New Immigrant, Old Story: Framing Russians on the Israeli Screen

OLGA GERSHENSON AND DALE HUDSON

FOLLOWING THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION, nearly two million people escaped the former empire to pursue new lives in Israel, the United States, Germany, and other countries. By the mid-1990s, the "new Russian immigrant" had begun to emerge as a character in both commercial and art-house cinema in these countries.[1] Because cinematic representations of immigrants often reveal more about the cultures producing and consuming such images and narratives than they do about actual immigrant experiences, the Russian immigrant character points to particular national responses to new waves of immigration at the onset of post–Cold War globalization, reflecting gendered, ethnic, and religious contradictions and inconsistencies within popular conceptions of national identity. In this article, we examine films about female Russian immigrants to Israel as sites of debates over nation and integration in the Israeli context, as well as sites of larger debates over accommodations and adjustments necessary for participation within the international community, particularly the international art-house film market.

The new Russian immigrant character marked an important departure from representations of Russian characters outside Soviet-bloc cinemas prior to the collapse of the USSR. Previously, spies and defectors had embodied the majority of representations of Soviet citizens, particularly in Hollywood Cold War action-adventure films and spy thrillers. Since the fall of Soviet communism, Russian immigrants have appeared most visibly in films that, either directly or indirectly, are concerned with the Russian Mafia. These new Russian immigrant characters are typically male, such as the Russian mafiosi in *Karma Local* (US 1998; dir. Darshan Bhagat) and *The Quickie* (France/UK/Germany 2001; dir. Sergei Bodrov), as well as in the acclaimed television series *The Sopranos* (US 1999–2006; prod. David Chase). Although a female counterpart to the Russian mafiosi also appears in thrillers and action-adventure films, such as *Birthday Girl* (UK/US 2001; dir. Jez Butterworth), the figure of the Russian woman generally holds a different significance. Russian males are confined largely to the self-contained, predominantly homosocial, diasporic world of the Russian Mafia that evades assimilation into its host country. By contrast, Russian women more often assimilate into their host countries through heterosexual coupling, whether via prostitution, romance, or marriage. Recent international art films

OLGA GERSHENSON is an assistant professor of Judaic and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is the author of *Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel; A Study of Cultural Colonization* (Peter Lang, 2005) and coeditor of *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* (Temple University Press, forthcoming).

DALE HUDSON is a visiting assistant professor of film studies in the Department of English at Amherst College. His work on cinema and new media appears in the journals *Afterimage, Studies in Documentary Film,* and *Screen,* as well as in the anthology *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Routledge, 2007).

featuring such characters include *Black and White* (US/Russia 1992; dir. Boris Frumin), *Postmark Paradise* (US 2000; dir. Thompson E. Clay), *Russian Doll* (Australia 2001; dir. Stavros Kazantzidis), and *Balalaika* (Turkey 2001; dir. Ali Özgentürk). Israeli cinema has also produced several similar films, including the television film *Kalinka Maya* (Israel 1997; dir. Eitan Londner), the absurdist satire *Circus Palestina* (Israel 1998; dir. Eyal Halfon), the sensationalist drama *The Holy Land* (Israel 2001; dir. Eitan Gorlin), the postmodern pastiche *What a Wonderful Place* (Israel 2005; dir. Eyal Halfon), and two romantic comedies: *Saint Clara* (Israel 1995; dir. Ari Folman and Ori Sivan) and *Yana's Friends* (Israel 1999; dir. Arik Kaplun). We choose to focus our analysis on *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* because both films address questions about Israeli immigration, particularly shifts in immigration policy in response to national identity, and both enjoyed considerable visibility on the national and international film circuits.

We read *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* as immigration narratives that posit assimilation of female immigrants into Israeli society as amenable, indeed possible, only through romance with a *sabra* (native-born Israeli) man. Alone, Clara and Yana represent inassimilable immigrants, ones whose very identities embody indifference to, or disengagement from, Israeli-Zionist ideologies. Because these immigration narratives are told through the generic formulas of romantic comedy, they feature representations of women, who, invariably, mobilize their youth, beauty, and sexuality for survival within narrative structures of the relative powerlessness of immigrants. *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* thus converge and depart from stereotypes of Russian women as femmes fatales, mail-order brides, or prostitutes on the international film circuit. By exploring the new character of the Russian immigrant woman within the specific context of Israeli cinema, we contribute to the study of the politics of Israeli cinematic representations of ethnicity, pioneered by Ella Shohat and continued by Yosefa Loshitzky and Nurith Gertz.

Politics of Immigration and Representation

Historically, cinematic representations of immigrants have expressed the politics of immigration in Israel, where the Law of Return, conferring citizenship on any Diaspora Jew, is raison d'être of the state. This law codifies *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Israel, literally "ascent") as a top national priority and affirms Israel's status as a Jewish state. The ideology of Zionism and the politics of immigration reflexively reproduce and justify each other, as a brief history of immigration to Palestine and Israel makes evident. This history is relevant to a study of cinematic representations of the new Russian immigrant because it establishes the historical context against which these newcomers are evaluated.

The first waves of politically Zionist immigration came to Palestine from eastern, central, and western Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. These immigrants, mainly European (Ashkenazi) Jews, formed the cultural, political, and economic elite of Israeli society. The next major waves of immigrants came in the late 1940s and 1950s, mainly from the Middle East and North Africa (Mizrahi Jews).[2] Many of them were forced to migrate because of hostilities against Jews in primarily Islamic countries, incited by the founding of Israel. Zionist emissaries actively recruited Mizrahi Jews, but once in Israel, these immigrants were subjected to the ethnocentric and colonial attitudes of the Ashkenazi minority. Conflict between the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Israelis remains unresolved; it constitutes an entrenched source of simmering discontent that routinely surfaces in national politics (Dahan-Kalev; Kimmerling; Swirski). In the 1990s, immigrants from the former Soviet Union arrived in the middle of these ethnic and political tensions, forming the first massive wave of immigration (about 900,000 people) since the 1950s. Together with the immigrants from the USSR who came to Israel in the 1960s–80s (about 140,000), Russian immigrants today constitute one of the largest ethnic groups.

Tensions quickly developed between the new Russian immigrants and local Israeli Jews, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi alike. The Mizrahi community saw the large surge in Russian immigration as reinforcing Ashkenazi dominance in Israeli society; the Ashkenazi community disapproved of the immigrants' lack of Zionist commitment, knowledge of Israeli Jewish customs, and desire to assimilate. Both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi communities were concerned with the unusually large proportion of non-Jews among the new Russian immigrants.[3] These tensions found expression in media stereotypes of Russian immigrants as destabilizing, if not outright threatening, to Israeli national identity. The Israeli media propagated this stereotype, depicting Russian immigrants as alcoholics, child abusers, and wife beaters and as a community of criminals, drug dealers, and prostitutes.

