, and long-term residents. (Scheper-Hughes and Boström 2013, 250)

The invoked stories cannot be found in the IDF's myth.

8. Conclusion

This article highlights key findings regarding the rhetorical construction of hasbara, the official discourse of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Facebook. Through the lens of critical rhetoric, drawing on Barthes' semiology and Foucault's discourse theory, the study examines not only official narratives but also what has been deliberately omitted – both in terms of content and its social reception. Analyzing the rhetorical devices that construct the myth of the IDF as a moral

organization – including persuasion through ethos, character, and euphemisms – is insufficient for fully understanding the mythological mechanisms that legitimize violence and serve as an alibi for genocide (Shlaim 2024). Equally significant in the IDF's process of mythologization and mystification is the exclusion of content that undermines the army's moral virtues – such as aspects featured in "revenge videos" recorded by some IDF soldiers, or the images of Palestinian bodies, allegedly stripped of organs, unearthed by bulldozers in desecrated cemeteries. Consequently, the analysis of the IDF's communication must consider both the rhetoric of official representations and vernacular rhetoric, as discourse derives meaning from strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, the mythological mechanisms underlying the IDF's power manifest not only in what is articulated but also in what is systematically silenced. This understanding of critical rhetorical inquiry aligns with Kenneth Burke's assertion that rhetorical analysis should always be prepared to expose mystifications.

Following Barthes, the article argues that myths are not confined to the distant past or traditional societies but are deeply ingrained in human behaviour and modern cultural systems. Myths persist because they offer societies a structured way of interpreting reality, transforming complex events into simplified, emotionally charged narratives. They provide coherence to social experiences, shape collective memory and influence public opinion, making them a fundamental aspect of how modern societies function. Even in contemporary times, societies continue to operate through mythic realities, constructing them through various means such as political discourse, media representation, historical reinterpretation and cultural narratives. The article, following Barthes, demonstrates that the IDF's myth is not merely a passive collection of stories; it actively shapes how people perceive the world and respond to events. It establishes heroes and villains, legitimizes or delegitimizes actions and reinforces ideological positions. The Israeli army, government and media institutions strategically deploy the myth of the IDF as a moral organization to control narratives and influence public sentiment. A key function of the IDF's myth is its role in moral and affective mobilization – it stirs emotions and invites individuals to align themselves with a particular interpretation of events. This makes it an essential tool in political and ideological struggles.

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