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Russophone Cinema Israel
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Russophone Israeli Cinema: "Accented", Post-Soviet, Transnational, Postnational?

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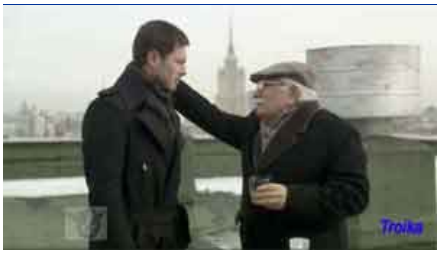
This issue focuses on Russophone cinema in Israel, i.e., films made by and about ex-Soviet Israelis in Israel and elsewhere. Our work on this publication began well before Russia 's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Even if the current war has little bearing on the articles and reviews that are collected here, it is not at all surprising that this particularly horrifying context leads, inter alia, to reflections on cinema production within a Russian context. These reflections also need to be extended to how we study post-communist cinema more generally.



For example, what terminology do we adopt because of the fact that two of the largest post-Soviet nations are at war with each other? Can we still talk about a "post-Soviet" or post-communist cinema? Embedded in these terms was a notion of a shared identity that came as a consequence of having lived under Soviet communism. The best illustration of a shared sentiment among post-Soviets is evident in Svetlana Alexievich's book, *Vremya sekond khend*/*Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013), whose central theme is the loss of a common community and a functioning civil society after the fall of communism. Tellingly, Alexievich's authorship is currently being investigated for extremism by Belarusian authorities, which points to the fact that this post-Soviet sharedness has been broken by the Russian invasion of Ukraine (perpetrated in part from Belarus).

While there is a shared interest in the same geographical territory, the respective claims to this very same territory are altogether different. Thus, we are experiencing a return of geopolitical value systems that are mutually incompatible. There is nothing 'post–' left in this system. Rather we are facing a system that has returned to Cold War standards with a Russian Federation that resembles a neo-Soviet republic more and more. This means that we as film scholars cannot remain impartial but have to name nationalistic propaganda for what it is when we see it.

Furthermore, if the system has indeed returned to a geopolitical value mode, we must now look underground to find films and filmmakers to write about, or, indeed, look outside the Russian Federation to excavate compelling 'Russian' cinemas – e.g., the Russophone cinema in Israel. Here we will likely find elaborations of the current military conflict present in future films, maybe reflected in new character development, but it will be incorporated into the cinematic text in an undisguised fashion because of the non-Russian context of production.

If the idea of a shared post-Soviet identity is being reformulated through Russia 's military intervention, then the concept of transnational cinema is also affected by the war in Ukraine, since the war can be seen as a culmination of rising nationalism in both Russia and Ukraine. The connection between the fall of communism and the rise of nationalism has been elaborated upon by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes in *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (2019), but what are the values of returning to transnational cinema? Surely the illiberal tendencies, such as standing against human rights, civil society and legal procedures (Krastev and Holmes 2019: 65), are a reflection of the failure of transnationalism and ideas about post-national belonging! On the contrary, when nationalism is on the rise, it is particularly fruitful to examine transnational identities and multi-layered belonging, because these transnational formulations or articulations of selves will always complicate core ideas of nation and national identity. Because of impure constellations from a peripheral position, the core and purist definitions are questioned and subverted.

Revisiting Transnational Cinema

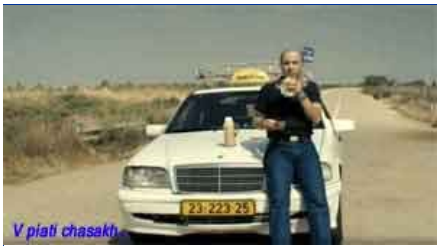
Transnational cinema arrived in film studies in the early 2000s as a way of interrogating the limitations of national cinema (see Higbee and Lim 2010: 8; and Lim 2019). Transnational cinema encompasses more than one national cinema (Lu 1997; Nestingen & Elkington 2005) and is different from international cinema, which is often associated with popular and global film productions. Transnational films are produced, distributed and screened in the shadows of national and mainstream cinema, being in a bi- or multilateral relationship between two or more countries. Russophone cinema in Israel is a good example of a transnational cinema where both nationality and language play a defining role. It is framed as part of Israeli cinema, where Russian speaking characters feature prominently.

Transnational cinema quickly became focused on the cinema of migration, diaspora and exile (Naficy 2001). In amplifying specific features of transnational cinema, there was also a tendency to lean on the post-national, a situation where the importance of nations would decrease as the world would be more and more entangled through international trade and communication. As Ezra and Rowden (2006: 5) write, ' [u]ltimately, the conceptual force of a term like transnationalism is determined by a

number of factors, ranging from the permeability of national borders (itself determined by local and global political and economic conditions) to the physical or virtual mobility of those who cross them ' . Together with advances in digital technology, neoliberal economics and global travel, transnational cinema was seen as evidently moving towards the same absolute objective of economic growth and liberal democracy. With Russia 's aggression against Ukraine, the idea of the end of history, promoted by Fukuyama in the early 1990s, that trade and travel would lead to eradication of nationalism, has been indefinitely postponed. Several decades after, we are witnessing the return of hard national borders based on a political thinking that seeks to reverse neoliberalism.

