

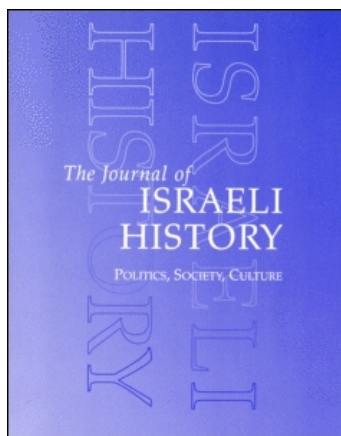
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Accented memory: Russian immigrants reimagine the Israeli past

Olga Gershenson*

This article seeks to understand the place of the Russian immigrant community in the larger Israeli culture and to explore how immigrants themselves negotiate their position. One site of such negotiation is the film *Paper Snow* (2003) created predominantly by Russian-Israeli filmmakers. Their distinct vantage point emerges through the film's casting, genre, style, and language. *Paper Snow* features such iconic figures of Israeli culture-in-the-making as actress Hanna Rovina and poets Alexander Penn and Avraham Shlonsky, but represents them as part of the Russian intelligentsia. In this way, the film adheres to the familiar story of nation building, but tells it with an accent: by emphasizing the Russianness of the Israeli national past, the film inscribes contemporary Russian immigrants onto the grand narrative of the nation. By revising the official collective memory, *Paper Snow* produces accented memory.

Keywords: Hanna Rovina; Alexander Penn; Avraham Shlonsky; Russian immigration; Israeli collective memory; accented cinema; Israeli cinema; Habima theater

Films have a disconcerting resemblance to memory.
David MacDougall¹

Right in the heart of Tel Aviv, on Dizengoff Street, surrounded by boutiques, galleries, and cafes, there is a restaurant called Keton – “a home of Jewish cooking since 1945.” Its menu features such traditional East European Jewish dishes as *kreplach*, *kneidlach*, and *gefilte fish*, which are uncommon in trendy Tel Aviv restaurants. Keton is somewhat of a museum: the chairs are covered with plaques memorializing its famed patrons, such as satirical writer and film director Ephraim Kishon or song writer and composer Naomi Shemer. On the walls are instantly recognizable paintings by Menachem Kadishman. It is underneath his painting of blue sheep that I saw plaques with the names of Hanna Rovina (1892–1980), the renowned actress of Habima, the Israeli national theater that grew out of Konstantin Stanislavsky's studio in Moscow, and Alexander Penn (1906–72), a communist poet hailing from Siberia (Figure 1). I felt moved – it was 2007, I was working on this article and had been reading and thinking a great deal about Rovina, Penn, and their love affair that had once scandalized the Jewish community in Palestine, the *Yishuv*.

I turned to Leah, the current owner (her grandmother Sarah established Keton back in 1945): “They used to come here? Didn't they break up in 1935?” I asked. “Maybe they did,” she answered, “but they had a daughter, Ilana, and they used to come here together.” As I was talking to Leah, two waitresses behind the counter were quarrelling in the most vulgar Russian. They didn't notice my Russian accent – or maybe they just didn't care. And here I was, caught between the past and present of Russians in Israel: between the great Russians of the past, icons of Israeli culture, whose plaques decorate this historic eatery, and the contemporary Russians, serving food for a minimal wage; between the

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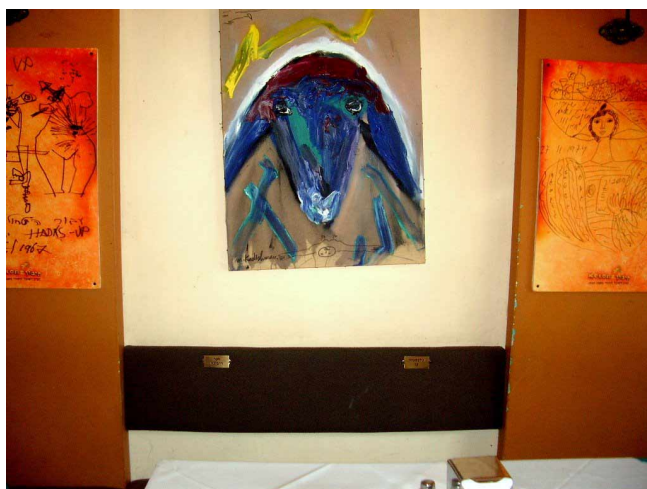


Figure 1. Rovina's and Penn's name plaques in Keton. (Photo by author.)

Russians of the past who belong in a museum and the Russians of the present whose place is in a kitchen or behind a counter.

The question is, what does this “Russian” past mean for contemporary Russian immigrants (commonly referred to in Israel simply as “Russians”)? Or, to rephrase David Roskies, how can they make this past “usable”?² These questions tap into a larger discussion about the place of “Russian Israel” in Israeli culture, or in the words of an immigrant author, in “Israeli Israel.”³ The Russian immigrant ethnic minority is often stigmatized in Israel as a “Russian ghetto.” The aspiration of the immigrants to integrate is mostly unnoticed, as they do not try to assimilate wholeheartedly but rather negotiate their Russianness and their Israelianness in complex, and often uneasy, ways.

One site of such complex negotiations is a recent film *Hayah o lo hayah/Paper Snow* (dir. Slava and Lina Chaplin, 2003), created predominantly by the Russian-Israeli filmmakers. This film is particularly relevant because its action takes place in the era of Israeli nation building, a period whose depiction constitutes part of the “master commemorative narrative” – “a basic ‘story line’ that is culturally constructed and provides the group with a general notion of their shared past.”⁴ Such narratives constitute sources of collective memory, giving the nation its identity and a sense of unified history. *Paper Snow* adheres to the familiar story line but tells it with an accent: by emphasizing the Russianness of the Israeli national past, the film inscribes contemporary Russian immigrants onto the grand narrative of the nation. By revising the official collective memory, *Paper Snow* produces accented memory.

