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Screening the Conflict, Reaping the Benefits: *Yana's Friends* and the Politics of Representation of Russian-Speaking Jews in Israeli Cinema

Pożytek z konfliktu: *Przyjaciele Jany* wobec polityki (samo)reprezentacji Żydów radzieckich w kinie izraelskim

Streszczenie: W wyniku powszechnej fali imigracji, zapoczątkowanej w roku 1989, około miliona Żydów radzieckich trafiło do Izraela. Doświadczenie przesiedleń dla większości repatriantów naznaczone zostało napięciem pomiędzy potrzebą asymilacji w nowych warunkach kulturowych, a chęcią zachowania „rosyjskiej” tożsamości kulturowej. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje politykę (auto)reprezentacji radzieckich imigrantów w Izraelu na przykładzie filmu Arika Kapluna *Przyjaciele Jany* (1999), który wyznaczył nową granicę w kinie rosyjsko-izraelskim. W przeciwieństwie do wcześniejszych filmów tworzonych w Izraelu przez filmowców z byłego ZSRR, w których doświadczenie przesiedlenia z reguły nacechowane było nostalgią, poczuciem utraty i podwójnej alienacji, Kaplun w przedstawianiu tożsamości rosyjsko-żydowskiej rezygnuje z nostalgii za radziecką przeszłością i kulturowania rosyjsko-żydowskiej niepowtarzalności. Chociaż bohaterowie filmu starannie i z pietyzmem zachowują niektóre aspekty kultury rosyjskiej (muzyka, sztuka, kulinaria), to łatwo rozstają się z innymi (akcent, alkoholizm, język rosyjski i radzieckie wzorce męskości). Analiza filmu ujawnia zmiany w strategiach autopozycjonowania tożsamości rosyjsko-żydowskiej w kontekście wielokulturowego Izraela.

Słowa kluczowe: kino, imigracja, tożsamość, Izrael, Żydzi rosyjscy, *Przyjaciele Jany*

Конфликт как выгода: *Друзья Яны* и политика (само)репрезентации советских евреев в израильском кино

Резюме: В результате масштабной волны иммиграции, начавшейся в 1989 году, около миллиона советских евреев переселились в Израиль. Опыт переселения для большинства репатриантов был отмечен напряжением между необходимостью ассимиляции в новых культурных условиях и желанием сохранить «русскую» культурную идентичность. В данной статье рассматривается политика (само)репрезентации советских переселенцев в Израиле на примере фильма *Друзья Яны* (1999) Арика Каплуна, который отмечает новый рубеж в российско-израильском кино. В отличие от более ранних фильмов, созданных в Израиле кинематографистами-выходцами из бывшего СССР, в которых опыт переселения как правило характеризуется ностальгией, невыносимым чувством утраты и переживанием двойного отчуждения, Каплун смещает акценты в репрезентации русско-еврейской идентичности и ностальгии по советскому прошлому и культивированию русско-еврейской исключительности. Герои фильма бережно и трепетно сохраняют одни аспекты русской культуры (музыку, искусство, еду) и с легкостью расстаются с другими (акцент, алкоголизм, русский язык и советские модели маскулинности). Анализ фильма выявляет

изменения в стратегиях самопозиционирования русско-еврейской идентичности в поликультурном контексте Израиля.

Ключевые слова: кино, мигранты, идентичность, Израиль, русские евреи, Друзья Яны

On November 16, 1999, *Yana's Friends* (*Ha-chaverim shel yana*, 1999), a debut film by the Soviet-born, Israeli filmmaker Arik Kaplun, collected almost every single prize at the prestigious Ophir Awards and was chosen to represent Israel at the Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film next year. In addition to the recognition from the film establishment, *Yana's Friends* also achieved unprecedented commercial success among the general public and made a stir in the international arena, where it received important prizes at prominent film festivals in Portugal, Czech Republic, France, Italy, and the United States. The film's unexpected, head-spinning success provokes the central question of this article: how did a film that on paper seems so "foreign" to Israeli taste — focusing on the Russian-speaking community, heavily intercut with Russian music and cultural references, and only partially in Hebrew — manage to do so well among both domestic and international audiences and critics? To address this question, I pay particular attention to *Yana's Friends'* representation of Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel, arguing that the film's success correlates to its ability to package "Russianness" in a consumable and easily digestible way by adhering to Israeli expectations of what "other" places and people look like.