With rare exception, Russian immigrants were excluded from Israeli public cultural production during the 1990s.[4] Israeli radio seldom included their "diasporic" Russian-accented voices, and Russian immigrant characters rarely appeared on television or film. Unflattering or distorted media coverage of immigration was framed invariably from the vantage point of the Israeli old-timers. A thriving industry of Russian-language media and culture existed separately from the mainstream Hebrew-language media, rendered invisible to most Israeli audiences. Only in the late 1990s did this situation begin to change. Russian subtitles were introduced on some cable channels in 1998 and in some movie theaters in 2001; a Russian-language cable television channel was launched in 2002. These steps toward recognition of the Russian-speaking audience in Israel, however, have not resolved the problem of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of immigrants in mainstream Israeli cultural production. Even though Russian immigrants increasingly receive cinematic representations, they still rarely find themselves in the position to control, or even contribute to, the production and circulation of such representations.

Immigrants, Zionism, and Israeli Cinema

The position of Russian immigrants in contemporary Israeli cinema emerges within the historical interplay of nation formation and state cultural institutions. Historically, Zionism appropriated cinema as a significant means of generating national consciousness. In the local context, however, it is complicated by the overlapping of ethnic and religious identity, implied in Israel's status as the "Jewish state" and by the right to citizenship, conferred by the Law of Return. In this section, we trace some of the moments, pertinent to our arguments, in Israeli cinema, its representations of immigrants, and its immigration narratives.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, cinema was "widely used as propaganda promoting Jewish immigration to Palestine, for fund-raising among Jewish communities and for political lobbying in Europe and [North] America" (Ne'eman, "Israeli Cinema" 223). Retrospectively labeled "Zionist realism," these films affirmed national identity based on agriculture, self-defense, and a return to the Hebrew language. In so doing, the films helped to shape and define expectations placed on new immigrants. In Dorit Naaman's analysis, "early Israeli cinema was strongly dependent, both ideologically and financially, on the country's political system," thus reproducing the Ashkenazi dominance and casting Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians as internal and external others (37). An alternative to cinematic representations of Zionist ideology began only during the 1960s with the leftist realism of the Israeli new wave, though it too represented an almost exclusively Ashkenazi perspective.

Alongside new wave films, popular Israeli cinema produced commercially viable comedies and melodramas that have been loosely grouped into what is considered the local Israeli genre of *bourekas* films (labeled after a Middle Eastern pastry). Comparable to Hollywood's blaxploitation cycle in terms of their response, however ambivalent and ultimately exploitative, to a paucity of cinematic representations of a minoritized group, *bourekas* were a

distinct group of low-budget films produced with indirect state funding (rather than direct state subsidies for "quality" films) by Ashkenazi filmmakers for a largely Mizrahi audience. Recognizable Ashkenazi actors often played Mizrahi roles, with Mizrahi actors often portraying Palestinian and other "foreign" characters (Naaman 37). The unprecedented success of *Sallah Shabati* (Israel 1964; dir. Ephraim Kishon), with its lazy, illiterate, and chauvinistic yet lovable and wise Mizrahi immigrant protagonist, became a prototype for the *bourekas*. In this and other films, the Mizrahim are represented as exotic, premodern, despotic, and antagonistic to Palestinians, consistent with racist political discourse concerning Mizrahi Jews, which recognized their difference as a matter of culture more than as one of class (Shohat). *Sallah* and subsequent *bourekas* films, such as *Katz and Carasso* (Israel 1971; dir. Menachem Golan) and *Kazablan* (Israel 1974; dir. Menachem Golan), employed interethnic marriage and social mobility (often via ethnic "passing") as narrative resolutions to ethnic tensions. Engendering a "mixed-marriage formula" that celebrated "the victory of love over social and ethnic differences," *bourekas* films became cult movies for young audiences during the 1990s (Ne'eman, "Israeli Cinema" 228).

The "post-political" filmmaking of the 1990s drew upon the conventions of romantic comedy from the *bourekas* films, returning almost to an emulation of Hollywood and European cinema. The films from this period are symptomatic of political ambivalence, evidencing a disengagement from political issues, in particular conflicts with Palestinians, and an emphasis on personal expression and individual experience. The filmmaking of the 1990s is "rooted in a sense of 'homelessness'," expressing "a new form of identity—neither here nor there, associated with both the difficulties of immigration and a sense of inner exile" (Ne'eman, "Israeli Cinema" 227–28). These post-political Israeli films coincide with a broader tendency among Israelis to embrace global capitalism through living and studying abroad, through travel and tourism, and, for filmmakers, through coproductions and participating in international film festivals.

Saint Clara and *Yana's Friends* are typical of a 1990s Israeli filmmaking that avoids a direct address of social and political problems. The release of *Saint Clara*, along with several other films, marked a new era of commercially viable local production, with the major daily newspaper reporting that *Saint Clara*, together with another film, garnered an audience of 70,000 during the first weeks of release in Israeli theaters (Zimmerman 115–24). In terms of funding, exhibition, and critical reception, *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* are strikingly similar. Both films were produced with a combination of public and private funding, and both films received critical praise in Israel and abroad during their exhibition in international film festivals and at commercial theaters.[5] There is even overlap in the on- and off-screen talent involved in the production of the two films. Russian-born cinematographer Valentin Belonogov shot both *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends,* and Israel Demidov and Lucy Dubinchik appear in both films. The films' popularity and acclaim suggest that both resonate with mainstream contemporary notions of gender, immigration, and nation in the Israeli popular imagination.

Saint Clara and *Yana's Friends* address interethnic tensions between Russian immigrants and *sabras* (both Ashkenazi or Mizrahi), drawing loosely upon the *bourekas* formula, avoiding the lived realities of sociopolitical problems. Both films replace Israeli–Palestinian conflicts and Ashkenazi–Mizrahi tensions with apocalyptic scenarios: earthquakes and nuclear contamination in *Saint Clara* and Iraqi missiles during the first Gulf War in *Yana's Friends*. Both films adopt strategies of romantic comedy, a genre that often gives expression to repressed social issues and personal compromise, with aspects of melodrama, which conventionally serves "as a safety-valve for ideological contradictions" (Mulvey 39). Yet the films differ in the identity politics of the filmmakers and their cast: *Saint Clara* was produced by Israeli directors and crew. *Yana's Friends* is primarily the work of Russian immi-

grant filmmakers and crew. *Saint Clara* is based on the novel by the Czech writer Pavel Cohout, adapted for the screen and transplanted onto Israeli soil by screenwriters Ori Sivan and Ari Folman.[6] *Yana's Friends* is based on the original script by Arik Kaplun and Semion Vinokur, which, they reported in an interview, includes autobiographical details from their own immigration to Israel, as well as details from other true immigration stories. In *Saint Clara* immigrants are represented from the perspective of local Israelis; in *Yana's Friends,* from the perspective of Russian immigrants.