***Paper Snow* – an accented film**

Paper Snow's focus on the past creates, in the words of an Israeli critic “another chapter in the Israeli mythology.”⁵ What myth is it and what does it mean? Here, I approach *Paper Snow* as a Russian-Israeli cultural expression – and hence, in Hamid Naficy's term, as an “accented film.” Accented films, in contrast to dominant cinema, are made by “diasporic and exilic subjects”; their accent “emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes.”⁶ Naficy's concept is useful in understanding how *Paper Snow*'s language, casting,

genre, style, and its theme of nostalgia contribute to its cinematic accent. Accented films are not necessarily oppositional to the dominant ideology and mainstream cinema, yet, I argue, *Paper Snow* subtly subverts both Zionist ideology and Israeli cinematic conventions.

Set in 1930s Tel Aviv, *Paper Snow* follows the love story of Hanna Rovina and Alexander Penn. The film opens with a scene in the cafe Snow of Lebanon, where Penn (Zak Berkman) is drinking with other literary giants of the era – the poets Avraham Shlonsky and Avraham Hali (Hayyim Nahman Bialik also makes a brief appearance). They all wear Russian shirts, and speak more Russian than Hebrew. The scene is filmed through a yellow filter giving it the atmosphere of a sepia photograph and setting a nostalgic tone.

Once Penn meets Rovina (Yevgenya Dodina), an intense romance develops between the two celebrities, with violent rows followed by grand gestures of reconciliation. Their affair takes place against the background of meetings at the Habima collective, drunken parties at the cafe, battles with the *Yishuv*'s leadership over funding for Habima, and scenes of rehearsals and performances. At the end of the movie, Rovina gives birth to Penn's baby. In the maternity ward, they are seemingly reconciled, and he is committed to leaving his wife and marrying Rovina. Yet, at the appointed time, neither of them shows up for their own wedding.

Within accented cinema, Naficy distinguishes between three loosely defined clusters of films: exilic, diasporic, and ethnic. Exilic cinema, according to Naficy, "is dominated by its focus on there and then in the homeland," while diasporic cinema exists at the intersection of attitudes to the homeland and diasporic experiences. In contrast, ethnic or identity films are centered on "the exigencies of life here and now in the country in which the filmmakers reside."⁷ Seemingly, *Paper Snow* firmly belongs to the category of ethnic/identity films: it focuses entirely on Israel, a country where the Russian-born filmmakers live now; and even though the plot deals with Israel's past, the film clearly alludes to the present day.

But the Zionist context of the Israeli cultural production complicates Naficy's categories. The question is, what is homeland, and what is exile? Zionist ideology envisions contemporary Israel as the historic homeland of the Jewish people, and presents immigration as a homecoming and immigrants as repatriates. This means that the immigrants are ideologically sanctioned to feel at home in Israel and not in exile, and are prohibited from immigrant nostalgia for the "prehistoric motherland" (as it is jokingly referred to by Russian immigrants).⁸ In reality, by relinquishing one form of exile and "returning" to their Jewish "homeland," immigrants join the Russian diaspora that counts today millions of people. So, when we talk about Russian immigrants in Israel, the notions of homeland and exile are ambiguous. Whether the immigrants choose to see Israel as home and Russia as exile or vice versa, they will still find themselves in "exile at home" (to use photographer Frédéric Brenner's precise formula).⁹ In *Paper Snow*, immigrant filmmakers resolve this conundrum by being nostalgic for the Russian past of Israeli culture. This resolution leads to the ideological ambivalence of the film – *Paper Snow* reaffirms the mainstream ideology as it subverts it. This also means that according to Naficy's classification *Paper Snow* is a diasporic film.

Language

One way in which *Paper Snow* is marked as an accented diasporic film is its use of language. The dialogue is in Russian and Hebrew, with a few Yiddish phrases. The representation of Hebrew is not historically accurate – the characters for the most part

speak contemporary colloquial language, with only the occasional antiquated phrase added for the ambience. However, there is some truth to using a medley of languages. Indeed, the preferred language behind the scenes at Habima, and among other Russian intellectuals in 1930s Palestine, was Russian.¹⁰ Despite the official “Hebrew only” policy, they mixed and matched languages, not unlike contemporary immigrants.¹¹

The use of the filmmakers’ native language, according to Naficy, is a marker of belonging and authenticity. But in the context of the Israeli cinematic tradition of representing the past, the use of Russian in *Paper Snow* has additional implications. Whenever Israeli cinema portrays the era of nation building, the dialogue is predominantly in Hebrew. This means that the characters, even if they are of Russian (or other) origin, are represented as generic Jews or future Israelis, and their ethnic roots are downplayed. The dialogue remains “Hebrew only” not only in the earlier films of the heroic-nationalist genre, such as *They were Ten* (dir. Baruch Dinar, 1960) or *He Walked in the Fields* (dir. Yosef Milo, 1967), but also in much more recent films, such as *Rutenberg* (dir. Eli Cohen, 2003). Even today, as other Israeli films (especially co-productions) have become more multilingual, the national past remains portrayed in Hebrew. The overwhelmingly Russian dialogue in *Paper Snow* challenges the tradition of representing the national past in a de-ethnicized way.

Seemingly, the preferred audience for this film is Russian-Hebrew bilinguals who understand Yiddish references. Hebrew speakers must rely on subtitles.¹² And yet, despite the extensive use of Russian in the dialogue, and despite a fair assumption that most mainstream Hebrew audiences will rely on subtitles, the main target audience of this film is not Russian immigrants but Israelis.

First, the film’s plot references the Israeli past, featuring historical characters such as Bialik, Shlonsky, Rovina, and Penn, who are mythic figures for any educated Israeli. Along the same lines, the film’s dialogue quotes extensively from Hebrew poetry and drama – familiar and cherished texts for Hebrew readers. But immigrant audiences have a different world of cultural references and might not even recognize the film’s historical characters and literary quotes.

