Aliyah to the Movies: Russian & Israeli Cinema

By Olga Gershenson

Russian-Israeli filmmakers ... walk a thin line between asserting the place of the immigrants in Israel and insisting on their cultural distinctiveness.

Love & Dance

Some years ago, when applying for my US passport, I took the naturalisation paperwork to the post office. It stated: 'Place of birth: Russia. Place of residence: Israel'. Confused, the clerk asked, 'Is Israel part of Russia?' 'No', I told her, 'but you have a point.' Twenty years earlier, the clerk's mistake would not have made sense. But once Russian Jews became the largest wave of Jewish migration into Israel—today one out of every six Israelis speaks Russian—the country has, in a way, become part of Russia. And Russia has in some ways become a part of Israel.

In a world that is increasingly globalised, decentralised, and diasporic, traditional national boundaries are blurred. Post-Soviet immigrants, known in Israeli parlance as 'Russians' are a case in point. These immigrants, who often maintain multiple passports, homes, and languages, make us re-think the meaning of homeland and exile: they are part of a traditional Jewish diaspora and of a new Russian diaspora. This mass migration affected both Israeli and Russian cultures. One site where these changes can be clearly identified is cinema: Russian immigrants and their homeland are becoming common in Israeli films and Israel is beginning to appear in Russian cinema. What do these films, made in both Israel and Russia, tell us about the changes in the cultural landscapes in both countries?

Recently, Israeli film and TV audiences have come to expect to hear not only Hebrew, but also English, French, Arabic, Amharic and, increasingly, Russian. This multiculturalism is a new phenomenon: early Israeli cinema, especially films of the so-called heroic-nationalist genre, subscribed to the 'Hebrew only' policy. The classic *They Were Ten* (1960, dir. Baruch Dienar) tells a heroic Zionist tale of the early pioneers. The film's characters are technically Jewish immigrants from Russia, but on screen they are portrayed as 'new Jews': they speak only Hebrew and even sing a Russian song in Hebrew (without any trace of an accent, naturally).

Love & Dance

This over-the-top black comedy signals that the true 'promised land' is back in the old country and not in Israel

The Schwartz Dynasty

Real Russian immigrants appear on Israeli screens only after the first wave of Soviet Jews, refuseniks and dissidents, landed in Israel in the 1970s. Now we see these 'Russians' as typical newcomers struggling with a new culture and language, and trying to fit into Israeli society. Unlike heroic pioneers, they are not model Israelis. The first such film was *Lena* (1980, dir. Eytan Green): the film's eponymous heroine (Fira Cantor) is young, beautiful and torn: between loyalty to her Russian husband, a Zionist still in a Soviet jail, and love for an Israeli man: metaphorically between maintaining her Russian identity and assimilating in Israel. Lena chooses to leave her Russian husband. In this way, as is common in Israeli films, a female immigrant is inducted and assimilated into Israeli society via romantic-sexual relations with a local male. But Russian male immigrants in the film appear aggressive and irrational, without any chance to develop relationships with Israeli women. In this and other ways, *Lena* typifies the representation of Russian immigrants on Israeli screens. The casting and use of language in *Lena* are also typical: Russian immigrant actors play immigrant characters. Their accent and occasional Russian dialogue are authentic, but also foreign-sounding within the 'Hebrew only' text of the films.

In the 1990s, Russian characters began to appear more frequently on Israeli screens. They are featured in many films, including *Saint Clara* (1996, dir. Ari Folman and Ori Sivan), *Circus Palestina* (1998, dir. Eyal Halfon), *The Holy Land* (2001, dir. Eytan Gorlin), *Made in Israel* (2001, dir. Ari Folman), *What a Wonderful Place* (2005, dir. Eyal Halfon), *The Schwartz Dynasty* (2005, dir. Amir Hasfari and Shmuel Hasfari), *Love & Dance* (2006, dir. Eytan Anner), as well as in TV serials *A Touch Away* (2006, dir. Ron Ninio) and *To Love Anna* (2008, dir. Tzion Rubin). Many of these films portray immigrants sympathetically, but emphasise their cultural and religious differences.

