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### ABSORBED BY LOVE

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# Olga Gershenson & Dale Hudson

## ABSORBED BY LOVE

### Russian immigrant woman in Israeli film

*Since the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union, Israeli print media, television and film have scrutinised the morality and Zionist commitment of “the Russians”. This scrutiny engendered stereotypes of the new immigrants as threatening the allegedly unified Israeli-Jewish identity. This article examines the discourse of “Russian” immigration in Israeli cinema as located at the nexus of gender, nation and ethnicity. We examine two recent films about young “Russian” women who are successfully “absorbed” into Israel through romance with Israeli sabra men: Saint Clara (1995) and Yana’s Friends (1999). Situating the films’ immigration narratives within the context of the cinematic representation and discursive positioning of “internal others”—women, Holocaust survivors and Mizrahim—the article demonstrates how these two films produce a partially resistant reading of the Israeli-Zionist discourse of immigration. By analysing the new representations of “Russian” immigrants in Israeli films, this article continues and extends the study of the politics of Israeli cinema.*

The recent wave of immigration brought nearly a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel. These immigrants, known in Israeli parlance as “Russians”, constitute one of the largest “ethnic” groups, developing uneasy relationships with the local Israelis. After the initial euphoria, the locals grew increasingly disappointed with the newcomers. Jewish Israelis were concerned about the unusually large proportion of non-Jews among immigrants (about 20 per cent). They disapproved of the immigrants’ perceived lack of Zionist commitment, Jewish tradition and desire to assimilate. The Mizrahi community in particular saw the large surge in “Russian” immigration as reinforcing Ashkenazi dominance in Israeli society. These attitudes found their expression in media stereotypes of Russian immigrants, especially women, as destabilising, if not outright threatening, to Israeli national identity.

Analysing media coverage in the major Israeli newspapers, Dafna Lemish (333) demonstrated that “Russian” immigrant women were portrayed in three ways: as prostitutes, as “others” and only rarely as “exceptional immigrants”. In media portrayal, immigrant women’s allegedly deficient morality puts them outside familial, and by extension, national boundaries. Thus, stories of Russian newcomers-prostitutes serve as “national cautionary tales” instructing audiences “in fundamental tenets of Israeli and national identity” and warning against undermining “the ethno-national attachments and loyalties that lie at the heart of Israeli polity” (Golden 83). Such media representation marginalises immigrant women and perpetuates the existing power relations by justifying the placement of locals/males in the hegemonic positions. Media representations emerge at the intersection of gender, nation and ethnicity (which, in a particular Israeli-Jewish context, also overlaps with religion). Due to Israel’s status as a Jewish state,

representation of women as “others” undermines their Jewishness, whereas their portrayal as whores undermines their normative gender roles. Finally, their “Russian-ness” undermines their status as Israelis. Symbolically, Russian immigrant women are juxtaposed with Israeli-Jewish women—model mothers and wives with unwavering national loyalties.

Our analysis aims to extend the study of media representation of “Russian” women to cinema. In today’s world where images and sounds circulate globally and ubiquitously, identities are constructed within representations. In that context, cinema emerges as a particularly potent medium—“not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects” (Hall 236–237). For scholars of contemporary Israeli culture, then, film has the potential to be a rich site for research that takes seriously the multiple facets of identity—gender, ethnic and national—within which society and culture produce subjects.

### “Others” in Israeli film

Discussion of immigrant representation in Israeli cinema must be located within the context of the representation of internal “others”: women, Holocaust survivors and Mizrahim.<sup>1</sup> Woman is defined as “other” in a masculine order (Gertz, “Space and Gender”, 162). Her otherness can be expressed cinematically or discursively through plot, point of view, “gaze” or, in Israeli cinema, through her mere existence (Friedman) and her social-professional-familial positioning (Lubin). Thus in early Israeli cinema, women appear only in supportive secondary roles, defined by their relationships to men as their mothers, wives or daughters (Gertz, “The Other”). Even if a woman appears in her own right, she is relegated to a secondary task. For example, in *Giv’a 24 Eina Ona* (Hill 24 Doesn’t Answer, 1955), a story of four fighters for Israel’s independence, the only character whose background and point of view are not represented is a woman.

Later, as Israeli filmmakers turned towards personal cinema, rejecting a straightforward ideological mode and collectivist orientation, women still remained secondary on screen. They often appeared as widows of war heroes, thereby sustaining the earlier conventions of social, professional and familial positioning. In the 1980s, however, the women were marginalised in new ways: through threatening images of femininity, when women were seen from a male director’s vantage point as witches or mentally ill, for instance in *Atalia* (1984). Anat Zanger (“Women in Israeli Cinema”, 211) calls the male director’s point of view “a clinical gaze”, which allows objectifying or even pathologising women. Unlike classical Hollywood’s visual pleasures (see Mulvey), in Israeli film a woman’s body is not generally fragmented in fetishistic close-ups, nor is it subjected to voyeurism in point-of-view shots. This is because, as Michal Friedman (42) argues, a woman on the Israeli screen “does not exist at all: she is the ‘object’ of the male body”.

