ISRAELI CINEMA
IDENTITIES IN MOTION

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In 2005 the new reality show *Israeli Project Greenlight* premiered on local cable. As in the original American show, the prize was half a million dollars and a chance to make a first film. The competition attracted hundreds of aspiring filmmakers. Against all odds, a twenty-three-year-old Russian immigrant from the Israeli periphery, Felix Gerchikov, won. He went on to make *The Children of USSR*, which took the first prize in the drama category at the 2005 Jerusalem Film Festival. This is a story of the “Israeli dream” come true. But it is also a sign of changes in Israeli culture.

Since *The Children of USSR* was produced as part of *Israeli Project Greenlight*, every step of its production was documented and televised. This footage revealed the immigrant filmmaker and cast, speaking Russian and variously accented Hebrew on and off the screen. The film itself was populated by immigrant characters struggling with drugs, gangs, and drabness of life in the Israeli backwater. If the film placed these normally marginalized characters at the core of the plot, the reality show brought their equally marginalized creators not only into the cultural mainstream but also into the audience’s living rooms. This was not just a new reality show but a new reality.

Mass migration from the former Soviet Union brought about 1 million people to Israel, which means that today every sixth Israeli is a Russian speaker. Such a population influx, and its arguably destabilizing influence on the Israeli culture, became a media sensation. Newspapers and television news were full of reports of “Russian prostitutes” and “Russian mafia.” Immigrants who took an enormous step down in their social status were portrayed as either parasites of the Israeli welfare system or shrewd invaders taking over the Israeli job market. Soon characters representing the new immigrants started popping up on screens too—a new “cultural other” was added to the Israeli cinematic repertory, joining women, Holocaust survivors, Mizrahim, and Palestinians. At the same time, a handful of immigrant filmmakers slowly started breaking into the Israeli film industry. These filmmakers not only increased the visibility of their community but also introduced the immigrants’ point of view to the Israeli cinema.

In this essay I survey the representation of Russian immigrants both in Israeli films and in the emerging field of Russian Israeli filmmaking. This survey continues the research on the representation of cultural others in Israeli film (pioneered by Ella Shohat and continued by Yosefa Loshitzky and Nurith Gertz), which so far has focused mainly on Mizrahim and Palestinians.¹

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History Lessons

Historically, Russian characters have not always been the "other" in Israeli films. Their representation, including their gender, nationality, and class, has been a product of an ideological climate and cultural needs at a particular historical moment. Thus the films of the heroic-nationalist genre, as Shohat points out, aimed to create heroic narratives reaffirming national unity and Zionist values. One such film, They Were Ten (1960, dir. Baruch Dinar), is a heroic tale of Zionist pioneers. As they are working the land, they transform not just the fields but themselves into New Jews. Unsurprisingly, most of these characters are male; the only woman among them is the beautiful Manya (Ninette Dinar), who works dutifully beside her husband and his comrades. Historically, Zionist pioneers were Russian Jews, whose Zionist-socialist ideology was equally fueled by their revolt against traditional Jewish and bourgeois values. Their pioneering ethos was deeply influenced by the contemporary Russian culture, including the veneration of Russian letters and the nascent revolutionary movement. But the film downplays its characters' ethnicity. On the screen they speak fluent, unaccented Hebrew: only one phrase in the entire film is spoken in Russian and not a single one in Yiddish. And even though the diegetic songs have Russian melodies, the pioneers sing them in Hebrew.

As the Israeli cinema moves away from the nationalist genre, its characters lose their propaganda poster appeal, but cinematic Russians remain in the cultural center. In The House on Chelouche Street (1973, dir. Moshe Mizrahi), Russian Sonia (Michal Bat-Adam) is positioned as a local both culturally and socially, in contrast to the Mizrahi Clara and her son Sami. Sonia speaks flawless Hebrew and has the clout to introduce Sami to the Israeli Zionist cultural capital (including Russian literature). In all these films, the characters' Russian culture of origin, however downplayed, constitutes an integral part of the Israeli Zionist cultural capital. So when do Russian characters become cultural others?