As in *Lena*, these films portray female immigrants as beautiful, helpless, sexualised women with distinctly Russian looks (blond hair, blue eyes, round face) who are frequently shown in frontal close-ups, disconnected from their Israeli environments. Their unassimilable foreignness can be overcome only through romantic involvement with an Israeli man. In contrast, Russian male characters are confined largely to their self-contained, homosocial world that precludes assimilation into Israel. Consequently, most of the plots feature romances between female immigrants and local males.

Will these Russian-Israeli couples manage to live happily ever after? *Love & Dance* hints at some answers. At the centre of this lyrical drama is Khen (Vladimir Volov), a young boy struggling with the cultural conflict between

his Russian-born mother and Israeli father. Khen's identity is caught between his frustrated parents a conflict that is emphasised linguistically as his mother speaks to him in Russian and his father in Hebrew. As Khen is negotiating his Russianness and his Israeliness, his parents fail to reconcile their cultural differences and must part. And yet *Love & Dance* ends on a positive note: Khen overcomes his own obsession with the dysfunctional Russian beauty, and falls in love with the down-to-earth Israeli girl. In the narrative logic of the film, even the inassimilable hybrid Khen makes the right choice between his Russianness and his Israeliness.

In contrast to bi-cultural Khen, immigrant men almost never become protagonists in Israeli films. The rare relationships between immigrant men and Israeli women usually fail, like the 'forbidden' romance between the secular immigrant and the ultra-orthodox young woman in a popular TV series, *A Touch Away*. Most importantly, whether male or female, stereotypical or nuanced, Russian immigrants are represented in all these films from the Israeli perspective—as outsiders.

Yana's Friends

Russian immigrants are represented in all these films from the Israeli perspective—as outsiders

This stereotypical portrayal of Russian immigration began to change as immigrant filmmakers themselves started breaking into the Israeli film industry. They introduced the immigrant's point of view and added their own accented voices to Israeli cinema, creating what has been termed 'accented cinema'. The 'accent' in question is defined not only by the actual languages and accents on the screen, but also by the cultural identities of the filmmakers. Indeed, Russian-Israeli filmmakers affirm and challenge, often simultaneously, the dominant national identity: they walk a thin line between asserting the place of the immigrants in Israel and insisting on their cultural distinctiveness. Unlike the Israeli films, which are preoccupied with assimilation via inter-ethnic relationships, Russian-Israeli films rarely feature Russian-Israeli romance.

The very first Russian-Israeli film, *Coffee with Lemon* (1994) by Leonid Horowitz, who came to Israel as an established director, is illustrative of these trends. At the centre of the plot is a famous Moscow actor (played by the Russian star, Aleksandr Abdulov) who immigrates to Israel, only to discover that he cannot bridge the cultural gap and is doomed to failure. He returns to Moscow, but is killed there in a street shooting. At the end, the immigrant protagonist fits neither here nor there, a far cry from the typical immigration narrative of an Israeli film.

The more recent *The Children of USSR* (2005) by a young Israel-educated director, Felix Gerchikov, also features a male protagonist, Slava, a former soccer star in his native town and now an immigrant, suffocating in a remote Israeli town and struggling to support his young family. Slava and his friends populate the margins of Israeli society, which also include violent Mizrahi youth, an Ethiopian immigrant and an oddball Hassidic soccer fan. The 'model Israeli' is nowhere to be seen, liberating the film from the reductive logic of assimilation. In fact, even the film's title indicates the inassimilability of its characters: pronounced *yaldey sssr*, the title combines a Hebrew word for 'children' and a Russian word for 'USSR'. Idiosyncratic bilingual spelling not only introduces a Russian word into a Hebrew title, but also uses a Cyrillic acronym as a nostalgic icon. The central 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. But Slava is stubborn, and he succeeds in forming a soccer team. At the end of the film, Slava is reconciled both with his Russian wife and his Israeli surroundings.