This difference, we argue, defines other important distinctions between the two films: between their cinematic styles and modes of representation and between the political ramifications of language use. As a result of these differences, *Yana's Friends* emerges as an "accented film." According to Hamid Naficy, accented films, in contrast to "universal" dominant cinema, are made by "diasporic and exilic subjects" (4). Their accent, he explains, "emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes" (4) and from visual style, which often make accented films critical. Indeed, our analysis shows that in comparison with *Saint Clara*, *Yana's Friends* poses a greater challenge to the Israeli–Zionist discourse of immigration, by representing immigrants from an insider's perspective and by including diasporic languages and accents. However, Naficy reminds us, accented cinema is not always oppositional (26). We argue that despite its "accent," *Yana's Friends* produces only a partially resistant reading of the Israeli–Zionist discourse of immigration. Both *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* equally insist on the assimilation of immigrants into Israeli-Jewish nation.

We argue that despite these differences, taken together, the two films are indicative of the emergence of a new cycle, parallel to *bourekas* genre, that we are calling the *pierogi* film (after a Russian pastry). Like earlier *bourekas* depicting Ashkenazi–Mizrahi romance, *pierogi* films bring together a Russian immigrant and a *sabra,* when "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," and hence "social integration is being dreamed via eroticism" (Shohat 134). Like earlier *bourekas*, *pierogi* films feature "stereotypical characters with whom it is easy to identify, the divided reality in which everything exotic or sentimental is emphasized" (Ne'eman "Cinema Zero" p. 21). So, how do *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* define the *pierogi* film, and what is the meaning of all the differences between the two films?

Cinematic Style: Theatricality and Realism

Saint Clara and *Yana's Friends* convey similar stories of difficulties faced by female Russian immigrants to Israel. Both films resolve their narrative conflicts through assimilation of the immigrant via romance with a *sabra.* The two films, however, adopt different cinematic and representational strategies, which change the meaning of the films' narrative strategy.

Yana's Friends deploys the mobile framing and on-location shooting that is familiar as a mode of cinematic realism, particularly in European art cinema. Drawing upon the innovations of French Poetic Realism during the 1930s and Italian Neorealism during the 1940s and 1950s, contemporary European art films conventionally structure their narratives around ordinary moments in the lives of ostensibly unexceptional humans. As a visual strategy, these art films make use of long takes, natural lighting, location shooting, direct sound, minimal use of non-diegetic music, narrative editing, and natural acting styles.

Although *Saint Clara* also adopts many of these characteristics and cannot be separated entirely from European art cinema, the film features a self-consciousness that draws more readily from analytical modes of narrative filmmaking, such as Soviet montage during the 1920s and the postwar European "New Wave" movements. Sound is often used counter-punctually, and framing and editing violate classical

cinema's rules of apparatic invisibility, so that the mediation of the filmic medium is rendered highly visible. Moreover, the two films play with the possibilities of photographic representation. *Yana's Friends* depends on the reality effect of photography's iconic properties, whereas *Saint Clara* exploits its indexical and symbolic properties. Whereas *Yana's Friends* may seem at times like a docudrama, if not an observational documentary, *Saint Clara* may seem at times like filmed theater.

The film's divergent representations of contemporary Israel are striking in this regard. *Saint Clara* locates the assimilation story of its thirteen-year-old Russian immigrant protagonist, Clara (Lucy Dubinchik), in a fictional remote town that is surrounded by a swamp in constant danger of devastation by earthquake. Drawing upon anxieties about the end of the millennium and prejudices against provincial hinterlands, the film's style underscores the caricatured and performative qualities of its representation of Israel through highly stylized and often contrived use of color, sets, costumes, and acting. The imagery is permeated by irony and ambivalence toward Israeli symbols and myths. Characters stand as character types, grouped by generation: adult and adolescent, new immigrant and old-timer.

In contrast, *Yana's Friends* constructs its representation of Israel through a surfeit of visual images, spoken words, and audible sounds that are characteristic of the Israeli reality of 1990–91, with the massive wave of Russian immigration coinciding with the first Gulf War. Its historical and cultural specificity, despite the comedic overboard, makes the film credible. Its narrative is intercut not only with home-movie footage shot by the aspiring filmmaker Eli (played by Nir Levy), who is obsessed with documenting his various lovers, but also with television footage, often as a transitional device between scenes. Similarly, the film's soundtrack is punctuated with sirens, announcements of possible Scud missile attacks from Iraq, and English-language television news reports on the Gulf War intermixed with Hebrew-language reports on newly arrived Russian immigrants, fusing the two coinciding events into a more generalized threat to Israel. Historically, both television news and home movies garner the conceit of a more direct relationship with reality than does fictional film. And this is exactly how *Yana's Friends* achieves its credibility. To borrow Loshitzky's phrase, this film "without being a documentary in the traditional sense" nevertheless "constitutes a form of social document" (83).

The two films also diverge in their representation of the Russian immigrants. Although the Israeli education system's concern with Russian immigrants is real, *Saint Clara* depicts this concern as surreal, particularly in its visual representation of Clara. Unlike her ever-excitable Israeli classmates, Clara's often-detached demeanor radiates otherworldliness. Visually, she is often shot frontally in close-up, disassociated from her surroundings, directly addressing the camera, even in shots that are not structured into the film's narrative as reaction shots or eyeline matches (see Photo 1). She appears static, outside of time and place, so that her image evokes the visual devices in Russian Orthodox icons. In fact, the film's Hebrew title, *Clara Hakdosha* ("Saint Clara"), alludes to Christianity, a serious taboo in the Israeli ethos centered on Judaism. As a modifier to the first name of a Russian immigrant, *Hakdosha* ("saint") alludes to fear of gentrification and to a concern over high proportion of non-Jews or even Christians among Russian immigrants—an Israeli "apocalypse" according to the film's thematic logic.

The mobile camerawork in *Yana's Friends* contrasts with the fixed camera positions in *Saint Clara*. The camera follows the movement of characters through interior spaces, adopting the aesthetics of observational documentary. Yana's (Evelyn Kaplun) reactions and expressions also are captured in close-up often, but they are not framed frontally. She does not directly address the camera's gaze as Clara does (with the exception of some shots seen through the lens of Eli's camcorder). Unlike Clara, who is imbued with mysterious and otherworldly qualities, Yana is largely confined to the banal

Photo 1: Clara (Lucy Dubinchik) as seen through the peephole of the *sabra* flat. Courtesy of Kino International.

predicament of actual immigrants. Yana's character is developed through depictions of her routine behavior: sleeping, showering, experiencing morning sickness, brushing her teeth, getting drunk, learning Hebrew—behaviors that are often re-depicted through the camcorder operated by Eli, whose movements and focus are erratic and unstable (see Photo 2). As Naficy comments in his discussion of accented films, the depiction of exiles' daily routines serves as "a countermeasure to the official pedagogical representation of them, which tends to abstract them by stereotyping, exoticizing, and othering" (117). Indeed, the depiction of Yana's daily activities—and their reproduction as audiovisual images in Eli's home movies—works as a significant countermeasure to the media stereotypes of Russian immigrants. In these parts, the camera often loses its subject, and the image is reduced to a blur in the camera's rapid movement from its subject to some inconsequential details of the surrounding; at other times, the camera's focus readjusts in the middle of a take. These imperfections contrast with the professional camerawork of the film's color sequences, observed by an invisible camera.