The history of *Paper Snow*’s production, distribution, and reception also points to its being targeted at Israeli audiences. *Paper Snow* was produced as part of the state-initiated project *Sratim mi-Kan* (Films from here) which was intended to make cable TV companies invest in film production and thus to give a push to the local film industry. *Sratim mi-Kan* was a hot topic in the media, and the films were anticipated, in the words of a *Ma’ariv* reporter, as “the coming of the messiah, and if not the messiah, then at least the British Channel 4.”¹³ Indeed, *Paper Snow* opened the first season of *Sratim mi-Kan* on Israeli cable TV, marking a new era in local filmmaking, enriched by the financial influx from the cable companies. This positioned *Paper Snow* as a mainstream Israeli production.

Indeed, Russian immigrants in Israel, who are not exposed to the mainstream Israeli press, might not even have heard of *Sratim mi-Kan*, and it is unlikely that they watched the *Paper Snow* premiere (or multiple repeats) on the Israeli film channel. Unlike mainstream Israeli audiences, Russian immigrants prefer to watch the Israeli Russian-language channel Israel-Plus, transnational Russian-language channels (including the film channel Nashe Kino and the channel RTVi produced in Russia, Israel, and the US), or the Russian cable networks ORT and RTR.¹⁴ And so *Paper Snow* was reviewed in the mainstream Israeli press, but almost no mention of it was made in the Russian-language Israeli press.

Thus I conclude that the film’s extensive use of Russian aims at Hebrew-speaking Israelis – more precisely, the Ashkenazi elites. Such a choice is not accidental. This is how

the filmmakers want to position themselves: they alleviate their status as Russian immigrants by reminding their audience that the Russian immigrants are Ashkenazi and that many Ashkenazi Israelis are historically Russian.

The questions of audience and language were raised early on in the production of the film, and clearly marked a divide between its Israeli and Russian-Israeli creators. Originally the script was written by the prominent Israeli director and writer Edna Mazya (to be directed by Shahar Segal). Mazya, of course, wrote her script in Hebrew. Later, as she explained to me in an interview, because of time constraints she asked the well-known Israeli writer Alona Kimhi for assistance with revisions. Kimhi, who immigrated to Israel from the USSR in 1972 as a young child, publicly identifies with her Russian roots, and sometimes serves as a kind of spokesperson for Russian-Israeli culture. With Kimhi taking over the script, its Russification had begun.

In the meanwhile the plans for a director changed as well, and the script was rerouted to Slava and Lina Chaplin, a husband-and-wife team. Educated at the prestigious Russian film school VGIK, the Chaplins immigrated to Israel in the 1970s as accomplished filmmakers. Since then they have continued their careers, mainly in documentary film: Slava worked for years for the Israel Broadcasting Authority and Lina made over 50 documentaries, often dealing with immigration and cultural difference. Their first fiction film (before *Paper Snow*) was *A Trumpet in the Wadi* (2001), a story of doomed love between an Israeli Palestinian and a Russian immigrant, based on the novel by Sami Michael.

Although the Chaplins have been working in Israel for over 30 years, they have maintained their connection to their culture of origin. They speak Russian at home, have an extensive Russian library, and for all these years have served as informal advisors for every immigrant filmmaker coming to Israel from the former Soviet Union. The Chaplins gave *Paper Snow* its Russian “accent.” As they explained to me:

We were very happy with the topic of the film – all this was intimately familiar to us. Israeli culture has been created by Russian Jews; Hebrew has been created by Russian Jews. What was going on in Russia and in Israel in the 1930s was very similar [culturally]. . . . Even though we hadn’t initiated the film, we were delighted to work on it – everything was so close to us, so familiar.¹⁵

Regardless of the historical accuracy of their claim, it is significant that the Chaplins repeatedly state their identification with the film characters – Russian-Jewish cultural producers.

Edna Mazya, who was not part of all these Russifying revisions, today disapproves of the entire film.¹⁶ Although she has not stated this explicitly, the Russification of the film violated her sense of cultural ownership of the script and – in a broader sense – of the representation of Israeli history to such a degree that she decided to reclaim her script. Mazya rewrote it as a play, *Hayah o lo hayah* (Was it a dream?), which, under the direction of Omri Nitzan, has been staged at the Cameri theater in Tel Aviv (originally founded, ironically, in opposition to Habima, in 1944). Indeed, the theatrical version represents the Israeli past in the much more conventional way: the dialogue is entirely in Hebrew, the music includes period Zionist marches and songs, and the dramatic tension is derived not so much from the love affair as from the characters’ arguments over the future of the new Hebrew culture. Most characters speak unaccented Hebrew, and accents are used only for comedic relief. Any Russianness of the story is effectively eliminated.

Another way in which *Paper Snow* is marked as an accented film is its preoccupation with language. Language plays an important role in the narrative, and even becomes the

topic of a conversation between the characters. In one such scene, Penn attends a Habima meeting to discuss his adaptation of a play. The discussion stalls when Rovina asks:

ROVINA: Isn't there a word in Hebrew for director? [Rovina uses the French *régisiseur*]
 [Actor and director Zvi] FRIEDLAND: What does it matter, let's call it stage conductor.
 ROVINA: Stage conductor is for an orchestra.
 FRIEDLAND: How about stage manager?
 ROVINA: Manager is not good either... We need one word, simple and clear. Simple. [Turns to Penn] Young man, you are a poet, aren't you?
 PENN: Maybe simply *bamai* [from Hebrew *bamah*, stage]

Multiple voices repeat the word with various intonations, trying it out and ultimately approving it. Rovina concludes: "*Bamai*. Simple, precise, clear."

The theme of the creation (or in ideological lingo – revival) of conversational Hebrew is an important motif in the historical narrative of Israeli nation building. Therefore, this scene in *Paper Snow* serves a double task: it pays tribute to the familiar and revered theme of "Hebrew revival" and also gently reminds its audiences about the figures behind the "revival" – Russian poets and actors, in short, members of the Russian intelligentsia, a loose category that includes the filmmakers themselves. Thus *Paper Snow* continues the national myth, while revising it.