The first film to introduce Russians as foreign newcomers was the now forgotten drama Lena (1980, dir. Eytan Green). This film reflects the era of the 1970s, when a ban on emigration from the USSR was eased and the first wave of Soviet Jews landed in Israel. Lena portrays Russian characters as immigrants and moves them from the Israeli cultural center to the margins. In many ways, it typifies the representation of Russian immigrants on Israeli screen for years to come.

The film's heroine Lena (Fira Cantor) is a young and beautiful woman, torn between her loyalty to her Zionist activist husband, still in a Soviet jail, and a newfound love for an Israeli man (incidentally, a Hebrew teacher), or metaphorically between maintaining her Russian identity and assimilating to Israel. Consistent with the Zionist tenets of immigration, she chooses to leave her Russian husband. Lena herself, with her poor control of Hebrew, her non-Israeli looks, and her struggle to negotiate a new society, is represented as a classic immigrant—the "other." Such a portrayal is typical of later films.

The representation of gender is also typical. As is common in Israeli films, interethnic tension is expressed through mixed coupling, similar to the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi Bourekas comedies. Lena is inducted and assimilated into Israeli society via the narrative strategy of a romantic-sexual relationship with a local male. In contrast, Russian male characters are confined largely to their self-contained, predominantly homosocial world that evades assimilation into Israel. In Lena Russian male immigrants are portrayed as ardent Zionists—they are activists campaigning for immigration rights for other Soviet Jews. Despite this positive ideological allegiance to Israel, however, Russian male immigrant characters appear to be aggressive, irrational, and violent. None has any potential for developing relationships with Israeli women. Even more outrageous are Russian immigrant male characters used for comic relief in other films. For instance, the Russian thug in Kuni Lemi in Cairo (1983; dir. Joel Silberg) is violent and stupid and barely speaks any Hebrew.

Finally, the casting and use of language in Lena are also typical. From the 1980s on, immigrant characters are played by actual Russian immigrant actors. Their accent and occasional Russian dialogue are authentic but also foreign-sounding within the "Hebrew only" text of the film.

From Bourekas to Pierogi

In the 1990s Russian characters started appearing more often on Israeli screens. They were mostly stereotypical, representing dangerous and abusive men and exotic and sexualized women. Such characters are featured in many films, including Saint Clara (1996; dir. Ari Folman and Ori Sivan), Circus Palestina (1998; dir. Eyal Halton), The Holy Land (2001; dir. Eitan Gorlin), What a Wonderful Place (2008; dir. Eyal Halton), Schwartz Dynasty (2005; dir. Amir Hasfari and Shmuel Hasfari), and Love & Dance (2006; dir. Eitan Anner) as well as the TV serials A Touch Away (2007, dir. Ron Ninio) and Loving Anna (2008–2009, dir. Tzion Rubin). At present, it is difficult to find an Israeli film which does not feature a "Russian" at least as a minor character. Subplots involving secondary Russian immigrant characters ap-
pear in mainstream hits such as Broken Wings (2002, dir. Nir Bergman) and Nina's Tragedies (2003; dir. Savi Gavison) and popular TV serials such as Florentine (1997–2001; dir. Eytan Fox) and The Mediator (Haborer, 2007; dir. Shai Kano). Some of these films conflate an image of a Jewish immigrant with an image of a trafficked non-Jewish sex worker or mail-order bride, but their narratives and casting overlap with the immigration stories in other films. To various degrees, Russian characters in these films remain limited by stereotypes.

The films representing Russian immigrants indicate the emergence of a new cycle, which, to parallel Bourekas, I call the Pierogi films. Bourekas were the well-known ethnic comedies of the 1970s and 1980s about Mizrahi-Ashkenazi relations. They often featured "stereotypical characters with whom it is easy to identify, and the divided reality in which everything exotic or sentimental is emphasized." As in Bourekas, characterization in Pierogi films is also stereotypical. Ashkenazi-Mizrahi relations in Bourekas took the form of a crossover romance, when, as Shohat writes, "ethnic/class tensions and conflicts are solved by a happy ending in which equality and unity are achieved by means of the unification of the mixed couple." Similarly, Pierogi films bring together a Russian immigrant and a local Israeli, their private union being symbolic of the national unity. Like Bourekas, Pierogi films pose assimilation into Israeli culture as an ultimate goal for the immigrants.