RUSSIAN-SPEAKING JEWS IN ISRAELI CINEMA

Yana's Friends marks an important stage of development of Israeli cinema because it signals an early attempt of ex-Soviet immigrants to Israel to take control of their artistic representation on Israeli screen. To be sure, Russian-speaking characters had appeared in Israeli media and cinema before 1999¹. As convincingly shown by Olga Gershenson, in the early days of Israeli cinema, the depiction of Russian-speaking newcomers was highly idealized. The ten apostle-like pioneers (*halutzim* in Hebrew) from the Russian Empire in *They Were Ten* (*Hem hayu asarah*, 1960), for instance, exemplify this mode of representation. In the film, the "Russian" characters are portrayed as heroic Zionists who put the needs of the collective first and therefore manage to solve all the challenges the Jewish

¹ On this topic, see: O. Gershenson, "Is Israel Part of Russia?" *Immigrants on Russian and Israeli Screens*. "Israel Affairs" 2011, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 165–167.

community faced with the Ottoman authorities, hostile Arab neighbors, and ruthless Middle Eastern climate. However, as the relationship between Israel and the Soviet Union soured following the Soviet militarization of Arab states during the Six-Day War, the attitude towards the Soviet Union and Russian-speaking immigrants drastically changed. During that time, Russian-speaking Jews lost their symbolic position as a cultural elite. Instead, the immigrant-hero ceded his position of superiority to the *sabra*, the native-born Israeli, who captured the cultural imagination with his strength, deep-rooted connection to the land, and first-hand knowledge of Hebrew language and customs. Concomitantly, all immigrants, including those from the USSR, were relegated to the margins of the country's social and cultural imaginary.

As a result of this transition, a new attitude towards ex-Soviet immigrants was established. Russian-speaking characters, notes Gershenson, began to be type-casted as “cultural others [...] struggling with a new culture and language, not belonging to Israeli society, and certainly not constituting model Israelis”². Their cinematic representations ranged among the roles of social outcasts, violent drunkards, hypersexual women, and criminals and seedy members of the underworld. This negative depiction started to *slowly* change in the second half of the 1990s, however. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in 1991, nearly one million Russian-speaking Jews settled in Israel, increasing the country's Jewish population by fifteen percent. As soon as the newcomers achieved a degree of economic and social integration, many set out to rewrite the visual narratives of “Russian” immigrants that had been propagated in the Israeli media, literature, and films. Filmmakers such as Lena and Slava Chaplin, Pini Tavger, Leonid Prudovsky, and Arik Kaplun, writers such as Alona Kimhi, Boris Zaidman, Rita Kogan, and Miri Litvak, and painters such as Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, Olga Kundina, Anna Lukashevsky, Asya Lukin, and Natalia Zourabova began reconfiguring and complicating the dominant image of the “Russian” immigrant that was ubiquitous in the Israeli culture³. *Yana's Friends* has been among

² Ibidem, p. 165.

³ For analysis of Russian-Israeli literature in Hebrew, see: R. Katsman, *The Hebrew Poetry of the Younger Generation of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel Part 1: Alex Rif, Nadia-Adina Rose*, “Ludaica Russica” 2020, no. 1 (4), pp. 18–39; R. Katsman, *The Hebrew Poetry of the Younger Generation of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel. Part 2: Yael Tomashov, Rita Kogan*, “Ludaica Russica” 2020, no. 2 (5), pp. 5–27; R. Tsirkin-Sadan, *Between Marginal and Transnational: Post-Soviet Immigration in Hebrew Literature*, “East-European Jewish Affairs” 2014, vol. 44, no. 2–3, pp. 253–268; A. Moshkin, *Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Israel? Historical Revisionism and Artists of the 1.5 Generation*, “East-European Jewish Affairs” 2019, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 179–199. For analysis of the visual art of Cherkassky-Nnadi, Kundina, Lukashevsky,

the early and most successful attempts to accomplish this task in Israeli cinema.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION OF YANA'S FRIENDS