But *Paper Snow* also pokes gentle fun at the Hebrew revival fervor. Thus in the erotic scenes of their first intimacy, Penn interrupts Rovina's Russian, by saying, "In Hebrew, Hanna, in Hebrew" (*Ivrit, Hanna, ivrit*), echoing the Zionist dictum "Hebrew person, speak Hebrew!" (*Ivri daber ivrit*). Even in moments of passion, Penn is first and foremost a Zionist devoted to the revival of Hebrew.

Casting

The Russian "accent" of the film is further emphasized by casting. Originally, the Chaplins intended to direct the film with an entirely Russian cast.¹⁷ However, the choice of Russian-speaking actors is relatively limited in Israel, and after they failed to find a Russian actor for the role of Penn, they gave up the original plan. Still, Russian Israelis are cast in several significant parts. Thus, Hanna Rovina is played by Yevgenya Dodina (Figure 2), a leading actor of Gesher Theater – a contemporary theater founded by Russian immigrants in Israel.¹⁸ In some ways, Dodina plays herself. For Israeli audiences she is both familiar and different. She is both Hanna Rovina – a legendary Habima star and a symbol of Israeli culture – and herself – a contemporary Russian immigrant star, recognizable not only for her acting in Gesher, but also for multiple roles in popular Israeli films, such as *Nina's Tragedies* (dir. Savi Gabizon, 2003), or more recently *Love and Dance* (dir. Eitan Anner, 2006). (The similarity between Rovina and Dodina is emphasized by an anecdote that the Chaplins eagerly tell at film screenings – how Dodina's young daughter, on seeing a portrait of Rovina, asked, "Is that mom?")

As Naficy reminds us, it is not by chance that in accented cinema, "the actor's ethnicity, the character's ethnicity, and the ethnicity of the star's persona coincide."¹⁹ This coincidence in *Paper Snow* has far-reaching consequences. Like Rovina, Dodina speaks Hebrew with a recognizable Russian accent. But there is a significant difference between the two stars: in Rovina's times, the Russian accent had a high status. Allegedly, young Hebrew-speaking actors who wanted to act at Habima even had to fake it.²⁰ In contemporary Israel, the Russian accent is a marker of low status, so that casting Dodina in the role of an icon of the Hebrew stage recontextualizes her (and other contemporary Russian immigrants') accent and raises its status.



Figure 2. Yevgenya Dodina as Hanna Rovina in *Paper Snow*. Courtesy of Cinephil.

Paper Snow's casting is not always accent-sensitive. Because of the casting constraints, some Russian characters are played by Israeli actors. The most important of them is Alexander Penn himself (Zak Berkman, who has also taken part in Gesher's productions). However, neither Berkman nor Mendy Cohen (cast as Shlonsky), nor Binyamin Visler (cast as Halfi) adjust their Hebrew accents to sound more Russian. The multiplicity not only of languages but also of accents means that the filmmakers do not attempt to create a purist or fetishized picture of an ethnicized past; rather through mixing and matching Russian and Hebrew accents they give them equal status.

Paper Snow's casting can be better understood in lieu of extra-diegetic factors. Naficy notes that in accented films filmmakers are often engaged in multiple tasks, such as when they act in their own films. Regardless of the reasons (usually limited resources), such casting acts as self-inscription, often autobiographical, that "tends to implicate the author as the actor, thus collectivizing the films' enunciation."²¹ Although the Chaplins do not cast themselves in their film, the casting of *Paper Snow* is self-referential – i.e. Russian-Israeli filmmakers, actors, and other cultural figures are cast as similar figures in the past. Thus Zvi Friedland, a key Habima actor and director, is played by Leonid Gorovitz, a renowned Soviet film director, who upon his immigration to Israel made several documentaries and two fiction films about Russian immigrants. Aharon Meskin, an actor and founding father of Habima, is played by Vladimir Friedman, an actor and a stand-up comedian in his Soviet past, who is highly recognizable in Israel for his portrayals of Russian immigrants in Israeli popular films such as *Yana's Friends* (dir. Arik Kaplun, 1999), *Broken Wings* (dir. Nir Bergman, 2003), and *Schwartz Dynasty* (dir. Amir Hasfari and Shmuel Hasfari, 2005). Fira Cantor, who is cast as Shura, Rovina's companion and assistant, starred in the now-forgotten drama *Lena* (1980), one of the first Israeli films to address cultural gaps between Israeli society and Russian immigrants. Such casting, I would argue, 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.

Genre

The genre of the film presents a further challenge for representing the Zionist past. The film's Hebrew title, a line from Penn's poem, is *Hayah o lo hayah* which can be roughly translated as "Was it ever?" Indeed, many shots are filmed out of focus, with an unstable hand-held camera. The Chaplins explained to me, "That's the effect we wanted to achieve – did that story happen, or is it only a myth? Where is the border between history and fiction?" This laissez-faire attitude to historical accuracy is quite surprising coming from the Chaplins, who have made careers of documentary filmmaking. Even more surprising is another of the Chaplins' confessions: "We were so tired of the politicized context, with the second *Intifada*, that we wanted to make a film that is entirely apolitical – no Israelis, no Palestinians, and no conflict." This decisive move away from politics in *Paper Snow* is especially conspicuous in contrast to the previous Chaplin feature, *A Trumpet in the Wadi*, which dealt directly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why would they want to distance themselves from politics? Examining the genre of *Paper Snow* hints at some answers.