However, in this political climate of illiberalism, it makes sense to return to transnationalism as a place of critique of banal (trans)nationalism (Esfandiary 2012: 103). We would like to argue that, even if we are currently in an era of renewed emphasis on the clashes of geopolitical spheres, transnationalism can regain some of its original strength by countering imperial/colonial nationalism. Transnationalism exists today without its grandiose post-national package and firmly within the *umheimlich*-ness of becoming diasporic (Ezra & Rowden, 2006: 11). In this sense, Russophone cinema in Israel may function as an example of cinema that works across and in-between neocolonial and nationalistic configurations, which absorb spillovers from essentialist demarcations of belongings and displace large populations into new conflicts and struggles between assimilation and diversity. Furthermore, giving attention to Israeli Russophone cinema also involves asking questions about future Russophone cinemas. Are we going to see a new rise of "Russophone" cinemas in, say, Armenia or Georgia, as new waves of migration arrive there from Russia?

The term that we have chosen is Russophone cinema in Israel, or Israeli Russophone cinema, since the term is flexible enough to capture filmmaking in Israel that features or focuses on Russian-speaking Israelis, migrants or visitors. Russophone cinema in Israel springs from an investigation into periodicals in Israel published in Russian (Besprozvannaya, Rogachevskii & Timenchik 2016). In a similar vein, the focus of this special issue is on speakers of Russian (not ethnic Russians or Russian nationals per se), on and off the screen. As we will see, many filmmakers, characters and audiences come from the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries, such as Ukraine, Latvia, Georgia, and form a category used by the Israeli immigration authorities. Within this group of migrants, Russian language is a lingua franca of the transnational condition that has risen following the mass late- and post-Soviet immigration to Israel. We argue that this use of Russian in exile and migration runs counter to the nationalistic ideologies that are currently fighting in Ukraine where hard language barriers are being imposed as a demarcation of territorial belonging.



We divide Russophone cinema into three categories. The first includes the portrayal of Russian speaking characters by non-Russian Israeli directors. Here we are interested in on-screen depiction of what can be categorised as the Other, and therefore in how the Russophone community in Israel is perceived by other Israelis (Ari Folman and Ori Sivan 's 1996 film *Klara HaKdosha*, analysed in depth in our special issue, can serve as an example; *Broken Wings* by Nir Bergman, *The Schwartz Dynasty* by Amir and Shmuel Hasfari, and *Nina 's Tragedies* by Savi Gabizon, all from the 2000s, should also be mentioned). The second encompasses Israeli characters in films by Russophone filmmakers outside Israel. Here we would like to capture the image of emigration to Israel as seen by the national cinemas coming from what can be called home countries of the FSU immigrants (e.g., *Passport* by Georgii Danelia, 1990; *Ar'e* by Roman Kachanov, 2004; *Dirizher* by Pavel Lungin, 2012; and *Van Gogi* by Sergei Livnev, 2018). In the last category, we look at Russophone and other Israeli characters in films by Russophone filmmakers who have emigrated to Israel (most publications in our special issue deal precisely with this category; of those titles that did not make it in our collection this time around, Leonid Prudovsky's short *Dobro pozhalovat' i nashi soboleznovaniia*, full-length feature *V piati chasakh ot Parizha* and TV mini-series *Troika* deserve undivided attention). The perspective covered here is that of self-representation, which stands in relation to the representations of the Other in Israeli cinema as a whole.

We focus on filmmakers in a wide sense of the word. That said, we will focus on directors more than on producers, cameramen, scriptwriters and actors. Our guiding light is Hamid Naficy 's 2001 book *Accented Cinema*, in which he frames a particular filmmaking of often second generation of immigrants that finds itself on the periphery of national cinemas. These filmmakers, in Naficy 's words, work 'interstitially' in-between different nations, identities and production modes. As such, Russophone cinema in Israel is working within, alongside or against larger hegemonies, whether Russian or Israeli.