The film revisits a dark moment in Israel's history, when Tel Aviv was under Iraqi bombardment during the first Gulf War, from the hindsight of 1999. The emotional atmosphere of a city under siege is invoked from the very beginning. After a short black-and-white musical prelude, the film switches to color and a long tracking shot intercut with multilayered sound registers (archival radio and television footage) contextualizes the film in its historical and geopolitical moment. At first, we hear what seems to be a CNN broadcast, discussing in English the "multinational... troops united against the Iraqi aggressor". Then the camera proceeds on its path through a disorganized, bohemian room, stopping on a television screen that broadcasts local news in Hebrew, announcing that today "1000 *olim*⁴ arrived [to Israel] from the Soviet Union, 120 from Ethiopia, and several more from Argentina". With these techniques, the film marshals archival and found footage to situate the film within the turbulent historical reality, as Israel dealt both with an unprecedented influx of migrants from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia (for which it did not have adequate infrastructure) and the frustrating military situation of sitting still while Iraqi SCUD missiles fell down on its citizens.

Against the backdrop of this international crisis, *Yana's Friends* explores the escalating social challenges that Russian-speaking newcomers struggled within Israel. Between 1989 and 1992, a record-number of 600,000 Soviet-Jewish immigrants landed in Israel and experienced disorientation and culture shock⁵. Having grown up in a completely different cultural, social, and political environment, the newcomers had an especially hard time

Lukin, and Zourabova, see: L. Dashevski, *The Phenomenon of the 'New Barbizon' in Israeli Art*, in: E. Nosenko-Stein, D. Sobolev (eds.), *Israel: Languages, Society, Culture*, The Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow 2020, pp. 333–365. On the history of Russian-Israeli cinema since 1991, see: A. Moshkin, *History, Diaspora, and Geography*, in: K. Platt (ed.), *Global Russian Cultures*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2019, pp. 113–135.

⁴ *Olim* is a particular Hebrew term that describes immigrants to Israel. It literally means "those who ascended", thereby implying a spiritual dimension to the worldly act of migration to Israel. It is not used for immigrants to any other place but Israel.

⁵ M. Tolts, *Demography of the Contemporary Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora*, in: Z. Gitelman (ed.), *The New Jewish Diaspora, Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel and Germany*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey 2016, p. 24.

adjusting to life in Israel because, as sociologist Larissa Remennick points out, the immigrants'

feelings of social displacement were augmented by an overarching sense of insecurity—financial (due to unstable income and mounting debts), physical (reflecting ongoing military conflict and acts of terror), and psychological (reflecting poor command of Hebrew, misunderstanding of local norms, and loss of support networks)⁶.

What made things worse is the fact that the newcomers had to confront these issues at a time of military conflict and looming death by gas.

On the level of plot, *Yana's Friends* follows the lives of two immigrant families from the Soviet Union in their attempt to integrate into Israeli society during the uproar of the first Gulf War. The first couple, pregnant Yana and her husband Fima, are forced because of the housing shortage and general lack of funds to share their living space with a local, Hebrew-speaking bohemian, Eli. In an ironic twist of fate, the couple returns to the mode of living of the typical Soviet communal apartment, a cultural site Svetlana Boym describes as a "microcosm, a nonidealized image of Soviet society in miniature"⁷. The second family is multi-generational, composed of Alik and Masha, their infant child, and Masha's paralyzed war-veteran father, Yitzhak. Because of quotidian challenges and economic destitution, both families lose their moral compass. Ignoring his wife's protests, Alik puts his paralyzed father-in-law, a decorated World War II veteran, on the streets of Tel Aviv to beg for money, while Yana's husband, Fima, flees Israel with the financial stipend ("absorption basket") that the couple receive from the State of Israel for their first year in the country, leaving his pregnant spouse utterly alone in a country where she knows no one.

It is remarkable that out of the large cast of characters — eight are immigrants from the USSR, one is native Israeli (*sabra*) — none is especially appealing, except the Israeli Eli. On top of that, Israel is portrayed as an utterly fragmented country, stratified along linguistic and cultural lines, with a clear segregation between Hebrew and Russian speakers. In fact, the two groups hardly intersect and when they do — at least within the film — the encounter tends to result in verbal abuse and physical violence.