Another intra-ethnic romance is at the centre of *Paper Snow* (2003) by the veteran Russian-Israeli directors Lena and Slava Chaplin. It is a historical drama set in the 1920s to 1930s about the love affair between Hanna Rovina, star of the Habima, an Israeli theatre that originated in Moscow, and Alexander Penn, an Israeli communist poet who was originally from Siberia. Other literary giants, Avraham Shlonsky, Avraham Halfi, and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, all of them hailing from Russia, surround Rovina and Penn. Moreover, all these Israeli historical figures are portrayed speaking to each other in Russian, which is all but unimaginable in the 'Hebrew only' national past. Unlike mainstream Israeli movies, *Paper Snow* pays tribute to their culture of origin, to their Russian literary and theatrical background. In this way, the film focuses

on the Russian roots of Israeli culture, emphasising the importance of Russian Jews (past and present) to Israel.

In a more subtle form, the past also appears in the short film, *Dark Night* (2005), by a successful young Russian-Israeli director, Leonid Prudovsky. The film opens with a scene of an Israeli patrol in the occupied territories. A soldier (Pini Tavger), 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 inspired Soviet troops, including his Jewish grandfather, as they fought against the Nazis. Similar use of the past appears in the brilliant *Yana's Friends* (1999) by Arik Kaplun. All these representations emphasise the identification of Russian immigrants with the Israeli-Jewish nation, while concurrently affirming their Russian cultural identity.

Israel today is a part of Russia, and Russia is a part of Israel

The Children of USSR

And of course, a big role in 'accented' movies is played by the language. If mainstream Israeli films, made to appeal to the Hebrew-speaking audience, feature few token words in Russian, Russian-Israeli films move freely between Russian and Hebrew. The recent TV series, *Between the Lines* (2009, dir. Evgeniy Ruman), goes a step further. This series about a Russian-language newspaper in Israel features a staff of writers and reporters, all of whom are immigrants speaking to each other in Russian (Hebrew subtitles are optional).

Not only Russian immigrants but also their homeland began to appear on Israeli screens. This is unusual, as diasporic homelands are not often depicted in Israeli films, and certainly not positively. But 'accented' movies portray Russia neutrally or even nostalgically: in *Paper Snow,* the heroine experiences a nostalgic flashback to a Russian winter as a beautiful snow-covered landscape. A brilliant recent TV series, *Troika* (2010), by the above-mentioned Leonid Prudovsky, not only features dialogue that is almost entirely Russian, but is also filmed on location both in Russia and in Israel with characters moving freely between countries, languages and identities.

As Russia began appearing on Israeli screens, Israel began appearing on Russian screens. This was a dramatic change from Soviet times, when the Cold War and continued anti-Zionist campaigns made any mention of Israel impossible. Only in the liberal era of perestroika did questions of Jewish life and interest appear on the Soviet screen. But in contrast to Israeli films, these films presented emigration as a tragedy—a consequence of local violence or injustice. Inter-ethnic romance involved a Russian Jew and a non-Jewish Russian, whose romance, as a rule, was doomed to failure. *Love* (1991), an influential film by acclaimed director Valery Todorovsky, is the tragic love story of a Russian guy and a Jewish girl who are eventually parted as persecution and anti-Semitism leave her no choice but to go to Israel.

Even in comedies, emigration is a kind of a tragic mistake and something to be fixed. In Georgii Danelia's *Passport* (1990), a non-Jewish character finds himself in Israel as an accidental new immigrant due to a case of mistaken identity. He is desperate to return to his native Georgia. Not surprisingly, some Russian movies feature return immigrants. In *Daddy* (2004, directed by a Russian film star Vladimir Mashkov), set in 1929, a character returns from Palestine, explaining that his return is a homecoming: for him Jerusalem was a place 'where one can only weep and die, and where people are strangers.' The message is clear: true home is Russia.

A different kind of return immigrant appears in Pavel Loungine's *Roots* (2005), when Baruch, a Russian-Israeli Mafioso travels to Ukraine to rebury his dear mother 'at home'. Even this over-the-top black comedy signals that the true 'promised land' is back in the old country and not in Israel.