Historically, interethnic romance in Israeli cinema has revolved around the "Orient question," as in the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi intermarriages of Bourekas films and forbidden Jewish-Palestinian loves. According to Shohat and Loshitzky, the prohibitive impetus of the latter plots was fueled by the fear of miscegenation. In pierogi films, as in Bourekas, this fear is completely removed, and the interethnic relationships are celebrated, as they facilitate the induction of an immigrant into the Israeli-Jewish nation.

Following in the footsteps of Lena, most cinematic romances in Pierogi films involve an immigrant woman and a local male. In most cases, the women are portrayed as young, beautiful, helpless, and seductive. They often have distinctly Russian looks (blonde hair, blue eyes, round face) and are frequently shown in frontal close-ups, disassociated from their surroundings, even in shots that are not structured into the film's narrative as reaction shots or eye-line matches. These close-ups depict Russian women in the manner reminiscent of a Russian Orthodox icon, emphasizing their foreignness and fetishizing their beauty. Russian women on Israeli screens are mysterious, exotic, and at times dangerous. Such heroines appear, for instance, in Saint Clara, Yana's Friends (1999; dir. Arik Kaplun), and Schwartz

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Dynasty. Usually the heroine's nonassimilable foreignness is overcome by a romantic involvement with a local male.

But in some respects Pierogi films depart from Bourekas conventions. In Bourekas films Ashkenazi actors often portray Mizrahi characters; in pierogi films Russian actors play Russian characters. Their accents are authentic and are not used only for comic effect (as in Bourekas). Yet most Pierogi films still subscribe to the "Hebrew only" convention of Israeli cinema. Recently some films, such as Love & Dance, have started introducing more Russian dialogue. This is another departure from the Bourekas genre.

Schwartz Dynasty is a good example of the emerging Pierogi conventions. The film's narrative conflict hinges on the presence of a beautiful and seductive Russian woman, Ana (Anyu Bukstein), who comes to Israel not to immigrate but to fulfill her late father's will and to bury his ashes in the soil of Israel. As the daughter of a non-Jewish mother, Ana is not considered Jewish according to Jewish law. Consequently she runs into endless bureaucratic obstacles trying to bury her father's ashes in a Jewish cemetery without the proof of his Jewishness. While trying to resolve this problem, she falls prey to various exploiters and crooks. An older woman (Miriam) who is originally Russian herself tries to help Ana, perhaps out of ethnic solidarity. Miriam's grandson (Avishai) also helps Ana. Predictably, Ana and Avishai fall in love and get married. In its use of the interethnic marriage plot device and conventions of romantic comedy, Schwartz Dynasty recalls the Bourekas films.

Despite the sympathetic treatment of immigrants, Schwartz Dynasty represents them from the local Israeli vantage point. For instance, its Israeli Jewish characters go to great length to lure secular, pork-eating Russian immigrants to a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and thus include them in a national religious ritual. The perspective of the immigrants themselves does not figure into the narrative.

The question is: what will happen to Ana and Avishai (and other Russian-Israeli couples) in the "happily ever after"? Love & Dance further explores Russian-Israeli intermarriage. Framed according to the generic conventions of romantic-comedy-cum-melodrama and adopting the style of cinematic realism, Love & Dance depicts Khen (Vladimir Volov), a young boy battling a cultural conflict between his Russian-born mother and Israeli father. Like other Russian women in Pierogi films, Khen's mother is beautiful and charming but also helpless and frivolous. Khen's own identity is caught between his frustrated parents. The rift in his identity is emphasized linguistically in the way his mother speaks to him in Russian and his father in Hebrew. The Hebrew title of the film, Sipur Khatsi Rossi (A Half-Russian Story), exemplifies this tension in Khen's identity.
Moreover, Khen’s father wants him to take up judo, but Khen is drawn to ballroom dancing—a hobby imported and spread in Israel by the Russian immigrants. Khen’s father ridicules ballroom dancing for being “too Russian” and too effeminate, but the boy sticks with it. If Khen uneasy negotiates his Russianness and his Israelianness, his parents fail to reconcile their cultural differences and must part. Thus the film’s prognosis for intermarriage as a vehicle of assimilation is not optimistic. Even the offspring are somewhat nonassimilable into the mainstream Israel.