⁶ L. Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey 2012, p. 56.

⁷ S. Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 130.

The film does not try to play down hate speech and xenophobia. On the contrary, it amplifies these prejudiced voices, and we often hear statements like: “Why did they bring all these psychos [referring to Soviet immigrants] to our country” and “That’s how you behave, after all that the country did for you, after all the things it gave you? And what do you do? Just take as much as you can and run away”. The hostility towards the newcomers, both among *sabras* and the Russian-speaking Jews who arrived at Israel in previous waves of immigration, is ubiquitous.

It is surprising that Kaplun — who himself arrived in Israel from the USSR in 1980 — does so little to present an alternative snapshot of Israel’s Russian-speaking community. Instead, the film portrays post-Soviet newcomers as the disruptive force that ruptures local harmony in Israel. To add insult to injury, all the charges against the immigrants, even in the xenophobic form quoted above, appear to be justified within the framework of the film. For instance, when the Israeli passerby bemoans all the “psychos” that this wave of migration brought to Israel, his ire is completely justified. After all, he has just been accosted by a drunken Russophone accordion player who aggressively demands payment for his music. Likewise, when an airport security officer goes on a xenophobic rant on post-Soviet immigrants who try to steal as much as they can and then flee the country, his assertions once again ring painfully true. After all, this is precisely what Yana’s husband did at the start of the film — he steals the money the state gave him and Yana for their first year in the new country and flees to the Soviet Union. In this configuration, *Yana’s Friends* seems to tacitly justify the local regime of hostility towards the immigrants that in fact characterized Israel during that time.

In her work on the representation of Russian-speaking Jews in Israel and Germany, Nelly Elias asserts:

During the 1990s, Israeli citizens’ attitudes towards Russian-speaking immigrants steadily worsened, bordering on the hostile. [...] This tendency was further exacerbated and intensified by the Israeli media that often accused the immigrants of involvement in prostitution and organized crime and falsifying documents attesting to their Jewish origin⁸.

In this context of social hostility, it is unclear why *Yana’s Friends* does so little to dispel these pernicious stereotypes. The director ponders this issue in the Hebrew-language interview with the Israeli newspaper “Haaretz”:

⁸ N. Elias, *Coming Home: Media and Returning Diaspora in Israel and Germany*, State University of New York Press, New York 2008, s. 19.

In my opinion, the frustrations that immigrants feel in the new place of residence result, in most cases, because they project the pain they feel as a result of losing their roots to the new environment. Of course, there are also objective difficulties, but it is much more difficult to find the strength to deal with the fact that your roots are gone and you know that the return to the place you are coming from is impossible⁹.

With this statement, Kaplun casually disregards the rational basis for the distress immigrants feel in the new environment — namely, the palpable cultural, social, economic, and linguistic hardships that result from dislocation and migration to a new country. Instead, he chooses to explain that distress as an inability to deal with the phantom pain of amputated roots (fault #1), which is in turn externalized and “projected” onto a new environment (fault #2). In other words, this adjudicating statement not only rebukes the newcomers by “explaining” their spiteful nature but also clears all responsibility from the government and the local population, both of which are conveniently absent from his thoughts. Instead, the phantom pain and nostalgia seem to be the root cause of the migrants’ “poor behavior”.

POETICS AND POLITICS OF ROMANTIC COMEDIES

Considering the heartbreak and destitution so many ex-Soviet characters endure in the film (abortion, divorce, poverty, death of a child, war trauma, homelessness, alcoholism), the director’s choice of the genre with which to frame this material — correctly identified as a “romantic comedy” with some elements of melodrama by Gershenson and Hudson — is at first glance surprising¹⁰. Indeed, there is a certain awkwardness about framing a narrative of immigrant pain and hardship as a neatly wrapped romantic comedy, a genre that is traditionally associated with an uncomplicated, passive, and escapist cinematic experience where uncomfortable images are increasingly airbrushed and left out of the narrative. Although counterintuitive, the genre choice tracks if we consider how, according to Celestino Deleyto, romantic comedies operate — by carving “a special space outside history... which shelters the lovers from the dangers that the social space represents”¹¹. This is precisely what happens in *Yana’s Friends*.