As a Holocaust survivor or a Mizrahi, a woman is doubly marginalised. In early films the Holocaust survivor is represented as a “future mother”, a woman undergoing rehabilitation for her future life. Her “transition from desolation to fertility symbolizes a changeover from infertility and licentiousness to motherhood” (Gertz, “The Other”, 48). As the focus shifts to a more complex representation in the 1980s and 1990s, characters of female Holocaust survivors give expression to the traumas of the Holocaust,

such as guilt and ambivalent relationships between victim and executioner (Ne'eman, "The Empty Tomb", 135), as well as second-generation issues such as a quest for identity (e.g., *Kayitz shel Aviya* (Aviya's Summer), 1988; *Tel Aviv-Berlin*, 1986). In the later films, the focus shifts to a conflict between the sensibilities of Israeli "new Jews" and the diaspora survivors. In such films (e.g., *Eretz Hadasha* (New Land), 1994), protagonists resolve this conflict by rejecting "Israeliness" in favour of their loyalty to the past.

Mizrahi women appear on screen at first as characters of *bourekas* films. This local genre includes commercially viable comedies and melodramas that form a distinct group of low-budget films often produced by Ashkenazi filmmakers for a largely Mizrahi audience. Like their male counterparts in the *bourekas* genre, Mizrahi women appear as stereotyped characters: unsophisticated and comical, but warm and kind. Inevitably, any inter-ethnic tension is resolved through the marriage of a mixed couple suggesting that "social integration is being dreamed via eroticism and the wedding" (Shohat 134). This portrayal is later challenged in the works of Mizrahi filmmakers (Moshe Mizrahi and Shmuel Hasfari in particular) presenting portraits of strong and complex Mizrahi women, at times contradicting the gender-ethnic stereotypes.

Recently, the Russian immigrant woman emerged as a new "other" of Israeli cinema. She appears in multiple films and television dramas. As in the print media, an image of a Jewish immigrant is often conflated with an image of a non-Jewish sex worker. At this point, it is difficult to find an Israeli film that does not feature a seductive or bizarre "Russian" woman as at least a minor character. These stereotypical portrayals of immigrant women, like those in the print media, are produced largely by Israeli filmmakers. Russian immigrants themselves, with rare exception, did not have access to Israeli cultural production during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> A thriving industry of Russian-language media and culture existed separately from the mainstream Hebrew-language media, rendered invisible to most Israeli audiences. The situation began to change slowly in the late 1990s with a small number of immigrant writers and filmmakers joining the Israeli media. Even so, Russian immigrants rarely find themselves in a position to control, or even contribute to, the production and circulation of their own representations.

Historically, however, Russian woman was not always the "other" of Israeli film. The representation of this character is situated within the ideological climate in which the films were produced and thus reveals cultural needs at particular historical moments. The 1960 hit *Hem Hayu Asara* (They Were Ten) tells a paradigmatic Zionist tale of *halutzim*. Young and beautiful Manyah (Ninette Dinar) is a Russian Jewish woman, a mother and a wife, working beside her husband and the rest of the commune. Her tragic death at the end of the film reaffirms her status as a Zionist martyr. In *Bayit Berehov Chelouche* (House on Chelouche Street 1973), a Russian Sonia (Michal Bat-Adam), is placed as a local, both culturally and socially, in contrast to a Mizrahi, Clara (Gila Almagor), and her young son, Sami (Ofer Shalhin). The Russian Sonia "enlightens" Sami by introducing him to the literature and ideas sanctioned by Israeli-Zionist ideology. Even as a secondary character, Sonia is placed at a cultural centre.

Situated in a different era, the 1980 drama *Lena* constitutes a watershed moment in Israeli film, when a Russian immigrant character is made "other" and moved from a cultural centre to the margins. *Lena* portrays a young and attractive Russian immigrant (played by Russian-born Fira Cantor), who is torn between her loyalty to her husband who is in a Soviet jail as a prisoner-of-Zion and her new love for a *sabra*, or metaphorically between maintaining her Russian identity and assimilating to become an Israeli.

Ultimately, Lena chooses to leave her Russian husband. Compared to heroic Manyah, Lena's character is more ambivalent and morally complex, and Lena herself is an "other". Despite this, the overall narrative of the film remains within the realm of Zionist ideology.

The recent proliferation of Israeli films featuring Russian immigrant women poses questions about the meanings of such characters, especially in relation to Israeli-Zionist ideology. We choose to focus our analysis on *Clara Hakdosha* (Saint Clara, 1995, dir. Ori Sivan and Ari Folman) and *Hahaverim Shel Yana* (Yana's Friends, 1999, dir. Arik Kaplun) since these two films both centre on immigrant women characters and are widely circulated nationally and internationally. *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* converge on and depart from stereotypes of Russian women in the media. Our analysis aims to understand the meaning of this new immigrant character within the politics of Israeli cinematic representations of gender and ethnicity, as studied by Ella Shohat, Yosefa Loshitzky and Nurith Gertz.