And yet at the end Love & Dance avoids this pessimistic conclusion and comes back to the Bourekas formula: as the characters are swirling on the floor in the final dance, it becomes clear that Khen is leaving behind his obsession with the beautiful but dysfunctional Russian Natalie and is falling in love with Sharon, the down-to-earth and reliable Israeli. In the narrative logic of the film, even the nonassimilable hybrid Khen makes the right choice between his Russianness and his Israeliiness.

In contrast to bicultural Khen, immigrant men almost never become protagonists in Pierogi films. In those rare cases where a romance between an immigrant man and a local Israeli woman is featured, it is a failed or an illegitimate connection. For instance, A Touch Away presents an aborted romance between the secular immigrant from Russia, Zorik (Henry David), and the ultra-Orthodox Rokhale (Gaya Traub). Despite her love for Zorik, Rokhale ultimately chooses to marry an ultra-Orthodox man. An earlier show, Florentine, featured a subplot about an illicit affair between a married immigrant (Israel Demidov) and a young Israeli woman (Karim Ofir). In the logic of these film and television narratives, a successful union between a Russian male immigrant and a local woman is unlikely. For the most part the Russian male characters are depicted as unreliable husbands and fathers (for example, in Yada’s Friends and Love & Dance) or, as swindlers and mafia thugs (as in The Mediator and What a Wonderful Place), or just as nonassimilable strangers with dangerous hobbies and precarious habits (in Saint Clara and Schwartz’s Dynasty). Most importantly, whether male or female, stereotypical or nuanced, Russian immigrants are represented in these films from the Israeli perspective.

Figure 11.2. Khen (Vladimir Volov) and Natalie (Valeria Voevodin), dancing on a rooftop in Love & Dance (Eitan Anner, 2006). Courtesy of July-August Productions.

Russian-Accented Cinema

As Russian immigrants are increasingly gaining cinematic representation on Israeli screens, they still rarely find themselves in the position to control or contribute to the production and circulation of such representations. The films discussed above were made by Israeli filmmakers, representing immigrants from the local vantage point. This is why the few films that have been made by Russian immigrant filmmakers present an opportunity for understanding their perspective. Within contemporary Israeli cinema, these films, which I call Russian Israeli cinema, form a body of work distinguished by the immigrant filmmakers’ vantage point.

As such, Russian Israeli cinema can be viewed as “accented film,” which, according to Hamid Naficy, can be defined not only by the actual languages and accents on the screen but also by the diasporic or displaced identities of the filmmakers. The “accent” of Russian Israeli films is expressed in their narrative strategies, use of language, self-referential casting, and style.

Naficy notes that accented films often critique the “universal” dominant cinema, and yet they are not entirely oppositional. Indeed, in contrast to Pierogi films, Russian Israeli films subtly subvert both ideological and cinematic Israeli conventions. At the same time, like the mainstream Israeli cinema of which they are part and parcel, they are preoccupied with the integration of immigrants into the Israeli Jewish nation. To various degrees, Russian Israeli films walk a thin line between asserting the immigrants’ belonging in Israel and insisting on their cultural distinctiveness. Sociologists call this position “integration without acculturation.”

Russian Israeli films are most distinguished by their narrative strategies. Unlike the Pierogi films, which are preoccupied with assimilation via in-
terethnic romance, Russian Israeli films do not feature interethnic Russian Israeli couples (Yana’s Friends is the only exception to this rule, making it closer to Pierogi films). In the rare cases of an interethnic romance, the relationships have no future. Most couples are intraethnic, and the protagonists are often male immigrants.

The very first Russian Israeli film, Coffee with Lemon (1994; dir. Leonid Horowitz), is a case in point. At the center of the plot is a famous Moscow actor (Russian film star Alexander Abdulov), who immigrates to Israel with his family only to discover that he cannot bridge the cultural gap and is doomed to failure. In part he comes to realize this due to his brief affair with his Hebrew teacher (recalling the romance in Lena). He returns to Moscow and is killed in a freak accident. At the end the immigrant protagonist fits neither here nor there. Not only his interethnic affair fails; his immigration to Israel and his return to Russia result in tragedy. This is not a typical immigration narrative for an Israeli film.