Yana's Friends announces this aesthetics even before the narrative begins. An ostensibly non-diegetic musical score begins as the opening title credits appear against a black background and continues over a montage of black-and-white images depicting the street musicians and other future characters in the film. The music serves the conventional purpose of concealing abrupt cuts between images of different locations along the Tel Aviv street,

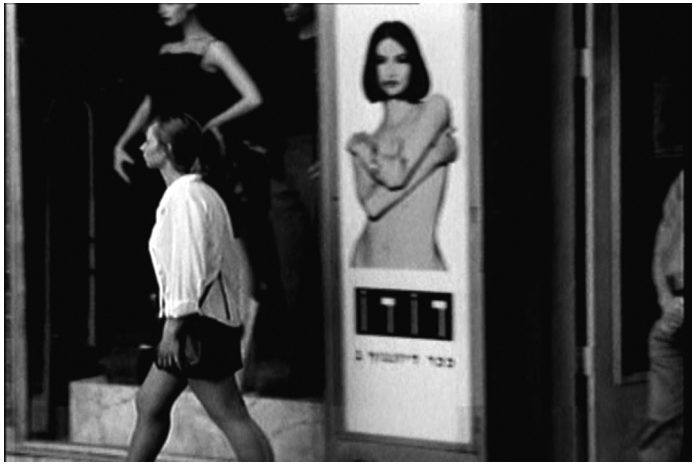

Photo 2: Yana (Evelyn Kaplun) as seen through the viewfinder of the *sabra*'s camcorder. Courtesy of First Run Features.

but the rhythms from the musical score are synchronized with movements in the visual images, so that street musicians appear to play violins and trumpets in time with the musical score. In these moments, the musical score appears diegetic. Moreover, the camera tilts downward to reveal a jar placed by the street musicians to collect change from passersby, which situates the musicians within the narrative rather than outside it. Indeed, one of the passersby is Yana, sparing a few coins for them. The music carries over into the film's first color footage, images of the very room where Yana's amorous assimilation into Israel will take place.

The interplay between the professional color and amateur black-and-white footage is self-referential. Already the film's first color shot indicates self-referentiality: the flat's interior is shown in one take, with the camera panning slowly from a window through the interior of one room, pausing to reveal several television monitors and stacks of videocassettes, and then continuing into the bedroom, pausing to reveal another television and another stack of videocassettes, before stopping on an image of Eli holding a camcorder. Eli's observational, and voyeuristic, camera is mirrored by the film's observational camera whose aesthetics include the practice of not using a corrective filter during on-location shooting to avoid the "blowout" when filming windows that open to the exterior. The diegetic world of the film is constantly subjected to documentation by Eli's camera, potentially showing identification of the filmmaker with the character.

With varying degrees of irony, both films also reflect xenophobic prejudices against immigrants and establish metonymic connections between immigration and catastrophic events. Thus, the cultural difference that marks Clara's teenage sexuality is equated with witchcraft and promiscuity. She is eroticized and exoticized through constant reference to her physical appearance, mysterious powers, and foreign origin. Clara's powers to foresee the future are represented in the film as a familial characteristic, a trait brought to Israel from Russia by both Clara's mother (Yevgenya Dodina) and Clara's uncle Elvis (Israel Demidov), who lost these powers after falling in love. Once Clara's powers are known by the local townspeople, they attempt to exploit them for their own benefit—by asking Clara to predict exam questions and winning lottery numbers. In both instances, the harnessing of Clara's powers results in social turmoil, figuratively expressing possible ramifications from the everyday practice of exploiting immigrant labor. In the first instance, the students get into trouble and are accused by school administrators of staging a "revolt." In the second instance, after Clara envisions the winning lottery ticket as 6–6–6 (the biblical "Number of the Beast"), a different catastrophe ensues. Her uncle Elvis attempts to redistribute the lottery jackpot to the entire community by giving the winning numbers to everyone. As a result, hundreds of lottery winners vie for the prize, and two of them commit suicide. Clara's other premonitions are also associated with apocalypses: she predicts a demise of the town and a devastating earthquake. Despite lack of scientific evidence, the townsfolk take Clara's premonition seriously, and a mass exodus from the town ensues. Clara loses her power only when she falls in love with Tikel (Halil Elohev), her *sabra* boyfriend.

Unlike Clara, Yana has no supernatural powers that distinguish her from the other immigrants or help her escape from her mundane problems. She is constrained by institutional structures and gendered power relations. Her husband, Fima (Israel Demidov), has absconded to Moscow with an Israeli government loan to new immigrants, thereby endangering her status. Yana is left pregnant and penniless in a foreign country and easily falls victim to exploitation and misrecognition. Her only savior is her womanizing flatmate Eli, a *sabra*. As in *Saint Clara,* the romantic coupling of a Russian immigrant and a *sabra* unfolds within the context of the ever-present possibility of national annihilation. But instead of imaginary catastrophes such as those in *Saint Clara,* the threat of annihilation is linked to an actual historical event, the Gulf War. The sexual intimacy between Yana and Eli explodes in the moments defined not only by Yana's

personal fears and insecurities but also by the highest national fears and insecurities. The intimacy emerges in a sealed room, during the missile attacks, accompanied by the sounds of sirens, as both she and Eli wear gas masks.[7] The missile threats and the gas masks gain an erotic charge in Eli's seduction of Yana. In one shot, the white flesh of her nude torso and bosom come into sharp contrast with her black gas mask, as Eli strokes her skin. In another scene, the nozzles of the gas masks click against one another as a substitute for exploring kisses (see Photo 3). The gas masks make their faces look the same and render both Yana and Eli mute, eliminating linguistic gaps and accents. The gas masks become necessary prosthetics on which their physical connection depends. In fact, once the threat of war has passed, Eli succeeds in his seduction of Yana only when missile attacks are simulated through his use of recorded sounds and images of past attacks—metaphorically, the immigrant and the *sabra* can unite only in the context of national emergency.

Like *Saint Clara,* the Hebrew title to *Yana's Friends* is suggestive of Israeli prejudices against Russian immigrants. The title, *Ha-haverim shel Yana,* innocuously translated into English as *Yana's Friends*, in Hebrew can mean either "Yana's friends" or "Yana's boyfriends." (Ironically, Yana has very few friends in this film.) In the latter case, the title places Yana's (and other Russian immigrants') morality in question, suggesting that she lacks the propriety of Israeli women. Although the films deploy different visual and narrative strategies to represent Russian immigrants and local Israelis, the Hebrew-language titles to both films mark the Russian immigrant women as somehow deficient in terms of their potential for complete entrance into Israeli society—an entrance that only the romance with *sabra* can facilitate.