⁹ D. Tsimerman, *Ha-chaverim shel yana*, “Haaretz”, 4 November 1999.

¹⁰ O. Gershenson, D. Hudson, *New Immigrant, Old Story: Framing Russians on the Israeli Screen*, “Journal of Film and Video”, vol. 60, no. 3–4, p. 26.

¹¹ C. Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2009, p. 113.

The structure of romantic comedy allows Kaplun to construct a heterotopia, where the full spectrum of social problems that ex-Soviet Jews face in Israel after immigration could be explored in a harmless and trigger-free manner.

While I agree with McDonald that “conflicting pulls of realism and fantasy are operating” in romantic comedies, I believe that the realist pull in *Yana’s Friends* — namely the historical reality of the Gulf War and the social problems of Russian-speaking Jews — is strongly downplayed¹². This is because cinematic genres predetermine the affective disposition of the audience, its horizon of expectation, and the mode with which cinematic images would be consumed. Therefore, trained like Pavlov’s dog, the audience automatically downplays the significance of social, political, and economic misfortunes that are featured in romantic comedies because they know that nothing bad happens in such films. Even when disaster strikes, it usually happens at the start of the film to allow the protagonist to reclaim their good fortune by the film’s end. For this reason, social issues that are found in romantic comedies (the “pull of realism”, to borrow McDonald’s terminology) are increasingly devoid of ideology — they are simply there to help the narrative to unfold and the couple to couple.

Ultimately, to give the audience the snuggly product it desires, to Adorno and Horkheimer’s despair, romantic comedies must gloss over the main conflicts that they bear witness to, be they related to issues of class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, or gender norms. As a result, by the end of the film, all the obstacles and differences are casually swept under the rug. In the case of *Yana’s Friends*, both the traumatic military attack during the Gulf War that exposed the country’s vulnerability and the complex challenges of post-Soviet migration to Israel are stripped of their extracinematic significance. The film maps its large cast of characters onto the historical events of the first Gulf War and the bombing of Tel Aviv in the manner of a classic historical novel in which the narrative resolution of personal challenges and assimilation into the social environment is deferred until the historical resolution is achieved. Thus, *Yana’s Friends* reaches its climax during the Iraqi air raid on South Tel Aviv which, within the structure of the film, merely functions to facilitate the couple’s intercourse and provide comic relief when Yana and Eli are having sex wearing nothing but gasmasks. In so doing, real-life dangers and urgent social issues become cozy and viewer-friendly within the structure of the film.

¹² T. Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007, p. 8.

Additional reason Kaplun might have chosen to cloak the immigrants' challenges in Israel in the garb of a romantic comedy might relate to the genre's underlying tendency to endorse the ideology of social integration¹³. In *Film Genre and the Genre Film*, Thomas Schatz argues that romantic and screwball comedies are often hinged on the conflict

between the values, attitudes, and actions of its principal characters and the "civilized" setting they inhabit. Conflict in these genres [...] generally animated by a "doubled" hero — usually a romantic couple whose courtship is complicated and eventually ideologically resolved"¹⁴.

This is precisely the narrative and ideological arc of *Yana's Friends*. The film is punctuated by a conflict between immigrants and the "civilized" setting they inhabit — the State of Israel — to which the newcomers are expected to assimilate. In the Zionist key, the newcomers are expected to break with the culture and tradition of the diaspora, cut their ties to their native tongue, and reinvent themselves as full-fledged Israelis. The film stages this sanctioned ideological progression. At first, Yana is a foreign Russian woman with a husband, a child in her belly, and a Russian tongue in her mouth. At the end of the film, both her child and her husband are negated (clearing the space for the heroine's heteronormative and reproductive future in Israel), she is dating a Hebrew man and is rather proficient in Hebrew. This completes her Zionist transformation of shedding diasporic foreignness and donning a new identity as a full-fledged Israeli.