### *Saint Clara and Yana's Friends and the cinema of 1990s*

The filmmaking of the 1990s is characterised by a new sense of "homelessness", reflecting concerns "with both the difficulties of immigration and a sense of inner exile" (Ne'eman, "Israeli Cinema", 227–228). Moreover, recent Israeli films demonstrate "a clear bias toward an apocalyptic/dystopian inflection associated with both the historical context and the recent changes in Israeli art and culture at large" (Ne'eman, "The Empty Tomb", 119). These so-called "post-political" films coincide with a broader tendency among Israelis to embrace global capitalism through living and studying abroad, travel and tourism, and, for filmmakers, through participating in international film festivals.

Both *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* are typical of late 1990s Israeli cinema that avoids addressing social and political problems directly and heralds a new era of commercially viable local production. In terms of funding, exhibition and critical reception, *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* are strikingly similar. Both were produced with a combination of public and private funding, and received critical praise in Israel and abroad during their showing at international film festivals and in commercial theatres.<sup>3</sup> Their popularity and acclaim suggest that both films resonate with mainstream Israeli notions of gender, immigration and nation. *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* address tensions between Russian immigrants and local Israelis, yet both avoid the larger view of sociopolitical problems. They replace the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Ashkenazi-Mizrahi tensions with apocalyptic scenarios: earthquakes and nuclear contamination in *Saint Clara*, Iraqi missiles during the first Gulf War in *Yana's Friends*. Both films adopt the strategies of romantic comedy, a genre that often treats repressed social issues with aspects of melodrama, a genre that conventionally serves "as a safety-valve for ideological contradictions" (Mulvey 39). Moreover, both films feature women protagonists through the vantage point of male directors who "express the masculine and national worlds to which they belong" (Gertz, "Space and Gender", 159). Of course, as Orly Lubin reminds us, male filmmakers can still create a film featuring a female autonomous subject. At the same time, a film that focuses on a woman, regardless of the filmmakers' gender, can still be hegemonic.

There are also significant differences between the two films: in our analysis, we will focus on the modes of cinematic representation, the cultural identities of the filmmakers

and casts, and the use of language and accent in the film dialogues. Analysis of these aspects of the films, we argue, permits greater insights into the ideological positions of the films within the Israeli social context.

Set in the (then) near future of 1999, *Saint Clara* is the story of a 13-year-old Russian immigrant's assimilation into Israeli society in a fictional remote town. Like her mother (Yevgenya Dodina) and uncle Elvis (Israel Demidov),<sup>4</sup> Clara (Lucy Dubinchik) has mysterious powers to foretell the future, powers that will end should she fall in love. The locals attempt to exploit Clara's powers for collective or individual benefit, figuratively expressing the exploitation of immigrant labour. Clara's classmates at the Golda Meir School ask her to predict examination questions, and the father of Clara's *sabra* boyfriend, Tikel (Halil Elohev), asks her to predict the winning lotto numbers. In both instances, the harnessing of Clara's powers results in social turmoil. In the first instance, the students are accused by school administrators of staging a "revolt", thereby disrupting their indoctrination as young Israelis into the nation through state education. In the second instance, Clara's uncle Elvis attempts to distribute the winning numbers to everyone. A "catastrophe" ensues with hundreds of lotto winners vying for the prize, and television news reports of two suicides in response to the confusion and disappointment. Clara's last premonition is apocalyptic: a devastating earthquake, undetected by the scientists in seismographic watchtower, incites a mass exodus from the town. Ultimately, Clara willingly surrenders her mysterious abilities for a chance at love. The film ends with Clara's and Tikel's first kiss taking place appropriately in a movie theatre in the nearly deserted town.

The film approaches cultural difference through constant irony and ambivalence about Israeli symbols and myths. *Saint Clara* opens with a scene of student solidarity against an authority figure, inter-cut with a series of long shots down the school's empty and impersonal corridors, as the heavy bass metal guitar plays on the soundtrack. A statue of Golda Meir stands at the end of a corridor against a red wall near the headmaster's office—an ironic reference to the glorious (and ostensibly unified) Zionist past. Inter-cut into the opening classroom scene are long shots into the headmaster's office, also decorated with Golda Meir's portraits. The headmaster, Tissona (Yigal Naor), uses the large T-shaped conference table to separate himself from his students as he interrogates them about their "revolt". Among the few objects on his desk is a container of organised, uniform pencils, suggesting the conformity and uniformity that he (and, by extension, Golda Meir, even Israel) expects of students. This expectation is, however, laughable in Israeli culture, which praises improvisation and inventiveness. Clara and her wayward classmates will never be assimilated into its rigid organisational structure. The scene is a parody of an ideal never to be realised. In this and other scenes, as Anat Zanger ("Path of Orange Peels", 60–61) comments, students refuse to walk the lines made for them and the real events take place "off the road" (backstage and on the periphery) without official supervision.