The immigration-assimilation narratives of both films then situate Russian immigrant women as potential threats to Israel. What is intriguing is that the threat of these immigrants is offset by the more pressing threat, which Nitzan Ben-Shaul describes as a paranoid sense of permanent threat to Israel's very existence. Indeed, the films depict Israel as vulnerable to contamination or annihilation and as alienated from the heroic Zionist past. This motif of threat, both internal and external, is also expressed in the two films through depictions of space and spatial relations.

Modes of Representation: Spaces of Estrangement, Confinement, and Transition

Naficy argues that in accented films, the burden of narrative is carried primarily through *mise-en-scène*, rather than editing (154). Such

Photo 3: Wearing gas masks, Yana (Evelyn Kaplun) and Eli (Nir Levy) find love in a sealed room during a missile attack. Courtesy of First Run Features.

films mobilize both "open" and "closed" cinematic forms, often in a single film, to convey narrative. Open forms favor mobile framing in external settings under natural lighting, appearing spontaneous and accidental. In contrast, closed forms appear self-conscious and deliberate, favoring claustrophobic interior settings, such as cramped living quarters, and often are shot with tight, static framing and "driven by panic and fear" (153–54).

Space is represented as psychologically threatening from the very beginning of *Saint Clara*. The film opens with a slow tracking shot down a long empty corridor in the school, which eventually fills with a mass of students yelling and running wildly through its sterile space. Combined with heavy metal guitar on the soundtrack, the opening shot suggests the students' alienation from the heroic symbols of a nationalist past. It is particularly evident in the shot's central visual focus on a statue of the school's namesake, Golda Meir. The fourth Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir remains a part of Zionist pantheon, but her position was compromised by her failure to prepare for Yom Kippur War. The choice to use such an ambivalent figure as a Zionist icon is clearly ironic.

Much like the school, the town is spatially defined in long tracking shots down empty streets, placed in contrast with fixed shots of an ambiguous and ominous swamp, establishing the geography of the region. The town's wide roads separate impersonal buildings, which dwarf human figures next to them. Interior spaces are concealed behind drawn blinds, perhaps signaling their vulnerability or danger. These spaces are open yet poisoned: empty railways cross abandoned and decayed industrial zones. Fires emanate from the smoke towers of refineries, visible between the stacks of industrial rubbish. At one point, an explosion occurs, and a massive dead bird sails through the window of the school, landing on the student's desk. (Clara is suspected of causing the event.) Like the streets, these industrial spaces are often unpopulated, as though they are no longer in use. The swamp suggests the limit to Israeli appropriation of land under the Zionist nationalist projects, signifying spaces that cannot be claimed by settlement—or perhaps it is a harbinger of land that cannot be reclaimed after nuclear contamination. A solitary seismographic watchtower that marks the swamp's skyline further suggests the fragility of the town's very existence. *Saint Clara* thus sets into play numerous apocalyptic motifs, expressing the quotidian Israeli "siege mentality." This phantasmagoric and decidedly un-Israeli setting parodies the celebratory man-over-nature discourse and the "optimistic geography" of earlier Israeli films (Gertz, "From Jew" 175–200).

The film's interior spaces are also a site of parody. The film's opening scene offers a depiction of students' protest against the unfair punishment by their teachers. The irony is made evident by the students' tactics (e.g., tying traitors to the classroom chalkboard and threatening to immolate them), borrowed from French New Wave representations of the Mai 68 protests and strike, such as *Weekend* (Italy/France 1967; dir. Jean-Luc Godard) and *Tout va bien* (France/Italy 1972; dir. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin). The headmaster, Tissona (Yigal Naor), interrogates his students about their "revolt" while separated from them by a vast conference table. In front of him is a container of highly organized and uniform pencils, which evoke the conformity and uniformity that he (and, by extension, Golda Meir—Israel, even) expects of students. Tissona's expectation is laughable in Israeli culture, where improvisation and inventiveness are valued. Clara and her wayward classmates will never be assimilated into the rigid organizational structure. Tissona's expectations more closely resemble a French model of education, and he is an unabashed Francophile, who lapses into French as though Hebrew were somehow insufficient to express his *idées reçues* about educational reform. He claims the clichéd wartime fantasy of a one-night romance with Edith Piaf and names his dog after Jean Gabin, the manly film star and populist icon of French poetic realism. Invariably wearing a red suit, he imagines himself as Danton during a French revolution

that he would like to stage with Clara as his guiding Marianne (as in Eugène Delacroix's iconic painting), and with Tikel as his means to conquer "the Bastille" of the students. In Israeli context, Tissona's use of French expressions and references to France's cultural history point to his Mizrahi identity because Maghrebi immigrants were often French speakers—an audible trace of the "civilizing mission" under French colonial rule. The character of Tissona and the spaces of the school over which he reigns also function as parodies of Israeli educational norms and values.

Domestic spaces of *sabra* and immigrant families reveal further caricatures of Israeli society. Tikel's flat, controlled by the whims of his self-absorbed parents, is well illuminated, modern, and sparsely furnished. The spaces suggest the emotional detachment within the nuclear family, particularly in a scene in which Tikel lackadaisically throws darts across the room during a serious discussion with his parents. By contrast, Clara's family inhabits space overwhelmed by mismatched, vibrantly colored furnishings and flooded with warm lighting. Their flat is overpopulated not only by the extended family but also by a stuffed macaw, lion, deer, and other wild animals and, of course, a few Russian dolls. Their home is located "in the woods," suggesting its physical distance from the Israeli mainstream. Through these spatial distinctions Clara's family is designated as an exotic other to the *sabra* norm. Their exoticism is further conveyed by characteristics of the family members that both parody and reinforce Israeli stereotypes of Russian immigrants—the mother is a "slut," and the gun-toting uncle is a "bear-hunter." Were it not for the irony of setting and performance, the film might seem to reproduce comparable juxtapositions between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi in the *bourekas* films.

Unlike *Saint Clara*'s highly stylized representations, *Yana's Friends'* spaces are depicted realistically. The film begins with the suspicious landlord Rosa (Dalia Friedland) ushering the young immigrant couple, Yana and Fima, down a narrow entrance hallway of the flat they will share with Eli. Rosa introduces a stereotypical Israeli nativist suspicion of new immigrants, echoed throughout the film. From the very beginning of the film, immigrants are confined to hostile, cramped spaces. This confinement is particularly vivid in the scene where the stairwell is blocked with a bed that Yana and Fima's neighbors are moving into their flat. The bed extends the full length of the stairwell's landing, so that Fima, who is trying to get out, must press against the walls to circumvent the obstruction. Cursing him in Russian, his neighbors either do not recognize him or do not want to recognize him as a fellow immigrant. They only conclude their insults when Yana arrives and addresses Fima in Russian. Cavernous interior places, such as stairwells, signal claustrophobia and entrapment of exile. Indeed, in this scene, the immigrants are stuck (literally and metaphorically) in the unwanted proximity of the stairwell. Much like they try to fit an old bed through the narrow stairs, they struggle to fit their previous life experiences into the alien spaces of their adoptive country.