DIFFERENT MODES OF RECEPTION

As mentioned above, *Yana's Friends* achieved an unprecedented degree of popular and critical success in Israel. Sami Michael, a prominent Hebrew-language writer, called it "one of the most popular Israeli films of the last 10 years"¹⁵. He does not exaggerate. At the Ophir Awards, *Yana's Friends* was nominated for fifteen awards in fourteen categories and took home ten, including the coveted Best Film, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Script, and Best

¹³ For a discussion of the *chernukha* genre in the late- and post-Soviet contexts, see: S. Graham, *Chernukha and Russian Film*, "Studies in Slavic Culture" 2000, no. 1, pp. 9–27.

¹⁴ T. Schatz, *Film Genre and the Genre Film*, in: L. Braudy, M. Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 697.

¹⁵ S. Michael, *Sadam Hussein ve ima sheli*, "Haaretz", 4 June 2003, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.886575> [23.10.2021].

Director. The remarkable success illustrates that despite the predominantly Russian-speaking cast, director, screenwriter, and cultural references, *Yana's Friends* had struck a chord with the Israeli audience. In fact, the film's producers — Moshe Levinson, Mark Rosenbaum, Einat Bikel, and Uri Sabag — are all non-Russian Israelis. The funding was also assembled locally without international or Russian assistance—it was financed entirely by the *Keren kolnoa ha-Israeli* (Israeli Cinema Fund), *Rashut hashidur* (Israel Broadcasting Authority), and with the aid of Amir Geva, a prominent Israeli producer.

It is therefore surprising that a film set entirely in Israel and that focuses on Israeli history in the early 1990s has never been treated as an “Israeli film” by either Russian or Israeli film critics. Most attempt to trace the film's genealogy to the director's Russian heritage, disregarding the fact that Kaplun had left the Soviet Union nineteen years ago, studied at Tel Aviv University, and emerged as a film practitioner in Israel as early as 1985 with his short film, *Solo for Tuba*. Nevertheless, *Yana's Friends* has been interpreted by the Israeli critics as an expression of the so-called “Russian soul” and as a continuation of the classical Russian cinematic tradition. Some reviewers compared it to Maxim Gorky's play *The Lower Depth* (*Na dne*, 1902) and Mikhail Bulgakov's celebrated novel, *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 1940/1967). Another went as far as to proclaim, rather bombastically, that “despite being set in Israel, *Yana's Friends* is not an Israeli film in almost any way”¹⁶. While fascinating, these parallels are not particularly helpful in explaining the immense popularity that *Yana's Friends* enjoyed among the Hebrew-speaking public and critics.

Reception in the Russian Federation was more tepid. Sergey Kuznetsov, one of Russia's leading film critics, characterized *Yana's Friends* with the following:

Some of my friends left the screening unhappy with the film and in disagreement with the jury's decision to award *Yana's Friends* the highest prize at the festival [Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic]. I appreciated the film [...] for its simplicity lack of ambition to shoot some “Great Drama” (*Bol'shoe kino*). In that way, Kaplun is a type of Israeli Ryazanov. The film was a little sad at times, and a little funny at other times¹⁷.

Lidia Maslova's review in *Kommersant* was less generous:

Representing the hopeless lives of Russian immigrants in Israel in rosy colors and unique Odessa humor, Kaplun tries to mimic the idiosyncratic style of Emir

¹⁶ *Israel is Our Home*, “Yediot Ahronoth”, October 29, 1999, in: *Lashon, Hevra, Ve'Tarbut*, M. Muchnik (ed.), Open University of Israel, Ra'anana 2002.

¹⁷ S. Kuznetsov, *Kul'turnii Gid*, “Russkii Zhurnal”, July 30, 1999, <http://old.russ.ru/culture/guide/19990730-pr.html> [27.02.2017].

Kusturica or temperament of Pedro Almodovar. The only difference is that his worldview is much more trivial and sentimental¹⁸.

The review on Russia's "Channel One" ("Pervyi kanal") was the most crushing:

The film is naive, emotional, rather clumsy and very weak in terms of acting [...] What's interesting, however, is not the film but the fact that the director, Arik Kaplun, is our former compatriot. Twenty years ago, as a 17-year-old boy, he completed his entrance exam to VGIK [The Russian State University of Cinematography]. Convinced that as a Jew he had no chance of getting in, he left for Israel right after the exam without waiting for results. In Israel, he had learned that was actually admitted to VGIK [but he could not travel back to the Soviet Union]. Twenty years later, he made his cinematic debut with *Yana's Friends*. It turns out that twenty years have passed in vain¹⁹.