A more recent example is The Children of USSR. Like Coffee with Lemon, this film features a male protagonist, Slava (Daniel Brook), once a soccer star in his native town and now an immigrant suffocated in the remote town of Netivot, working random jobs and struggling to support his young family. The main romantic relationship of the film is Slava’s failing marriage to Sveta, a fellow Russian, who wants him to leave behind his dreams of soccer and to be like her father (the proud manager of a garbage business). But Slava is unwilling to give up the male camaraderie—he lives in a world of other young Russians whose dreams have also been crushed. With the help of his ex-coach (Vladimir Friedman), Slava succeeds in putting together a soccer team.

Slava and his friends populate the margins of Israeli society—the locals that they encounter are marginalized minorities themselves, including the corrupt Mizrahi officials, an Ethiopian immigrant soccer player, and an oddball Hassidic soccer fan nicknamed Messiah. The “model Israeli” is nowhere to be seen, which explains why the film does not insist on assimilation. The only reference to it is ironic: Messiah promises Slava to buy uniforms for his team if the players put on phylacteries and pray with him. Slava agrees. In the next scene the camera pans over the motley immigrants, who, being entirely unfamiliar with the Jewish ritual, senselessly parrot Messiah’s words and movements. Whether they intend it or not, their mimicry transforms into mockery, serving as a parody of the entire Israeli institution of immigrant “absorption.”

Yet the film is not all gloom and doom. Despite its raw realism, The Children of USSR succeeds in being both funny and lyrical. Its immigrant characters are represented from an insider’s perspective: Russian teenagers rarely appear as a group or in a long shot. The camera frequently moves to let the audience see from Slava’s perspective. The plot, which could have produced a stereotype of immigrant social cases, turns into a complex and sympathetic narrative.

Another intraethnic romance is at the center of Paper Snow (2003; dir. Lena Chaplin and Slava Chaplin). The plot focuses on a love affair between two mythological Russians in 1930s Tel Aviv: Hannah Rovina, a star of the Habima national theater, which originated in Moscow, and Alexander Penn, a Communist poet from Siberia. Other literary giants (Avraham Shlonsky, Avraham Halfi, and Khaim-Nakhman Bialik, all of them hailing from Russia) surround Rovina and Penn. The film emphasizes their culture of origin, their Russian literary and theater training. In this way it focuses on the Russian roots of Israeli culture, emphasizing the role of Russian Jews (both past and, by extension, present) in building the nation. This particular vantage point on Israel’s national past is an important characteristic of the Russian immigrant perspective.11

Ironically, as other Israeli groups try to contest the images of the Russian Jewish fathers-founders, contemporary Russian immigrants try to reassert it.12 In a more subtle form this use of the past also appears in Yana’s Friends. A subplot of the film involves an ostensibly Israeli woman and an immigrant war veteran who recognize each other as lovers separated by World War II (in which they both fought on the Soviet side). Their son died defending Israel in the Six Day War. This subplot both pays tribute to the heroic Israeli past and claims the new immigrants’ right to be part of this grand narrative of the nation. In the narrative logic of the film, it is the Russian immigrants’ lost sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, who fought the Nazis, founded Israel, and defended it.13 A similar motif appears in the short film Dark Night (2005; dir. Leonid Prudovsky), which opens with a scene of an Israeli patrol in the occupied territories. One of the soldiers, who comes from a Russian family, is singing a famous Soviet song of the World War II era—Dark Night. Driving the army Jeep through the night, he explains to his fellow soldiers the significance of the song, which accompanied the Soviet troops, including his Jewish grandfather, as they went to defeat the Nazis. In another film, A Trumpet in the Wadi (2002; dir. Lena Chaplin and Slava Chaplin), an accented variation of a Jewish Palestinian cinematic romance, a Russian immigrant protagonist is killed while on army duty, presumably by Palestinian militants. All these representations emphasize the identification of Russian immigrants with the Israeli Jewish nation while simultaneously affirming their Russianness.
In addition to these narrative strategies, Russian Israeli films are marked as accented by their extensive use of Russian. The use of the filmmakers’ native language, according to Naficy, is a marker of belonging and authenticity. Indeed, in contrast to Pierogi films, dialogue in Russian Israeli films moves freely between Russian and Hebrew, with the majority of the dialogue in Russian. This difference becomes particularly tangible in films representing the national past, such as Paper Snow, where Israeli historical figures are portrayed speaking to each other in Russian. The use of Russian dialogue challenges Israeli cinematic convention, according to which the national past is portrayed in Hebrew. Even today, as other Israeli films (especially coproductions) have become more multilingual, this convention still holds true.