However, the interior spaces also serve to reveal something hidden and intimate about the characters: Rosa and Yitzhak (Mosko Alkalai) are revealed as lovers who were separated during World War II when both fought on the side of the Soviet Army. After the war, Rosa went to Israel and gave birth to Yitzhak's son, who later died in the Six-Day War. Rosa's unposted letters to Yitzhak, about her love for him and about the death of their son, are hidden in the attic. They cascade and flutter from there when Yana charges the door, over which Eli hangs, videotaping her. An image of papers dropping from above in this scene echoes a recurring motif of accented cinema, representing exilic epistolarity and provisionality (Naficy 109). In Naficy's observations, the flying papers are often symbols of identity papers and are reminders of the various displacements and replacements of the exile. Indeed, these letters reveal Rosa's own identity as a former immigrant. Rosa's reunion with Yitzhak instantly transforms Rosa from a suspicious and powerful Israeli landlord into a sensitive and vulnerable Russian woman. She lovingly feeds Yitzhak, cleans him, and puts

him to bed, all the while telling him the story of her life without him and her love for him. This scene transforms the small dark room in which it unfolds into an intimate space engulfed by memory and longing. Temporarily, this romance undoes the successful absorption, restoring Rosa to her Russian origin.

Exterior spaces, however, are fraught with alienation. Already in the opening sequence, the image of the street musicians introduces a motif of homelessness. Echoing this sequence, other characters beg in the streets: Yuri (Shmil Ben Ari) plays his accordion, and paralyzed Yitzhak silently displays his medals. Ironically, they fight over the best begging spot. For Yana, the streets are also sites of "homelessness and wandering" (Naficy 225). Because she lacks a routine for life outside the communal flat, her identity is unanchored, situated perilously within the permanent transit of estrangement and self-exile.

In addition to open and closed spaces, Naficy describes a third space of borders, sites of departure and arrival and transportation vehicles—spaces that are "transitional and transnational" (154). International airports and border checkpoints are spaces under state control that are emotionally charged and anxiety-provoking because of the possibility, for some travelers more than others, of being detained or deported. For such travelers, airports can easily transform into prisons, especially in the case of Israeli airports, as evident in films such as the comedy *James' Journey to Jerusalem* (Israel 2003; dir. Ra'anan Alexandrowicz) or in the experimental short *Transit* (Palestine/France 2004; dir. Taysir Batniji). As for characters in these films, for Yana the airport becomes a site of panic where spaces of claustrophobia and agoraphobia overlap and become a bureaucratic web in which she is trapped. The first snare in her travel plans occurs when she is told that her dog, safely nestled in a bag, is too large to ride in the passenger cabin. But a more serious hurdle comes at another point in her departure. Not having a bank release note, she is not allowed to proceed through immigration. Framed in a long shot, Yana looks vulnerable within the airport's large open spaces, hollowed by fluorescent light reflecting on the hard surfaces of floors and glass partitions. She looks particularly vulnerable in a moment of utter desperation, when she makes a mad dash through the control gates, only to be apprehended by security guards and taken to an office for interrogation. The office is a stale space, where two bored agents witness Yana's humiliation as they realize her state of helplessness—pregnant, duped, and abandoned by her husband. Eli rescues her, paying the various fines sanctioned against her as a result of her husband's transgression of Israeli law and even helping her finance an abortion. In the airport scene, as in every situation, Yana is overwhelmed and lost, whereas Eli is independent and self-sufficient. Eli controls the spaces of Israel, reproducing images of them with his camcorder; Yana, by contrast, is controlled by these spaces.

The public spaces in *Yana's Friends* also permit Yana to refashion herself and achieve her absorption. In a scene that immediately precedes Fima's return, Yana joins the celebration of Purim that has taken on extra significance because it coincides with the end of the Gulf War. Citizens perform the festival's carnivalesque reversals by disguising their everyday identity under colorful costumes and outlandish hats. Costumed modestly in a bowler with a pair of dots painted on her face, Yana begins to perform a new identity, still herself, but more Eli's girlfriend than Fima's wife.

Politics of Language: Accented, Mediated, and Otherworldly Communication

The different vantage points on immigration—those of outsiders in *Saint Clara* and those of insiders in *Yana's Friends*—also define the films' approaches to languages, accents, and other means of communication. Thus, Clara communicates with the universe (or the Judeo-Christian god) via telepathy, whereas Yana is confined to the mundane means of a telephone. The telephone functions in *Yana's Friends* like the other mechanical apparatuses

in the film—camcorders and gas masks—as a means of mediating direct contact between humans. This mediation is especially important for constructing Yana's character. Her future is largely determined by information that she receives via telephone or voicemail. In one scene, she phones Moscow to speak with her husband. He pretends not to hear and hangs up. When Yana phones back, her mother-in-law answers the call, informing her that Fima will not be returning to Israel and advising her to seek an abortion. In the short space of a few sentences, Yana learns that her life as a wife and as an expectant mother is over. It is precisely after this traumatic telephone conversation that Yana decides to accompany Eli to videotape a wedding reception. Drunk, Yana nearly acquiesces to Eli's seductive charms when they return from the reception. Only an incoming voicemail message from one of Eli's girlfriends alerts her and interrupts the seduction.

Telephones are largely absent from the remote town in which *Saint Clara* is set. Unlike the ubiquitous technologies of communication and documentation in *Yana's Friends,* the film's selective representation of technology enhances the town's remove from reality—from cosmopolitan Tel Aviv and historic Jerusalem, as well as from the everyday violence in the occupied territories. The technologies that do mediate communication are menacing: televisions broadcast stories of nuclear contamination, tree viruses, and suicides; seismographic monitors promise catastrophe; and even the local cinema screens a disaster movie during Clara and Tikel's first date (see Photo 4).

Clara's capacity to communicate telepathically—without the help of technology—makes her even more "alien" than the recently arrived Yana. Because of her contact with other realms, Clara's presence in Israel is partial. Her classmates describe her as living in "two worlds," only "visiting" their world when relevant. In so doing, they express a common perception of immigrants, exiles, and diasporic people as attached to two places and, consequently, as divided or insincere in their loyalty to any one place. When Clara falls in love with Tikel, however, her union with the young *sabra* "normalizes" her, ridding her of her apocalyptic powers of prognostication. Although Tikel functions simultaneously as an assertion and as a parody of Israeli masculinity—he bullies his schoolmates yet displays vulnerability over his first encounter with love—the onus of assimilation falls on Clara. Through romantic attachment, Clara is domesticated: she stops being otherworldly and becomes one of the worldly and the nonthreatening. She abandons her "saintly" powers of divination and supernatural communication and becomes a fully mortal woman. Like Yana, who presumably abandons her immigrant life, defined in terms of mediated telephone communications with loved ones back in Russia, Clara also abandons her immigrant life, defined by unmediated communication with other realms.