The only positive review of the film was authored by Otar Iosseliani in *Obshchaia gazeta*, who characterized *Yana's Friends* as a "remarkable, soft, kind, and surprisingly humane film [...] that is filmed in the best traditions of our former comedies", alluding to the famous late-Soviet comedies by Eldar Ryazanov²⁰. While these reviewers disagree in their assessments of the film, they all make a similar conceptual move, stretching an imaginary line from the Soviet/Russian cinematic tradition to *Yana's Friends*, whether by way of Ryazanov, Bulgakov, Gorky, Odessa humor, or counterfactual history of what could have been. Curiously, none of these reviewers see *Yana's Friends* as part of Israeli cinematic culture, history, or aesthetic tradition. For some reviews, the film's Soviet/Russian resonance is something positive, for others negative — but none can look past it.

Olga Gershenson proposes a different way of looking at *Yana's Friends* by placing it within Hamid Naficy's conceptual framework of "accented cinema". Accented cinema is an analytical category that brings together films made by "diasporic and exilic subjects [whose accent] emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes"²¹. While I do not dispute *Yana's Friends'* tangible links to accented cinema, I would like to propose a small modification to both Naficy and Gershenson's

¹⁸ L. Maslova, *The Immigrant is Singing about Jews*, "Kommersant", February 16, 2001, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/168662> [27.02.2017].

¹⁹ "Channel One" ("Pervyi kanal"), 9 November, 2001, <http://www.1tv.ru/public/print/pi13081> [23.10.2021].

²⁰ O. Iosseliani, *Vpechatleniya Nedeli*, "Obschaya Gazeta", March 14, 2002, <http://www.pressarchive.ru/obschaya-gazeta/2002/03/14/262658.html> [27.02.2017].

²¹ H. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2001, p. 4.

assessment of accented cinema today. For Naficy, accented films “work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices”, “operate independently, outside the studio system or the mainstream film industries”, and “are not neatly resolved by familiar narrative and generic schemas”²². Elsewhere, Naficy notes that two of the most important characteristics of accented cinema are experimental/idiosyncratic cinematic style and anti-establishment/deterritorialized mode of production²³.

Yana's Friends — a film that comfortably occupies the generic terrain of a romantic comedy, uses “love conquers all” formula as its *deus-ex-machina*, and is produced on the dime of the Israeli Cinema Fund — represents a new stage in the development of accented cinema not elaborated by Naficy or Gershenson. The specificity of this stage lies in the fact that its practitioners produce not cinema of the margin with respect to style or mode of production but a popular cinema of the center attuned to the demands of the market. What makes *Yana's Friends* such a successful *Israeli* film is its ability to package Russianness in a consumable and easily digestible way by adhering to Israeli expectations of what “other” places and people look like. This is precisely why Russian speakers are portrayed in the film as one-dimensional drunkards and criminals who disrupt local harmony. Ultimately, by reproducing the local regime of hostility toward Soviet immigrants that characterized popular and official discourses in Israel during the 1990s, the film illustrates how tapping into Israel’s multicultural climate from the majoritarian point of view can be converted into commercial and critical success and economic gain, even at the risk of capitalizing on a communal suffering and exporting an easily digested semblance of “authenticity” to the dominant Israeli audience.

On the level of plot, *Yana's Friends* propagates a very stable message in concert with the Zionist ideology. The overarching point of view of the film is that of the state and not of the immigrant community. As a result, the film can be seen as a prescriptive manual for the social integration of Russian-speaking immigrants. The fate of the titular character illustrates this tendency. Despite her extraordinary stressful situation — her husband just left her, took all their money, she lives in an unfamiliar country, expecting a child, while misses are shelling her country — she displays very little longing for the home she left behind and her inner world is left almost entirely unexplored. Instead, after a short deliberation, she

²² Ibidem, p. 10.

²³ Ibidem, p. 26.

stands on her own feet, symbolically aborts the baby of her runaway husband, and embarks on a new relationship with the Israeli Eli. In so doing, Yana demonstrates by example that no matter how difficult immigration gets, one must keep going to earn a happy ending.