Paper Snow belongs to a hybrid genre, as contemporary films often do. It mixes artist biopic (itself a mix of genres), melodrama, and historical film. Like artist biopics elsewhere, especially the ones featuring women protagonists – such as *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (dir. Alan Rudolph, 1994), *Carrington* (dir. Christopher Hampton, 1995), *Frida* (dir. Julie Taymor, 2002), or *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* (dir. Steven Shainberg, 2006) – *Paper Snow* focuses on the private life of a major cultural figure. Instead of following Rovina's professional work, it zooms in on her personal life, or more precisely one episode of it – her scandalous affair with Penn, and their resulting out-of-wedlock child. Not only does the film end without a happy ending, but more importantly, it ends without narrative closure – an important generic distinction of accented films, in contrast to traditional melodrama, which usually asserts closure at the end. Rovina is thus represented as a woman, and as a celebrity, but hardly as a Zionist icon.

In its focus on private life, *Paper Snow*, like most melodramas, concentrates on a woman's story, on her personal drama and love life. As is typical for melodrama,²² *Paper Snow*'s narrative is preoccupied with morality, and its central conflict is a conflict between the sexes. Its mise-en-scène is mainly internal enclosed spaces: Rovina's apartment, a cafe, cavernous passages, foyers, dressing rooms behind Habima's stage, and various hallways and staircases. Such a focus is the polar opposite of what Nurit Gertz calls the "optimistic geography" of the Israeli representational tradition, where a masculine and heroic "new Jew" is portrayed outside, conquering or working the land.²³ No land or manual labor is seen in *Paper Snow*. Even some of the street scenes are shot in the studio, in artificial light, giving them an air of interior space – of a domestic feminine sphere.

In one such scene, Rovina returns home from the rehearsal. As she exits the bus, walks through the narrow street, climbs up the stairs to her apartment, and enters it, the lighting, the music, and the atmosphere do not change substantially to suggest differences between interior and exterior space. In her dark, cavernous apartment, Rovina is greeted by Shura, her companion, who has been soaking her feet in a bucket of water. The two women engage in intimate conversation, freely shifting between Russian and Hebrew. As their conversation flows from affectionate banter to emotional revelations, both are busy with routine activities. The camera follows the two women's casual movements from room to room: Rovina undresses, lights a cigarette, and moves to and fro. Shura cossets Rovina – tells her off for not eating enough. Rovina snaps, "What do you mean, not eating enough, at my age?" But despite the banter, Rovina reveals to Shura that she

has fallen in love with Penn. In one of the funniest scenes, mixing Russian and Hebrew, pep-talk and gossip, Shura encourages Rovina to follow her heart:

SHURA: Show him who you are!

ROVINA: What are you saying! He's a boy – fifteen years younger than me. Rovina doesn't impress him. An aging actress with too much makeup.

SHURA: There isn't a man whom Rovina doesn't impress . . . Do you want a piece of herring? I brought some from the market today.

ROVINA: He invited me to his birthday – at the Snow of Lebanon tonight.

SHURA: Here, eat. [*Offers Rovina a piece of herring on a fork*]

ROVINA: Of course, I won't go.

SHURA: Don't go.

ROVINA: I won't go.

SHURA: Don't go.

ROVINA: I won't go

SHURA: Don't go.

ROVINA: Won't go.

SHURA: Don't go. Or go. Take a bath, put on your purple outfit, and show him who you are!

In this and other similar scenes, emphases on women characters, their home, their domestic banter, their culturally marked lifestyle and routine activities (soaking feet, eating herring) create a woman's sphere distinct from male-dominated Israeli cinema depicting the nation-building period.

Moreover, *Paper Snow* features one of the more erotically charged scenes in Israeli cinema (though the camera's soft focus mitigates its explicitness). Filmed, like the rest of the film, with the hand-held camera of a documentarist, and through warm yellow filters, the scene cuts between fragments of their naked bodies, as Penn and Rovina make love and fight over whether the lights will remain on during their lovemaking. Later, they sit at the piano together, still naked, as he plays improvisations and she sings the lyrics to the sad song that is heard later as a non-diegetic accompaniment to the shots of Rovina's memories of the Russian snow.

Needless to say, Israeli films about nation building do not feature explicit representation of sex. They usually depict that period in broad strokes, with an emphasis on the military and economic steps taken towards the establishment of the state. They aim to produce what James Young calls "the state-sponsored memory of a national past" in order to "affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election."²⁴ In contrast, *Paper Snow* is not concerned with grand narrative. Even though it is based on real events, it uses the historical plot only as a backdrop for a celebrity love story. Its period costumes and settings are nothing more than markers of melodramatic nostalgic iconography. *Paper Snow*'s "feminine" and erotic story subverts the Israeli conventions of historical film.

This subversion becomes especially conspicuous when one compares *Paper Snow* to Cohen's *Rutenberg* (which was also part of *Sratim mi-Kan*, and also a historical biopic). *Rutenberg* is the story of Pinchas Rutenberg, a visionary trying to build a power plant in Mandate Palestine. Unlike *Paper Snow*, *Rutenberg* is a "masculine" film: it focuses on a male hero and his struggle with technological and economic problems, not on emotions and relationships. Most of the key scenes in *Rutenberg* are shot outside, where men are taming nature with technology. Rutenberg's main accomplishment is his contribution to the economy of the future Jewish state, and his character is conceived as interesting not because of his relationships with his friends and family members but because he is a Zionist visionary, working for the ideological cause. Significantly, even though Rutenberg, like Rovina and Penn, was Russian, the film downplays his Russian roots

(his revolutionary past is represented schematically and stereotypically, through two brief scenes, with virtually no Russian dialogue), and presents him as a generic Zionist, part Israeli, part “citizen of the world.” Most importantly, *Rutenberg* subscribes to the convention of realistic representation, unlike *Paper Snow* with its yellow filters, nostalgic music, and out-of-focus shots.

The directors’ decision to stage a period piece from the Zionist past and yet to exclude politics – to focus on the personal and universal, and to film it as a melodrama – is political in itself and poses a challenge to the local conventions of historical representation. The criticism of hegemonic narrative subtly embedded in *Paper Snow* is expressed not only through genre but also through the film’s style.