If international telephone and otherworldly

Photo 4: Clara (Lucy Dubinchik) and Tikel (Halil Elohev) find love in a darkened cinema during an earthquake. Courtesy of Kino International.

communications are characteristics of a psychological state of inner exile and homelessness within immigrant life, then abandoning them signifies an absorption into Israel. The same principal is conveyed through language and accented dialogue. Dialogue in *Saint Clara* is conducted almost entirely in Hebrew, with a few phrases of Russian and French. Even Clara's Russian immigrant family speaks Hebrew among themselves. In that way, *Saint Clara* continues the Hebrew-only convention of Israeli cinema, where accents have historically been used only for caricature, as in *bourekas* films. In contrast, *Yana's Friends* belongs to an ever-increasing body of new multilingual Israeli films often geared toward international audiences. Dialogue in *Yana's Friends* moves freely between Russian and Hebrew, with the majority of dialogue taking place in Russian. *Saint Clara* is made to appeal to the mainstream Hebrew-speaking audiences, whereas *Yana's Friends* is also made for Russian-speaking audiences, who can access Russian dialogue without subtitles. More importantly, *Yana's Friends* gives central stage to Russian language and accent, usually relegated to the margins. Thus, *Saint Clara* evokes Israel as an imagined community that speaks a single national language; *Yana's Friends* evokes an immigrant state, where variously accented Hebrew is spoken along with other languages.

Similar patterns emerge in casting: the casting practices in *Saint Clara* are only slightly less condescending than those for the *bourekas* films, where Ashkenazi actors portrayed stereotyped Mizrahi roles under the direction of Ashkenazi producers. Although Russian immigrants are portrayed by actors who themselves are immigrants, it is the Israeli filmmakers who direct these actors to play stereotyped immigrant characters. In *Yana's Friends,* by contrast, Russian immigrant filmmakers direct not only immigrants but also Israeli actors to portray the motley Russian immigrant characters. Popular Israeli actors are cast as Rosa (Dalia Friedland), Yitzhak (Moscu Alcalay), and Yuri (Shmil Ben-Ari). Popularity of the actors, and hence their easy identification by the local audiences, leads to accent-sensitive casting: they are cast in the roles where their Hebrew accents would sound appropriate to the Russian-speaking audiences. Yitzhak's role is largely silent. Yuri is a Bukharian (Central Asian) Jew, whose strong accent in Russian sounds authentic. Rosa's character has been living in Israel since the 1940s, so presumably her Russian is rusty. Moreover, Friedland herself has Russian roots—she is a daughter of Zvi Friedland, a founder of the Israeli theater Habima, which hails from Moscow. Similarly, representation of immigrants' accents in *Yana's Friends* recognizes cultural diversity among Russian immigrants. The film distinguishes between the languages and accents of Muscovite Yana, provincial Alik, and Bukharian Yuri.

From the *Bourekas* to the *Pierogi*

The themes on intercultural romance and immigration in *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* clearly draw on the earlier cinematic conventions of *bourekas*—and also depart from them. Within the Israeli social context of institutionalized and ideologically approved immigration, an immigration story framed as a romantic comedy also becomes a story of cultural assimilation into a new nation and a story of national identity formation. The question, then, is how to situate *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* vis-à-vis Israeli-Zionist ideology and the *bourekas* genre.

Both *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* pose partial challenge to the Israeli-Zionist ideology of immigration. Both films break the linguistic hegemony of "Hebrew only"— *Yana's Friends* to a large degree and *Saint Clara* to a lesser degree. However, both films clearly pose assimilation as an ultimate goal for immigrants. This approach, like in *bourekas* films, reflects and perpetuates the dominant ideology of *mizug galuyot*—literally, "mixing of the exiles" and figuratively, "melting pot." Clara and her family abandon their witchlike powers in order to integrate into Israeli society. Despite its immigrants' vantage point, *Yana's Friends* also ends with an ultimate "melting pot" happy end-

ing. The epitome of this formula is conveyed through romantic relationships in both films. Yana's "successful absorption" is realized through her sexual relationship with Eli; Clara's inassimilable foreignness is overcome by romantic involvement with Tikel, albeit only at the level of an innocent kiss.

The ideological induction via romance with a *sabra* is an important narrative strategy in both films. Historically, interethnic romance has been a recurring theme in Israeli cinema, with interethnic romance typically revolving around the "Orient question," as in the Mizrahi–Ashkenazi intermarriages of *bourekas* films, which celebrated "integration," and the Jewish–Palestinian "forbidden loves" of *Hamsin* (Israel 1982; dir. Daniel Wachsmann), *The Lover* (Israel 1985; dir. Michal Bat-Adam), *On a Narrow Bridge* (Israel 1985; dir. Nissim Dayan), and more recently, *A Trumpet in the Wadi* (Israel 2002; dir. Lena and Slava Chaplin). The prohibitive impetus of the latter plots is fueled by the fear of miscegenation (Shohat 160–61, Loshitzky 113). In the case of Yana and Eli, as well as Clara and Tikel, this fear is completely removed. Like in *bourekas* films, the interethnic relationships are celebrated because they facilitate the induction of an immigrant into the Israeli-Jewish nation. Significantly, the immigrant characters in these films are women, potential mothers to Israeli babies. Also significantly, both Yana and Clara are assumed to be Jewish despite the Russian looks of Evelyn Kaplun and Lucy Dubinchik.[8] In this sense, both Clara and Yana are "sanctioned" by Israeli-Zionist ideology.

Ultimately, both the heavily stylized approach in *Saint Clara* and the more realistic approach in *Yana's Friends* produce only partially resistant readings of Israeli-Zionist discourse of immigration. The cultural verisimilitude in *Yana's Friends* is limited. Its realist details suggests that the film documents social reality, yet, whatever the conflicts based on identity politics, all is resolved through either romantic (Yana and Eli) or familial (Rosa and Yitzhak) relations, so that, although *Yana's Friends* differs significantly from *Saint Clara* in the identity of its filmmakers, its style, its language use, and its "accent," the political-ideological message of assimilation is not substantially different in the two films.