The emotional gaps in *Yana's Friends* are a by-product of the multicultural bargain: in return for political allegiance, ethnic groups gain recognition, resources, and license to express some elements of their cultural traditions such as ethnic food, music, arts, holidays, and crafts. Yet they are also expected to be silent regarding much of the real pain of migration. To borrow the words of Slavoj Žižek, liberal multiculturalism can only accept otherness

deprived of its substance — like the multitude of 'ethnic cuisines' in a contemporary megapolis; however, any 'real' Other is instantly denounced for its 'fundamentalism', since [...] the 'real Other' is by definition 'patriarchal', 'violent', never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs²⁴.

A similar point was made by the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her celebrated TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story", she argues that contemporary cultural industry has turned an "ethnic story" into a nicely packaged, monolithic "single story" that is devoid of substance, contradictions, and that caters to the dominant culture. In these cultural works, she argues, there is a tendency to "show a people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become"²⁵. In other words, both Žižek and Adichie imply that liberal multicultural is only interested in the cultural difference that can be easily integrated into the workings of global capitalism, while all else is excluded, flattened, and misconstrued. Rather than expressing the complex and contradictory voices of the post-Soviet community in Israel, *Yana's Friends* savvily converts the cultural and historical experience of Russian-speaking Jews in Israel into profit, while obscuring the deep-seated suffering that takes place behind the scenes and the violence that the multicultural ethos, including the Zionist one, inflicts on immigrants. Ultimately, Kaplun is happy to tap into Israeli model of commercial, popular filmmaking that offers its audience an uncomplicated narrative of love and melodrama. In so doing, however, Israeli films like *Yana's Friends* obfuscate many facets of the Russian-Israeli experience that are left unexplored in their storylines.

²⁴ S. Žižek, *Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism*, "New Left Review" 1997, 1/ 225, p. 28.

²⁵ Ch.N. Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, "Ted Talk", July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en [23.10.2021].

CONCLUSION

Concluding his discussion of romantic comedies, Schatz writes: “[t]he suggestion of living happily ever after tends to gloss over the inevitable loss associated with each character’s compromise. What is celebrated is the collective value of their integration into an idealized social unit”²⁶. This idea of glossing over the inevitable loss and compromise is strongly present in *Yana’s Friends*, a film that implicitly restages the Zionist teleological plea to immigrants in Israel to abandon their native languages, cultures, and identities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Hebrew-speaking audience and critics unanimously loved the film while the Russophone ones, judging by their tepid reception, were much less enthusiastic. Produced from the dominant point of view of Israeli society, *Yana Friends* correctly identifies the dominant trends of Israeli cinematic tradition during the 1990s, when multiculturalism and diversity became “master plots” of contemporary Israeli literature and visual culture²⁷. However, the traumatic experiences of the Russian-speaking community in the film have been flattened by the dominant Israeli/Zionist gaze so that ultimately, the film better serves Israel’s mainstream Hebrew-speaking audience. The film neither undertakes a structural analysis of the hostility towards the Russian-speaking community in Israel nor attempts to complicate a stereotypic view of Russian speakers as sexualized women and criminal men. Instead, it presents a market-tested story of romance and cultural assimilation that is in sync with the Israeli audience²⁸. It remains to be seen when new narratives about the Russian-speaking community will emerge in Israeli culture, narratives that would be able to embrace and synthesize all the complexities of this community’s historical experiences in Israel after immigration.

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²⁶ Th. Schatz, *Film Genre and the Genre Film*, in: *Film Theory and Criticism*, L. Braudy, M. Cohen (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 701.

²⁷ During that time, a record number of outsiders were finding representation on the Israeli screen, including Palestinians, women, Haredim, Mizrahi Jews, Post-Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, asylum seekers, and sexual minorities.

²⁸ On the marketability of ethnic stories in the global book market, see: L. Ryoko Wakamiya, *Tell Me Your Story: Recent Russian-American Writing*, in: K. Platt (ed.), *Global Russian Cultures*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2019, 135–151. and Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. New York: One World, 2020, pp. 47–51.

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