The Israeli educational institution is also parodied through the highly stylised and exaggerated performance of the actors portraying the faculty in contrast to the more naturalistic acting styles of the cast portraying the students. Headmaster Tissona moves self-consciously, as though in response to the film's actual lighting and camera setups. He lapses into French, as though Hebrew was somehow insufficient to express his *idées reçues* about education. He is a caricatured francophile, who claims a one-night romance with Edith Piaf and has named his dog after Jean Gabin, the film star and populist icon



of French poetic realism. In Israeli context, Tissona's lapse into French marks his Mizrahi identity. (Immigrants from North Africa were often French speakers—an indelible trace of the “civilising mission” under French colonial rule.) The character of Tissona points to the limits of assimilation to an Ashkenazi norm, but also signifies nostalgia. This nostalgia is not for the past, especially not for a “once-upon-a-time” Land of Israel as Zanger (“Path of Orange Peels”) suggests, but rather it is nostalgia for the “imaginary West” (using Yurchak's term), for the imaginary geography of European culture.

Like the institutional spaces of the school, domestic spaces of the *sabra* and immigrant families reveal further caricatures of Israeli society. The *sabra* Tikel lives with his self-absorbed parents in a well illuminated, sparsely furnished modern flat, suggesting the emotional detachment within the modern nuclear family. The immigrant Clara lives with her family in a flat overwhelmed by mismatched vibrantly coloured furnishings. The flat is overpopulated, not only by the extended family, but also by a stuffed macaw, lion, deer and other wild animals. The combination of saturated colour and the eccentric content of the apartment exoticise Clara's family. 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 uncle is a “bear-hunter”. Were it not for the irony with which setting and performance are used to suggest cultural differences, the film would seem to reproduce comparable juxtapositions of Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in the *bourekas* films.



**FIGURE 1** Clara (Lucy Dubinchik) and Tikel (Halil Elohev). Courtesy of Kino International.

Surrounding these interior spaces are isolated and phantasmagorical exterior spaces that constitute “the newly found wasteland in contemporary Israeli cinema” (Ne’eman, “The Empty Tomb”, 128). Empty streets and an ambiguous and ominous swamp (typically shown under yellow lighting) signify land that cannot be claimed by settlement—or perhaps a harbinger of land that cannot be reclaimed after nuclear contamination. Using Gertz’s (“From Destruction”, 59) words, such portrayal of “indifferent and alien nature is laden with significance on a national level: nature remains alien to a people that has not been able to truly become a part of its land”. Landscape in *Saint Clara* parodies the “optimistic geography” (Gertz, “From Jew to Hebrew”, 182) of the historical-nationalist genre films. In these films, pioneering characters transform the land by either bringing water to the desert or by draining the swamps. In *Saint Clara*, the recurring images of swamps show that the Zionist pioneers either failed to “make the desert bloom” or failed “to dry the swamps”. The film sets in play numerous apocalyptic motifs (the approaching new millennium, the ever-present possibility of nuclear annihilation or contamination) standing in for the everyday fears among many Israelis (though the film never explicitly refers to the threat of terrorism).

In addition to being an immigration story, the film is a coming-of-age story in which minor crises are exaggerated into major drama. Cultural difference, particularly marking Clara’s teenage sexuality, is equated with “witchcraft”, which is consistent with the threatening representation of women as “other” in Israeli film (Zanger, “Women in Israeli Cinema”). As a Russian immigrant, she is a mysterious and somewhat sexualised adolescent, possessing uncanny powers to predict the future and attract the amorous attention of boys her age, as well as their fathers and her headmaster. She is frequently shown in frontal close-ups, disassociated from her surroundings, directly addressing the camera, even in shots that are not structured into the film’s narrative as reaction shots or eye-line matches. These close-ups depict Clara in the manner of a portrait on a Russian Orthodox icon. The film’s Hebrew title, *Clara Hakdosha*, alludes to Christianity, a serious taboo in the Israeli ethos centred on Judaism. Playing with a taboo is always threatening, but it is not by chance that it appears as a modifier to the first name of a Russian immigrant. *Hakdosha* (“saint”) alludes to fear of gentrification and a concern over the high proportion of non-Jews among Russian immigrants—an Israeli “apocalypse” according to the film’s thematic logic. In this way, without ever indicating this directly in the dialogues, the film portrays Clara as non-Jew and essentially renders her ethnically Russian, granting her the Israeli equivalent to what the American television series *Seinfeld* popularised as “shiksap-peal”.