Clearly, Israeli films about immigration are made to appeal to the mainstream Hebrew-speaking audience, whereas Russian Israeli films are also made for Russian speakers, who can access Russian dialogue without subtitles. More importantly, Russian Israeli films give center stage to the Russian language and accent, usually relegated to the margins. In one case, even the film’s title is Russified: Yaldey CCCP (pronounced yaldey ssr and translated as “the children of the USSR”; see figure 11.1). The filmmakers insist on a Russian spelling of the abbreviation for USSR, part of the Soviet iconography. This idiosyncratic title not only introduces a Russian word into Hebrew but also uses a Cyrillic acronym as a nostalgic icon.

The “accent” of the Russian Israeli films is further emphasized through casting. According to Naficy, in accented cinema the actor’s ethnicity and the character’s ethnicity coincide. Moreover, filmmakers are often engaged in multiple tasks in accented films, directing as well as acting in their own films. Regardless of the motivation behind them (usually limited resources), such casting decisions function as self-inscription and are often autobiographical.

Indeed, casting in Russian Israeli films is often self-referential, as when Russian-Israeli filmmakers, actors, and other cultural figures are cast as similar figures in the past. For instance, in Paper Snow Leonid Horowitz (a Russian Israeli director mentioned above) is cast as Tzivi Friedland, a key Habima actor and director. Vladimir Friedman, a famous Russian Israeli film actor, is cast as Aharon Meskin, a Habima actor since its Moscow days. Hanna Rovina is played by Yevegenya Dodina, a leading actor from Gesher—a contemporary theater founded by Russian immigrants in Israel. For Israeli audiences Dodina blends the two figures: she is both Rovina—a legendary Habima star—and herself—an immigrant actor starring in many Israeli films discussed here. Such casting works as a collective or communal self-inscription, by means of which the Russian Israeli filmmakers inscribe themselves (and by extension their community) on the narrative of Israeli history.

Russian Israeli films are marked by an emerging accented style: Yana’s Friends offers sophisticated metacinematic commentary by intercutting deep-focused color film footage with variably focused black-and-white homemade video. Paper Snow creates the visual nostalgia of a sepia photograph by shooting the film through a yellow filter. A Trumpet in the Wadi is shot entirely by an unstable handheld camera to achieve the veracity of a documentary and the urgency of news footage. Russian Israeli cinematography, with its raw, highly personalized methods, conveys the sense that the lives depicted on camera and those lived behind it are one.

So what does all this mean for Israeli cinema and culture? In terms of cinematic style, Pierogi films continue to tap into the Bourrekas legacy. Russian Israeli films present greater challenges to the local cinematic conventions, offering not only an immigrant vantage point but also accented narratives and styles. At the same time, accented films are an integral part of Israeli cinema, which is increasingly engaged in multilingual, multicultral coproductions appealing to the international cinema markets.

The treatment of immigration in both Pierogi and accented films is emblematic of larger cultural trends. The two cycles of films reflect competing discourses on immigration—“nativist” and “accented.” The nativist discourse is preoccupied with cultural preservation and with the threat of further destabilization of the allegedly unified Israeli national identity. In contrast, an accented or immigrant-centered discourse insists on the value of the diasporic cultures and languages. Instead of focusing on assimilation, it is preoccupied with finding the balance between the old and the new. The emergence of accented discourse in the public sphere is part of a larger shift in Israeli culture toward post-Zionist politics, including a positive attitude toward the diasporic heritage and a greater orientation toward multiculturality. This is a new reality.

NOTES

3. Pierogi are a kind of Russian pastry. For the initial definition of the term, see
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