Style

Paper Snow’s soft focus, yellow filters, and nostalgic music create a particular style, weaving together sensory perceptions and memory. The film’s cinematography relies on haptic imagery, i.e. imagery that uses the visual medium of film to appeal to other senses – touch, smell, and taste, making “the skin of the film” almost tangible. The resulting rich texture appeals to the “sense memory,” characteristic of accented cinema.²⁵

The scenes taking place at Snow of Lebanon are a good example here. This location, a cafe cramped with tables, chairs, and guests, is a center of gravity in the film, in which both the opening and closing scenes, as well as many of the key scenes, take place. Unstable camera movements create blurry and confusing images of the space. The yellow filter limits the color palette to warm yellows and browns. The hand-held camera wanders freely among the seated characters, often making jerky shifts from one character to the next. The focus is soft and the framing is tight, emphasizing the intimacy of the place and the relationships between the characters. Indeed, the proximity between them, as well as their body language, creates a sense of intimacy. They huddle together, hug, kiss, and touch: as they drink they clink their glasses in toasts; as they recite poems, they playfully cover their ears. Everyone smokes, inhaling and exhaling from the same thick cloud of smoke that envelopes them. This smoke creates a kind of smokescreen (literally and metaphorically), which simultaneously obscures the view of the past and also makes the atmosphere in the cafe palpable. Thus, the visual track appeals not only to the viewer’s sense of vision, but also to other senses. This way of filming allows the filmmakers “to touch affectionately the ordinary things,”²⁶ and in the case of *Paper Snow* also to touch the past affectionately.

The sound track reinforces the haptic effect. The scenes in the cafe and other public places are saturated with the murmur of multilingual conversation, laughter, crying, lines of poetry, and other sound bites. The conversation does not flow in an orderly manner but rather overlaps in a natural way, with people interrupting and talking over each other. In the background, an original score written by Avi Binyamin (a house composer of the Gesher theater) emulates period music in the style of Central European light entertainment. Its simple lyrical melody built on chords is charming and sentimental – in the musicologist Emanuel Rubin’s words, “Viennese schmaltz.”²⁷ Together with the yellow filter and soft focus, it engenders the nostalgic tone.

Not only does *Paper Snow* employ light music, its instrumentation also serves as a subtle reminder of the Russianness of the past. Guitar and violin, and the rising pitch of the melody, make the music sound more East European. Regardless of whether such music was likely to be played in Tel Aviv cafes in the 1930s, it is definitely an unlikely soundtrack in Israeli films depicting the nation-building era. In such films, musical scores are usually dominated by Zionist marches and canonic *shirei Eretz Yisrael* (songs of the

Land of Israel).²⁸ Not only does *Paper Snow* use European light music, it also subtly Russifies the sound, thus making the Israeli past both more European and more Russian. Thus the sound track also appeals to the “sense memory.”

The motifs of nostalgia and sense memory are expressed through another key scene, which gives the film its English title, *Paper Snow*. The premise of the scene is that Penn, who is depicted as an undisciplined bohemian, fails to show up to the first rehearsal at the Habima, where he is supposed to try his hand at directing. Rovina, who arranged for the trial rehearsal for him, is enraged. In a vengeful exchange, she tells him that he cannot be a director. To prove her wrong, Penn arranges a private theatrical show for Rovina.

When she walks home through the Tel Aviv street at night, alone and exhausted, Penn releases bags of tiny pieces of paper from the roof of a nearby building, creating a shower of paper snow just for her. The mood shifts, as Rovina is enchanted, playing in the snow like a little girl, smiling and laughing, catching the “snowflakes” with her hands. Her sparkling eyes and delighted smile are revealed in close-up mobile shots. These close-ups are intercut with shots giving a bird’s-eye view of Rovina reveling in paper snowflakes and with shots of a triumphant Penn, screaming to her, “Am I a director or not!” echoing the very word (*bamai*) he had invented in the previous scene. The use of the natural lighting of the streetlamps in the scene creates high-contrast images, typical of theater, but also of observational documentary. The effect of the scene, both theatrical and realistic, is magnified by a non-diegetic musical score, a sad song, sung in Hebrew by Dodina’s accented voice off screen:

Snow, snow and open land,
Everything is white.
This is the only thing from there that I am longing for,
My only fantasy is to return to that snow.

As the song continues, the visual track suddenly cuts for just a few seconds from the Tel Aviv street to beatific, almost still images of a quintessential Russian winter – a vast white landscape, with black trees and black birds in the background, and snow-covered red mountain-ash berries in the foreground.

This close-up of the mountain ash tree is significant. In Russian popular imagination, emigrants express their homesickness through “nostalgia for birch trees” (using a common Russian idiom). The birch tree, often featured in Russian folksong, poetry, and landscape painting, is a symbol of Mother Russia. In that context, the Chaplins’ choice to focus the shot on another paradigmatic Russian tree, the mountain ash (also often mentioned in folklore and poetry), alludes to the proverbial nostalgia for birch trees signaling to the Russian audience Rovina’s emigrant nostalgia.

An additional level of complexity is added by the meaning of the very term “nostalgia.” Derived from the Greek *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain), its original meaning is homesickness.²⁹ In Hebrew (like in English) the meaning has changed over the years to mean, “yearning for the past,” but in Russian the word has retained more of its original meaning. Starting with the authoritative 1881 dictionary by Vladimir Dal’, Russian dictionaries define nostalgia as “longing for the motherland.” Russian *nostal’giyah* is a gnawing aching for Mother Russia, a condition inflicted on the émigré for leaving it behind. In that context, the nostalgic film made by the Russian Israelis expresses not only their yearning for the Israeli past but also for their Russian homeland (thus violating the Zionist condemnation of exilic nostalgia).