Clara’s demeanour radiates otherworldliness. She is exoticised through constant reference to her physical appearance, mysterious powers and foreign origin. Echoing *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds* (a paradigmatic Russian-Jewish play made into a cornerstone of Israeli culture by Habima theatre production), her classmates describe Clara as living in “two worlds”, only visiting their world when relevant. By so doing, they express a common perception of immigrants, exiles and other diaspora or transnational people: they are attached to two places and, consequently, locals may perceive their loyalties as divided, insincere or incomplete. When Clara falls in love with Tikel, her union with the local male “normalises” her, rids her of her miraculous, witch-like power. (Within the ironic narrative of the film, Tikel functions both as an assertion of Israeli masculinity



when he bullies his peers, and also as a parody of Israeli masculinity when he displays vulnerability and anxiety over his love interest.) Through this romantic attachment, Clara is domesticated: she stops being otherworldly and becomes one of the worldly, the familiar and the non-threatening. She abandons her “saintly” powers of divination, her holy foreignness and becomes a wholly mortal woman. Clara’s story is a story of becoming local or, in Israeli assimilationist ideology, a story of successful absorption.

In contrast to *Saint Clara*’s use of highly stylised sets, costumes and performances, *Yana’s Friends* presents a recognisable cast of Israeli characters in recognisable locations. The film begins with Rosa (Dalia Friedland), the ostensibly Israeli landlord who is convinced that all new immigrants are parasites and con-artists, ushering the young immigrant couple Yana (Evelyn Kaplun) and Fima (Israel Demidov) into a shared apartment, where they meet their new flatmate, *sabra* Eli (Nir Levy). A womanising bachelor who wants to attend film school in the United States, Eli follows Yana, clandestinely videotaping her daily activities and assembling a catalogued archive of her sad life. Like a male protagonist in many classical Hollywood films or a *sabra* character of the early Israeli cinema, Eli controls the power of the gaze. In *Yana’s Friends*, Eli literally performs the male “penetrating gaze”. As Eli is portrayed following Yana with his camera, he himself emerges as an observer, which exposes the penetrating gaze as a technology of power. This gendered gaze is also an ethnic (or national) gaze—a gaze of male *sabra* onto a female immigrant. Thus, in *Yana’s Friends*, a woman is marginalised both through gaze (like in classical Hollywood cinema) and through social-professional-familial positioning (like in Israeli-Zionist cinema).

Eli, however, is a voyeur with a heart of gold, mobilising the power of his privileged identity as a local male to help Yana. After Fima flees to Moscow carrying with him the



**FIGURE 2** Yana (Evelyn Kaplun) and Eli (Nir Levy). Courtesy of First Run Features.

government loan (the only money the immigrant couple has), Eli rescues pregnant Yana by paying the various fines sanctioned against her as a result of her husband's transgression of Israeli law, and even helps to finance her abortion. Yana's choice of abortion over motherhood positions her as a "bad mother" within the patriarchal economy of Israeli-Zionist film, where women are, first and foremost, mothers to a new generation of citizens (Gertz, "The Other"). This abortion also allows Yana to expel the seed of the man who betrayed not only his wife, but the entire nation by absconding to Russia. Thus the abortion symbolically facilitates her absorption into Israel and opens a way for Yana to develop a romance with Eli and potentially become a mother of his children, fully sanctioned by Zionist ideology.

Indeed, a romance unfolds between Yana and Eli. Like Clara, Yana is assimilated into Israeli society via the narrative strategy of romantic-sexual relation with a local man. She first responds to Eli's attempts at seduction after having learned that her husband is not going to return to Israel. She escorts Eli to a wedding, which he has been hired to videotape, where she gets drunk and dances, sad and alone, among the merriment of complete strangers. However, intimacy between Yana and Eli takes place in the moments not only of Yana's personal fears and insecurities, but of highest national fears and insecurities—during the first Gulf War, underscoring, as in *Saint Clara*, the ever-present possibility of national annihilation. Significantly, their intimacy takes place in a sealed room, during the missile attacks, accompanied by the sounds of sirens, as both she and Eli wear gas masks. The threat of war facilitates unity among the everyday disunity of Yana and Eli. Later, the gas masks become necessary equipment—prosthetics—upon which their physical connection depends. The gas mask standardises everyone's face (metaphorically unified in the face of danger) and additionally renders everyone mute, eliminating linguistic gaps and muffling accents. Once the threat of war has passed, Eli's seduction of Yana succeeds only when missile attacks are simulated through his use of recorded sounds and images of past missile attacks.

There are other immigrants in addition to Yana: Alik (Vladimir Friedman), desperate to immigrate to the United States and escape the ever-present dangers of the Israeli wars; his complicit wife (Lena Sachanova) and her paralysed grandfather Yitzhak (Mosko Alkalai), left to beg in the street by the enterprising Alik. Competing for the best begging spot is a street musician Yuri (Shmil Ben-Ari), the Bukharan immigrant. Parallel to Yana's and Eli's romance, another, less predictable romance unfolds between Rosa and Yitzhak. A series of comedic coincidences reveal that Rosa and Yitzhak were lovers separated during the Second World War when both fought in the Soviet Army. After the war, Rosa went to Israel and gave birth to Yitzhak's son, who later died heroically in the Six-Day War. Rosa is instantly transformed from a suspicious and powerful Israeli landlady to a sensitive and vulnerable Russian woman. As with *Saint Clara*, all ends implausibly well: Yana and Eli, along with the film's entire cast of characters, run toward the beach after Yitzhak's runaway wheelchair. Presumably stimulated by his rekindled love affair with Rosa, Yitzhak recovers from paralysis. The entire cast laughs together, celebrating the miraculous recovery and unification.