In that way, both films typify the emergence of the *pierogi* film. Several more recent films continue the trend, shaping and challenging its conventions. An example is *The Schwartz Dynasty* (Israel 2005; dir. Amir Hasfari and Shmuel Hasfari), which might have even been called "Ana's Friends." The film's narrative conflict hinges on the presence of a beautiful and seductive Russian woman, Ana (Anya Bukstein), who comes to Israel not to immigrate, but to fulfill her late father's last will and to burry his ashes in the Land of Israel. As the daughter of a non-Jewish mother, Ana is not considered Jewish according to the religious law. Consequently, she runs into endless bureaucratic obstacles in a rabbinical court that will not give her permission to bury the ashes in a Jewish cemetery without proof of her father's Jewishness. Trying to resolve this problem, she falls prey to various exploiters and crooks. As in *Yana's Friends,* the plot includes an older woman, Miryam (Miriam Zohar), who is originally Russian herself and who is trying to help Ana, perhaps out of ethnic and gender solidarity. Parallel to this story is a story of Ana's budding romance with Miryam's grandson, Avishai (Yehuda Levi), who comes out of the Schwartz dynasty—a dynasty of rabbis and cantors—and who is a religious teacher and cantor himself. Avishai assists Ana in navigating Israeli spaces in the same way in which Eli helps Yana. The union between the two is accomplished also during emergency—a fire, from which Avishai rescues the urn containing Ana's father's ashes. At the end of the film, predictably, Ana and Avishai are married, and Ana gives birth to a daughter, named after the late Miryam.

Yana's Friends and *The Schwartz Dynasty* share the interethnic marriage and conventions of romantic comedy that recall the *bourekas* films, yet deploy comedic but realistic detail in their representations of immigrants. The connection between the two films is reinforced also by the casting of the same actors in secondary roles. Evgeny Fleisher plays minor comedic

characters in both films. Vladimir Friedman plays Yana's obnoxious neighbor and Ana's pig-selling uncle, Alex, married to Ziyona (Sharon Elimeleh), a Mizrahi Israeli. In that way, the intermarriage formula of "absorbing" foreign bodies into the Israeli nation is reproduced twice—through Avishai's marriage to the Russian Ana and through Alex's marriage to the Mizrahi Ziyona. However, like *Saint Clara*, *The Schwartz Dynasty* takes an outsider's perspective to immigration. It adopts an Israeli-Jewish perspective, with Judaism as a central theme in the film. Assimilation of Russian immigrants in *The Schwartz Dynasty* is achieved not only through intermarriage but also through religion, given that the marriage presumably involves Ana's conversion. The Israeli-Jewish characters of the film also go to great lengths to lure pork-eating, secular Russian immigrants into a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—and thus include them in the national religious practice. The intermarriage formula, adapted from the *bourekas* films as a means to resolve interethnic conflict and to integrate new immigrants, continues in the transformed form of *pierogi* comedy.

An interesting question to ask about these films, then, is what will happen to Clara and Tikel, to Yana and Eli, or to Ana and Avishai in the "happy ever after"? The recent film *Love & Dance* (Israel 2006; dir. Eitan Anner) continues the narrative device of intermarriage between a Russian immigrant woman and an Israeli *sabra*. Framed according to the genre conventions of romantic comedy-cum-melodrama and adopting the style of cinematic realism, *Love & Dance* depicts Chen (Vladimir Volov), a young boy battling a cultural conflict between his Russian-born mother (Oksana Korostyshevskaya) and his Israeli father (Avi Kushnir). Like Eli in *Yana's Friends,* both Chen and his father are photographers and videographers, always seen with a camera. Like Yana and Ana, Chen's mother is beautiful and charming but helpless and frivolous. Chen's own identity is caught between his frustrated parents. The rift in his identity is emphasized linguistically with his mother speaking to him in Russian, and his father in Hebrew. When the father objects to his use of Russian, Chen tells him, "But I am half-Russian!" to which his father replies, "But you are more non-Russian than Russian." Chen contemplates this statement but does not agree with it. The Hebrew title of the film—*Sipur Hatzi-Russi/Half-Russian Story*—exemplifies this tension.

As a part of this gender/culture battle, Chen's father wants him to take up judo, but Chen is instead fascinated with ballroom dancing—a hobby imported and spread out in Israel by the Russian immigrants since the 1990s. It is ridiculed in Israel (and the film portrays as much) as being "too Russian" and "too effeminate" according to Israeli standards of masculinity. Chen uneasily negotiates his Russianness and his Israeliness, encountering his first love, his first friendship, his first fight, and his first moral choice. However, Chen's parents cannot negotiate their cultural differences. Their marital—and cultural—conflicts escalate, so that even their love for each other and their love for their son likely will not help them to reconnect. The film's prognosis for intermarriage as a vehicle of assimilation is not optimistic. Even an offspring of this intermarriage is somewhat inassimilable into mainstream Israeli society. Chen is a conflicted hybrid—half-Russian, half-Israeli—with alliance to two cultures that are placed at odds against one another. Because he desires to relinquish neither culture, the only remaining alternative is not to be absorbed. In the sense of its pessimistic conclusion, *Love & Dance* perhaps most challenges the legacies of the *bourekas* formula, thus offering hope for a new story to be told.

NOTES

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1. The term "Russian immigrants" in Israel refers to immigrants from the entire former Soviet Union, including non-Russian republics. In conversational Hebrew, they are often referred to simply as "Russians." Here, we use these native terms.

2. Although the term Mizrahi (literally "Oriental") has replaced the term Sephardic, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Here, we use the politically correct term Mizrahi.

3. The Russian immigrant community includes "core" Jewish members as well as their non-Jewish relatives who were entitled to enter Israel according to the Law of Return. Although the numbers are controversial, sociologists estimate that about 20 percent of Russian immigrants are non-Jews (Leshem and Sikron 81–118).

4. The most notable exception was Gesher, an Israeli theater founded by a group of Russian immigrants. However, Gesher's critical and popular reception has been controversial, revealing its ambivalent status in Israeli culture (Gershenson).

5. *Saint Clara* won awards from the Israeli Film Academy ("Israeli Oscars") in six categories, the prize for best film at the Haifa International Festival, and a jury prize at the 1996 Karlovy Vary Film Festival. *Yana's Friends* won awards from the Israeli Film Academy in ten categories, the Wolgin Award for Jewish Film at the 1999 Jerusalem Film Festival, and multiple prizes at other venues, including the 1999 Karlovy Vary Film Festival, the 1999 Moscow International Film Festival, the 2000 Cinemanila International Film Festival, and the 2000 Paris Film Festival.

6. Cohout's novel has been adapted to film once before, in *Dei Einfalle der Heiligen Klara* (Germany/Czechoslovakia 1980; dir. Vojtech Jasny).

7. Because of fear of chemical attack, each household in Israel set up a sealed room with taped windows and life supplies. During each attack, people would go to the sealed room, put on gas masks, and wait for the all-clear signal. The sealed room became an iconic image, representing the time period with its fear and absurdity.

8. In an interview, Evelyn Kaplun acknowledged, "I look like a Russian" (Karpel). Moreover, in the previously mentioned film *What a Wonderful Place,* Kaplun is cast as an ethnic Russian.

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