This forbidden nostalgia seeps in through breaches in the diegetic narrative, such as Rovina’s memories of the Russian winter. Paradoxically, the scene of the fake theatrical snow leads to a revelation of Rovina’s genuine nostalgia, and by extension, the

filmmakers' own nostalgia behind the camera. The artificially lit urban spaces of Tel Aviv stand in contrast to this exterior shot of the Russian snow. Moreover, it is the only shot filmed with steady camera movements and without the filters that diminish the color palette to browns and yellows (effectively inverting the conventions of nostalgia cinema according to which the past, not the present, is tinted yellow). The nature shot also stands in contrast to the cramped artificial interior spaces, full of people, conversation, action, and thick with smoke, where the film's story takes place. The snowy landscape is quiet and unpopulated, and only Dodina's song flows slowly in its winter vastness. Thus, something as artificial as paper snow signals something as real as this landscape. In a minute's flashback, the film constructs what Naficy terms a "chronotope of the homeland as a primordial nature idyll" – as opposed to the fake snow of the new country.³⁰ The opposition between the enclosed crowded places of Tel Aviv and the open space of a Russian landscape are parallel to what Naficy would call the claustrophobia of exilic places and the agoraphobia of the homeland in accented cinema. Thus, through the creation of utopian images of Russian nature, the filmmakers inadvertently imply that their characters are in exile. Once again, *Paper Snow* subtly subverts the Zionist ideology, which appoints Israel as a "true" homeland. Without communicating so much on a conscious level, but rather through images of closed and open spaces, the film points to the "prehistoric" motherland as the true home and gives a rare glimpse into immigrant nostalgia, a nostalgia for a real place and time, and not just an imaginary Israeli past.

The theme of a search for identity and authenticity reverberates through other elements of the film. Importantly, *Paper Snow* is a film about theater, in which real actors play characters who are actors, who at times play other characters. Rovina and other characters dress up and undress, put on and take off makeup, put on and take off wigs, in short go in and out of other characters. Fragments of rehearsals and performances are woven into the narrative of the film: even when Rovina is "herself" she is performing, such as when Shura urges her to get into the character of "Rovina" and go and conquer Penn. The motif of performance, passing, and in general the performativity of identity, also characteristic of accented cinema, playfully permeates the film through this "diegetic staging."³¹

This motif of the performance of identity is reinforced by the use of mirrors in the story. Although the mirror is not seen on screen, Rovina puts on her makeup, using a mirror in her dressing room. Facing the camera, whose position would be that of the mirror, she is shown, not only putting on and taking off makeup but also pausing and contemplating, and peering at herself with intensity, perhaps asking herself who she is, who she has become. These are the questions that the filmmakers ask, drawing parallels between the characters on screen and themselves.

Taken together, the haptic imagery and the multilayered soundtrack have a paradoxical effect: the film simultaneously expresses longing for the past (albeit an imaginary past) and obscures it, giving a glimpse into what Walter Benjamin (citing Proust) calls "involuntary memory."³² In contrast to conscious memory, or remembrance, Laura Marks explains, "involuntary memory cannot be called up at will but must be brought on by a 'shock'.... [It] aims not to protect impressions but to disintegrate them."³³ Thus, its cinematic style gives the film its distinct nostalgic flavor.

Paper Snow is a "nostalgia film," not a historical film. That is, to use Fredric Jameson's definition, it does not represent "our historical past" so much as "our ideas or cultural stereotypes about the past."³⁴ But what is the meaning of this nostalgia for immigrant filmmakers? How can we explain their nostalgia for a past that is not theirs? Why are they homesick for the home they have not lived in? The unusual displaced nostalgia of *Paper Snow* becomes even more apparent if we compare it to another nostalgic film,

And the Wind Returneth (Russia, 1991) by another Russian-born Israeli filmmaker Mikhail Kalik. Israel appears in this film only in an opening scene, as the sterile space of an airport from which Kalik departs to travel to Russia. In the rest of the narrative, Kalik weaves together archival footage and black-and-white fictional scenes to tell the story of his growing up in Stalinist Russia, his formative experiences in Gulag camps, his becoming a filmmaker, and, ultimately, his exile from the homeland. Whether we chose to see Kalik's film as nostalgic or anti-nostalgic, its locus is "there and then in the homeland."³⁵ That is not the case with *Paper Snow*.

Why then did Russian-born directors make a film that expresses nostalgia for the Israeli past? Their nostalgia for this imaginary past may be seen as a reflection of their present, or even of a desired future. As Laura Marks writes, "Nostalgia . . . need not mean an immobilizing longing for a lost past: it can also mean the ability of past experiences to transform the present."³⁶ In the case of *Paper Snow* this can mean the ability of the representation of the past to transform the present. Unsatisfied with the status of contemporary Russians, marginalized and stigmatized as prostitutes, mafiosi, alcoholics, and charity cases,³⁷ immigrants appeal to the clout of the great Russians of the past, builders and warriors, pioneers and poets, both virile and intellectual – a cross between the prophet-poet Bialik, and the war hero Trumpeldor. Their nostalgia is not just "a romance with one's own fantasy,"³⁸ it is a romance with the nation's fantasy. It is not by chance that the theme of nostalgia appears in connection with nationalist ideology, which "mobilizes the nostalgia for the old Common Place lost" and "promises to recover the blissful childhood of a nation."³⁹

***Paper Snow* – accented memory**

Paper Snow tells a story that at least chronologically belongs to the period of Israel's foundation, a period whose depiction constitutes a part of what Yael Zerubavel has called the "master commemorative narrative," which "provides the group with a general notion of their shared past" – a source of collective memory. Some groups might resist the master narrative and produce a "countermemory."⁴⁰ *Paper Snow* does not produce countermemory; the filmmakers do not contest the national master narrative but merely adjust it to their own needs. Its cinematic accent allows *Paper Snow* to relate a chapter of the national narrative with a Russian accent: to make a subtle revision to the official memory of the past, and thus to produce accented memory.