Unlike *Saint Clara*'s caricatured representation of Israel, visual images, dialogues and diegetic sounds in *Yana's Friends* realistically portray Israel during the early 1990s with its massive wave of Russian immigration coinciding with the Gulf War. The filmmakers generously insert documentary and television footage. The soundtrack is punctuated with sirens, warnings of possible SCUD missile attacks from Iraq, as well as

television news reports on the Gulf War and on newly arrived immigrants. Paraphrasing Loshitzky (83), *Yana's Friends* is "anthropology without anthropologists", a film that "without being a documentary in the traditional sense" nevertheless "constitutes a form of social document". Visually, *Yana's Friends* resembles *Sha'anani See* (Comfortably Numb, 1991, dir. Ori Sivan and Ari Folman), a documentary about the effects of the Gulf War on the city of Tel Aviv.

*Yana's Friends* announces its documentary-like aesthetics already in the opening credits, a montage of black-and-white shots of the film's primary characters in the streets of Tel Aviv. The camera focuses on images of Russian immigrant street musicians, often tilting downward to reveal a jar placed to collect change. These immigrants are depicted as talented, though misplaced; the training of their former lives insufficient for their new life in Israel. An ostensibly nondiegetic musical score begins as the opening title credits appear over these black-and-white images, serving to conceal the abrupt cuts between images, cuts that call attention to themselves by breaking the rules of continuity editing. Yet certain rhythms from the musical score are synchronised with movements in the visual images: street musicians play violins and trumpets in time with the musical score, though the female singer is never shown. The music carries over into the film's first colour footage, images of Eli in the flat, which adopt aspects of new-wave film aesthetics such as natural lighting, on-location shooting, long takes and rapid cutting.

The first shot, for example, is a long slow pan of the interior of the apartment in one take. The camera pans from a window through the interior of one room, pausing to reveal several television monitors and stacks of video cassettes. The camera then continues its pan into the bedroom, where it pauses again to reveal another television, another stack of video cassettes, before continuing to pan to an image of Eli holding a video camera to film his lover, as she attempts to dress on the bed. The world outside the flat's windows is lost in the "blowout" (whiteness that obliterates the exterior) that emerges during on-location shooting without corrective filters. The camera that documents Eli mirrors his own documenting camera. The music from the opening titles and montage merges during this long take with the sound of an English-language television news report about the Gulf War, a war that was broadcast live in many parts of the world. The diegetic world of the film is constantly reinforced through documentation and surveillance, much like the "reality" of contemporary life with its ever-present television screens and surveillance cameras. The inter-cutting of stable, deep focused, colour footage with unstable, variable focused, black-and-white footage re-inscribes the routine nature of the narrative. The film's mobile camerawork contrasts with the fixed camera positions in *Saint Clara*. Yana's reactions and expressions are often captured in close-up, but they are not framed frontally. Similarly, Yana does not directly address the camera's gaze as Clara does with the exception of shots seen through the lens of Eli's video camera.

Unlike the mysterious and otherworldly qualities of Clara and the apocalyptic world into which she immigrates, Yana is largely confined to the realistic predicament of a constrained female immigrant. She resides in a sublet communal flat, is abandoned and betrayed by her husband, left pregnant and penniless in a foreign country where she does not speak the language fluently, and easily falls victim to exploitation and misrecognition. In short, there is nothing mysterious or otherworldly about her—and unlike Clara, she has no supernatural powers that distinguish her from the other immigrants or help her escape from her mundane problems of being an outsider. Like *Saint Clara*, however, the film's Hebrew title is telling of Israeli attitudes to immigrants.

The title, *Hahaverim Shel Yana*, translated innocently into English as *Yana's Friends*, can mean in Hebrew 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 morality in question, suggesting that she lacks the propriety of Israeli Jewish women and playing off one of the negative stereotypes for Russian female immigrants. Thus the Hebrew titles to both films emphasise the cultural difference of Russian immigrant women and mark their marginal position in Israeli culture as non-Jews and prostitutes.

### Accents, language and point of view

Despite their generic similarities, the two films differ in the two aspects of production: the identity of filmmakers and the politics of language. *Saint Clara* is based on the novel by the Czech writer Pavel Kohout, adapted for the screen and transplanted onto Israeli soil by Ori Sivan and Ari Folman.<sup>5</sup> *Yana's Friends* is based on the original script by Arik Kaplun and Semion Vinokur that, according to them, includes autobiographical details of their immigration stories as well as the story of Kaplun's wife Evelyn, who plays Yana. Although there is some overlap in terms of cast and production crew (Russian-born cinematographer Valentin Belonogov filmed both *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends*; Israel Demidov and Lucy Dubinchik appear in both films), the films represent considerably different vantage points on Russian immigration.