More recently, Israel, and Russian immigrants to Israel, have started to appear even in mainstream Russian movies and TV series entirely unrelated to Jewish topics. *Padishah*, an episode of a hit detective series, *National Security Agent-3* (2001), takes Russian detectives to Israel and features scenes filmed on location, including the most alluring tourist destinations—beaches, historical sites, hotels and restaurants. Russian detectives come in contact with a wide range of Israelis—religious and secular, new immigrants and native-born, so that the characters (and audiences)

The Schwartz Dynasty

learn about everyday Israeli life. The main character (played by Russian film star Mikhail Porechenkov) even falls for a local colleague, a young, confident Israeli woman. The romance is not expected to last, but it does indicate warming relations between the two cultures. An episode in a more recent Russian detective series, *Zhurov* (2009), colourfully titled *Shabbes Goy*, takes place not just in Israel but within a Hassidic sect in Jerusalem. It was filmed on location, in the religious neighbourhood of Mea Shearim. Again, the Russian detective (Andrey Panin) is working on a case together with a local colleague (Russian-Israeli actor Vladimir Friedman) who serves as both his interpreter and cultural mediator, helping him (and the audience) to gain a rare glimpse into the life of an insular religious community.

These Russian films and TV shows appear to have no Jewish theme. So, why Israel? Israel is a historically and culturally rich foreign locale, which makes it an exciting visual setting. But more importantly, the appearance of Israel in the Russian TV series affirms old social ties between Russian-Jewish cultural producers, some of them living in Russia and some in Israel, who still collaborate with each other. The script of *Shabbes Goy* was written by a Russian Israeli, and an Israeli production company (staffed with Russian Israelis) helped with the local casting.

Some co-productions and collaborations blur national and cultural boundaries, to the point where it is hard to identify whether a film is actually Russian or Israeli. Consider *And the Wind Returneth* (1991) by Mikhail Kalik. In the 1960s, Kalik was a figurehead of the Soviet poetic cinema along with directors such as Andrey Tarkovsky and Sergey Paradjanov. Following the anti-Semitic censoring of his films, he emigrated to Israel in 1971. There, Kalik made only one film and failed to flourish as a director, but in Russia his oeuvre continued to be revered. And so, on the invitation of the Soviet film authorities, he travelled to Russia and made *And the Wind Returneth*, his cinematic autobiography. Although set mostly in Soviet Russia, the film opens and ends in Israel, depicting, among other emigrations, Kalik's own. This was not a co-production: the film was financed by Soviet state funding, and shot mostly in Russia, but, with a director who identifies as a Russian-Jewish Israeli, the film's Israeli character is inevitable. Kalik's film is not the only example of such national boundary-crossing. Leonid Horowitz directed a Russian-Jewish film, *Ladies' Tailor*, and just a couple of years later, upon his immigration, a number of 'accented' films in Israel. However, Horowitz now lives in his native Kiev. Felix Gerchikov, who directed *The Children of USSR* in Israel, is now making films in Moscow. Are these filmmakers Russian or Israeli?

Because such a large number of Jewish cultural producers immigrated to Israel, the social ties that they maintain with their Russian friends and colleagues create social networks, which, once in place, generate their own momentum, leading to new cultural production and distribution as well as the blurring of national and cultural boundaries. Movies made by these filmmakers, whether Russian or Israeli, circulate through the internet, transnational TV channels and Jewish film festivals, and are seen in Russia, Israel, and elsewhere in the Russian diaspora. These cultural crossings and exchanges make the Russian-Israeli cinema an extension of both post-Soviet or, in broader terms, Russian diasporic cinema. Of course, these developments are not limited to cinema—we see the same process at work in literature, art, business and scholarship. As Russian immigrants to Israel transform themselves through migration, they also transform cultures around them, which is why Israel today is a part of Russia, and Russia is a part of Israel.

Olga Gershenson is Associate Professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. To learn more about her work, see www.people.umass.edu/olga/.

A version of this article appeared in the journal Israel Affairs.