The emergence of accented memory in a public sphere became possible through the development of a more positive attitude in Israel toward *galut* (exile) and *galutiyut* (diasporic sensibility), and a greater orientation toward multiculturalism. In the past, the Zionist mandate of *shlilat ha-galut* (repudiation of exile) required the erasure of diasporic memories and affiliations, but that has been gradually changing. Ironically, as other Israeli groups try to contest the images of "the Russian-Jewish hero," as witnessed by both a critical rereading of history and a proliferation of jokes about previously taboo historical topics,⁴¹ Russian immigrants try to reassert it. In that, they demonstrate what Svetlana Boym calls "the inferiority-superiority complex of immigrants," who believe "themselves to be more dedicated to the ideals of the adopted homeland"⁴² than "Israeli Israelis."

This complex is evident in the Russian-language political, journalistic, and literary discourse. Dimitry Shumsky has shown how Russian-Israeli intellectual elites reconcile their Russian culture and their Jewish nationalism by casting themselves as a "responsible group with a national vision," akin to the Zionist pioneers, and by assigning to Russian Jews a special, even messianic mission to unite Israel in the face of national disunity and the security threat.⁴³

Another example of such use of the Israeli past in Russian-Israeli cultural productions is *Village*, a Gesher theater show about the foundation of Israel.⁴⁴ *Village* focuses on the Russian roots of Israel, presenting a romanticized and nostalgic picture of Mandate Palestine. Although the story is told through the voices of multilingual and diverse characters (including a German refugee, an Arab trader, and Sabra soldiers), the emphasis is on Russian-born farmers of the *Yishuv* and a Russian Holocaust survivor.

In a more subtle form, same ideas are affirmed in *Yana's Friends*, a romantic comedy by the Russian-Israeli filmmaker Arik Kaplun.⁴⁵ A sub-plot 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 sub-plot both pays tribute to the heroic Israeli past and claims the new immigrants' right to be part of this grand narrative of the nation. It is the Russian immigrants' lost sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, who fought the Nazis, founded Israel, and defended it. This representation evokes the role of Russian Jews as saviors and protectors of the Jewish people – and Israel.

Potentially, these representations appear at an opportune moment when some Ashkenazi Israelis are seeking their own ethnic roots and want to establish their pre-Israel cultural identity as Russian, Polish, or Ukrainian Jews. This, at least in some ways, is a backlash against the rise of Mizrahi identities and the challenge they present to the established power balance in Israel. The recent documentary *The Ashkenzim* (dir. Dani Dotan and Dalia Meyerovich, 2005) is a good example of this trend. The film creates a collective portrait of a new generation of Ashkenazi Israelis proudly reconstructing their ethnic heritages through language, food, and cultural production, simultaneously reasserting the Ashkenazi right for cultural hegemony in Israel. The same trend can be seen in the recent non-fiction book on Ashkenazi Israelis by Merav Rosenthal-Marmorstein. Through an examination of recent public discourse and media events, the author makes a case against casting Ashkenazi Israelis as “oppressors” of Mizrahi and Palestinians, and reminds the readers of their historic role as nation builders.⁴⁶ Although, within the Israeli social hierarchy,⁴⁷ contemporary Russian immigrants are too far removed from the Ashkenazi elites to join forces with them, it is still significant that the cultural trends in “Russian Israel” parallel or complement those in “Israeli Israel.” To elevate their status, contemporary Russian Israelis strive to emphasize their connection to the historical past of the nation and, in so doing, also revise the mainstream collective memory of Israel's past and offer their own version – an accented memory.

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Notes

1. MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 231.
2. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*.
3. Nudelman, “Between the Empire and the Ghetto,” 12.
4. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 6.
5. Irit Shamgar, “Mi-Leningrad le-Wadi derekh Tel Aviv” (From Leningrad to wadi via Tel Aviv), *Ma'ariv*, 30 August 2002.
6. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4.

7. Ibid., 15.
8. I am grateful to Gennady Estrakh for reminding me about this expression.
9. Brenner, *Exile at Home*.
10. Author's interview with the former Habima actor Ahuva Miron, 19 July 2005; and personal communication from Israeli historian Israel Bartal, 6 February 2006.
11. One of the hallmarks of Zionist movements was the revival of Hebrew, transforming it from a language of religion to an everyday idiom. This revival was accompanied by a nationalistic drive to stamp out the use of other languages. See Kuzar, *Hebrew and Zionism*; and Almog, *Sabra*.
12. At international and Jewish film festivals, where the film was shown with English subtitles, the multilingualism of the film, and the shifts between languages were lost in translation altogether. The exception was the Week of Israeli Cinema in Moscow, where audiences could follow the Russian dialogue.
13. Meir Schnitzer, "Dodina ahavah et Rovina" (Dodina loved Rovina), *Ma'ariv*, 21 March 2003.
14. Elias, *Israel*.
15. Author's interview with Lina and Slava Chaplin, 21 July 2005.
16. Author's interview with Edna Mazya, 17 June 2007.
17. Author's interview with Lina and Slava Chaplin.
18. See Gershenson, *Gesher*.
19. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 24.
20. Interview with Ahuva Miron.
21. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 48.
22. Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*, 202–03.
23. Gertz, "From Jew to Hebrew," 182.
24. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 2.
25. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.
26. Ibid., 182.
27. Emanuel Rubin, personal communication, 11 April 2007.
28. On *shirei Eretz Yisrael*, see Regev and Seroussi *Popular Music and National Culture in Yisrael*, 49–70.
29. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 2–3.
30. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 158.
31. Ibid., 271.
32. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 157–59.
33. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 64.
34. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 114.
35. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 15.
36. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 201.
37. See Lemish, "The Whore and the Other"; and Elias and Bernstein, "Wandering Jews."
38. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.
39. Boym, *Common Places*, 287.
40. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 6, 10.
41. Ibid., 167–77.
42. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xv.
43. Shumsky, "Ethnicity and Citizenship," 163.
44. On *Village* and its reception, see Gershenson, *Gesher*, 109–16.
45. For detailed analysis of *Yana's Friends*, see Gershenson and Hudson, "Absorbed by Love," 304–13.
46. Rosenthal-Marmorstein, *Ha-nadon: Ashkenazim*.
47. See Kimmerling *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness*.

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