*Saint Clara* is the work of Israeli directors and producers, who frame the film's representations of Russian immigrants from a local Israeli perspective. *Yana's Friends* is primarily the work of Russian immigrant crew who frame their representations from their own perspective. The filmmakers' position is evident in their portrayal of Yana. Through Rosa's character, the film introduces an Israeli view of new immigrants ("Parasites, you just want to take advantage"), but the filmmakers clearly dissociate themselves from this position and complicate that perspective when it is later revealed that Rosa herself was once an immigrant. In the scenes when the immigrants' behaviour can be seen negatively from the Israeli-Zionist point of view, the filmmakers adopt the position of an immigrant insider, as though to explain the realities of immigrant experiences in Israel. Even in ethically questionable situations, such as the scene when Yana is "caught" at the airport trying to return to Russia—an awful sin from the Zionist perspective—the sympathies of the filmmakers with the immigrants are unwavering. By contrast, though Russian immigrant actors play "themselves" in *Saint Clara*, the immigrant point of view is mediated through Israeli point of view—a typical pattern in Israeli films.

These differences are also realised in casting. In *Saint Clara*, the Israeli filmmakers direct Russian immigrant actors to play stereotyped immigrant characters. In *Yana's Friends*, it is Russian immigrant filmmakers who direct Russian immigrant actors to play the immigrant characters. Moreover, they also direct Israeli actors who are cast as Russian immigrants (Dalia Friedland plays Rosa, Mosko Alkalai plays Yitzhak and Shmil Ben-Ari plays Yuri). The usual distribution of power is reversed in *Yana's Friends*, at least on the level of the film production. The film's verisimilitude is also realised through attention to accents. Israeli actors who are highly recognisable to the local audiences receive roles where their accents would sound appropriate to the Russian-speaking audiences. Friedland's Hebrew-accented Russian is justified in her role as Rosa since the character has been living in Israel since the 1940s. In, fact the actor herself has Russian

roots: her father, Zvi Friedland, was a founder of the Habima theatre in Moscow. Alkalai can play Yitzhak because the role is largely silent. Ben-Ari plays a Bukharan Jew, whose strong accent in Russian sounds authentic. Thus, representation of immigrants in *Yana's Friends* recognises cultural diversity and social hierarchies among Russian immigrants. The film distinguishes between Muscovite Yana, provincial Alik and Bukharan Yuri, all of them speaking with recognisable accents in both Russian and Hebrew. In addition to accents, the politics of language emerge as an important dimension of marking differences between the two films. Dialogue in *Saint Clara* is conducted in Hebrew, with only a few phrases of Russian and French. Even Clara's Russian immigrant family speaks among itself in Hebrew. *Yana's Friends*, alternatively, moves freely between Russian and Hebrew, with a large part of the dialogue taking place in Russian. Thus *Yana's Friends* gives centre stage to the Russian language and accent, usually relegated to the margins.

*Yana's Friends* and *Saint Clara* belong to an ever-increasing body of Israeli films about recent immigration, which Loshitzky (85) defines as a "diasporic exilic transnational film". *Yana's Friends*, however, is transnational in a way in which *Saint Clara* is not. What distinguishes *Yana's Friends* is its mixture of languages and accents that, in Hamid Naficy's (1) words, "cuts across previously defined geographic, national, cultural, cinematic and meta-cinematic boundaries". This transnational character of the film is particularly salient in the context of Israeli cinema, where the Zionist dictum of "Hebrew only" has prevailed for decades, and where accents have historically been used only for caricature, as in *bourekas* films. The use of language in the two films is an indirect evidence of audience appeal: clearly, *Saint Clara* is made with a mainstream Hebrew-speaking audience in mind, whereas *Yana's Friends* is produced also for Russian-speaking audiences, who can appreciate the accents and the linguistic switches. *Saint Clara* appeals to Israel as an imagined community that speaks a single national language; *Yana's Friends* appeals to Israel as an actual community that speaks a number of different languages, replete with accents. It is not by chance, that in the 2000s *Yana's Friends* has been followed by other Israeli films exploring themes of migration and cultural difference, such as *Masaot James Beeretz Hakodesh* (James's Journey to Jerusalem, 2003), *Sof Haolam Smola* (Turn Left, 2004) and *Tihye Vetiye* (Live and Become, 2006). These films are often multilingual, multinational co-productions appealing to the international cinema markets.

### Absorbed by love

The emphasis on intercultural romance and immigration in *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* also draws upon cinematic conventions from previous generations of Israeli filmmaking, which, from its beginning, has been an important aspect of nation-building. The question that arises, then, is how to situate *Saint Clara* and *Yana's Friends* vis-à-vis Israeli-Zionist ideology. Israeli-Zionist discourse imposes on immigrants the ideological imperatives of Zionist attitudes, a commitment to learning Hebrew and assimilation into Israeli culture. Even as recent political and cultural developments have somewhat loosened these imperatives, they are still enforced in the discourse.<sup>6</sup> Both films challenge the main Zionist imperative: the immigrant characters can be hardly described as Zionists. It is unlikely that their immigration was inspired by the idea of nation-building, and yet this ostensible absence of Zionist commitment does not constitute a problem in either *Saint Clara* or *Yana's Friends*. Both films negotiate the

second imperative by breaking the linguistic hegemony of “Hebrew only” (to a large degree *Yana’s Friends*, and to a lesser degree *Saint Clara*), but the treatment of the imperative to assimilate is the same as ever.

The treatment of ideology of immigration in *Saint Clara* and *Yana’s Friends* reflects and perpetuates the dominant ideology of *mizug galuyot* (literally “mixing of the exiles”, figuratively “melting pot”). Clara and her family must abandon their witch-like powers in order to integrate into Israeli society. Even Clara’s disoriented uncle Elvis finds a friend in the headmaster Tissona, as the two walk their pets, a goat and the dog named Jean Gabin respectively, in the town’s deserted streets at the film’s close. Without abandoning the vantage point of Russian immigrants, *Yana’s Friends* also ends with an ultimate “melting pot” happy ending: Rosa and Yitzhak are wartime sweethearts, two halves of a separated couple whose son died the ultimate Israeli death. The film both pays tribute to the heroic Israeli past and claims the new immigrants’ right to be part of this grand narrative of nation.

The epitome of this melting-pot formula is conveyed through the romantic relationships in both films. Historically, inter-ethnic romance has been a recurring theme in Israeli cinema, though it was typically defined as “forbidden love” revolving around the “Orient question”, as in the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi intermarriages of *bourekas* films and the Jewish-Palestinian romances of later “personal” cinema. The prohibitive impetus of the latter plots was fuelled by the fear of miscegenation (Shohat; Loshitzky). In the case of Yana and Eli, as well as Clara and Tikel, this fear is completely removed. Yana and Clara have a potential to become local despite their “otherness”. Both films use the phenotypes of Evelyn Kaplun and Lucy Dubinchik to signal their Russianness.<sup>7</sup> In that, the character of Russian immigrant woman is “de-judaised” and even given some features of gender stereotypes of a *shiksa* (a gentile woman): blonde, beautiful, weak and kind. Despite that, both Yana and Clara are assumed to be Jewish women, potential mothers to Israeli babies. Regardless of any perceived Russianness, Yana and Clara reinforce Israeli-Jewish hegemony and integrate into Israel in ways not possible for external “others”. As Gertz (“The Other”, 50) notices, “the Arab, unlike the woman, is condemned to remain the ‘other’ outside ... and thus has no place in the main metamorphosis of the films”. In this sense, Clara and Yana are “sanctioned” by Israeli-Zionist ideology, though perhaps not by the everyday attitudes of Israelis.

Ultimately, both the heavily stylised approach to an immigration and assimilation story in *Saint Clara* and the more realist approach in *Yana’s Friends* produce only partially resistant reading of Israeli-Zionist discourse of immigration and gender. The cultural verisimilitude in *Yana’s Friends* is limited: whatever the conflicts based on identity politics in *Yana’s Friends*, all is resolved either through romantic (Yana and Eli) or familial relations (Rosa and Yitzhak) so that, although *Yana’s Friends* differs significantly from *Saint Clara* in its representation of Russian immigrants, its political-ideological message of assimilation is not substantially different.

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## Notes

1. We exclude from this discussion representation of Palestinians who within the Israeli cinema function as “external others” and thus are at times defined as enemies.
2. The most notable exception was Gesher, an Israeli theatre founded by a group of Russian immigrants. However, Gesher’s critical and popular reception has been controversial and has revealed its ambivalent status in Israeli culture (see Gershenson).
3. *Saint Clara* won Israeli Film Academy (“Israeli Oscars”) awards 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 Israeli Film Academy awards 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.
4. Both Yevgenya Dodina and Israel Demidov are leading actors of the Gesher theatre (see Note 2 above).
5. Cohout’s novel has been adapted for film once before: *Die Einfälle der heiligen Klara* (West Germany/Czechoslovakia 1980).
6. Political and cultural developments include the research of Israeli New Historians, the rise of Post-Zionist intellectual movement (Nimni), the emergence of political parties that reposition Mizrahi identities *vis-à-vis* Zionism (Chetrit), greater acceptance of Palestinian identity, and challenges to the Jewish character of Israeli state (Migdal).
7. In a media interview, Evelyn Kaplun acknowledges: “I look like a Russian” (Karpel). Moreover, in her next film, *What a Wonderful Place* (2005), Kaplun is cast as an ethnic Russian.

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