Russophone migration to Israel

For our research purposes, we identify three main waves of Russian-speaking migration to Israel. The first wave took place from the early 1880s to the late 1920s and in particular during the so-called Fourth Aliyah (1924-1928) when many immigrants from Eastern Europe settled in Palestine. As many as 67,000 people arrived during the four years from Poland, Russia, Lithuania and Romania, according to the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration in Israel. It is in this period that Zionist filmmakers took their first steps in establishing a film industry in first Palestine in the late Ottoman period and later in Mandatory Palestine under the British rule (see the section on Nathan Axelrod (1905-87), who came to Eretz Yisrael in 1926). Immigration from the Soviet Union continued after the Fourth Aliyah, but in fewer numbers. Once the Israeli state had been established in 1948, the bulk of migrants came predominantly from countries in the Middle East, such as Yemen, Iraq, Egypt and Morocco. This is important to mention, as these migrant waves have reshaped the film industry in Israel. The large influx of Oriental (or Sephardi) Jews has had a significant impact on Israeli cinema and in turn set precedent for the discourse of cinematic representation of later waves of immigrants (Shohat 1989). In particular, Sephardi filmmakers and the so-called Bourekas films have influenced the way that Russophone cinema positions itself within the landscape of screen politics in Israel (see Gershenson 2011a).

The second wave of Soviet immigrants reached the Promised Land in the early 1970s when the Soviet Union relaxed the rules against the migration to Israel. This came about when Jews in the Soviet Union were refused permission to travel. Their protests, although deemed illegal, were staged publicly, which in turn brought the

issue to international attention. These protesters were called refuseniks. Nearly 150,000 of them left the Soviet Union for Israel between 1971-1981. Even if later quite a few of those Soviet migrants travelled on from Israel to the US, many also opted for changing their destination already while in transit in Vienna (Karlikow 1983: 35).

The second wave 's impact on the Israeli filmmaking is not insignificant. Several filmmakers that are dealt with in this issue came to Israel with this wave. For example, Mikhail Kalik, who was one of the leading figures in Soviet poetic cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, emigrated in 1971 due to constraints on filmmaking in the Soviet Union (Gershenson 2011b: 173; for more on him, also see the relevant chapters in Gershenson 2013, as well as Timoshkina 2014). He made only one full-length feature film in Israel, *Three [Men] and One [Woman]* (1974), which was heavily criticised and flopped with the Israeli audiences. Yet Kalik continued to work within the film industry. He returned as a director after the fall of the Soviet Union with the film *And the Wind Returneth* (1991), produced and funded entirely by Soviet Russia (for its analysis, see Moshkin 2019: 116-22). Lena Chaplin (together with her husband Slava) settled in Israel in 1976, only to emerge in the 2000s with an intricate filmmaking style that transgresses fiction and documentary forms. Also Arik Kaplun is a filmmaker who immigrated in the late 1970s. Contrary to Kalik and Chaplin, he had no filmmaking education or experience from Russia and obtained it in Israel. Kaplun 's film *Yana 's Friends* became one of the first Russophone Israeli films that managed to reach popular audiences both inside and outside Israel.

While the Soviet Union was disintegrating as a consequence of Mikhail Gorbachev 's Glasnost and perestroika, the pressure from Jewish communities in all the (former) Soviet republics mounted in terms of wanting to emigrate. This engendered the wave known as the Big Aliyah, when about a million post-Soviet citizens would eventually settle in Israel in the course of the 1990s. As Amy Kronish writes (1996: 169), many of these immigrants arrived with great expectations that were quickly dampened, in particular, through the allocation of poor, prefabricated homes, which is reflected in *Coffee with Lemon* by Leonid Gorovets, who came to Israel in the early 1990s. Gorovets himself marks this disappointment by moving back to post-Soviet Ukraine to make films there after failing to find his place in Israel. Many contemporary filmmakers in Russophone diaspora originate from this wave – actors, directors, writers and technicians, who left the dire situation of economic collapse that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Contrary to the two previous waves, reasons for migrating to Israel had more to do with poverty than with Zionist or libertarian ideals. The post-Soviet condition simply proved unbearable.

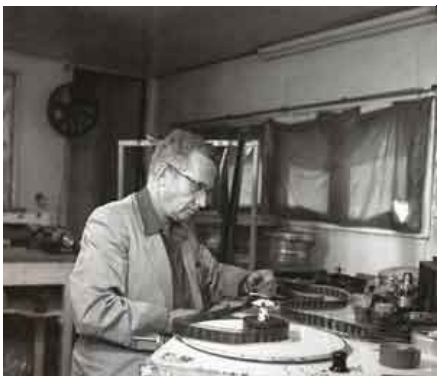
If these are the three waves as indicated by the established literature in the field (Gershenson 2011a; 2011b), then there are also indications that a fourth wave is currently in the making. The numbers of FSU migrants, especially those from Russia, have increased in recent years. In 2017, 7,260 individuals left Russia for Israel. Only two years later, the number became twice as high (see Lesnykh 2020). In the first six months of 2022, as many as 16,600 Russians emigrated to Israel (Liudi begut 2022). Overall, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the migrant figures from Russia are comparable with those of the 1970, indicating that the current regime in Russia is seen by Jewish communities as hostile toward securing diversity and plurality in terms of national and religious identity (to mention but two diversity aspects here). For its part, in the summer of 2022 the Russian government initiated the process of closure of the Russian offices of the Jewish immigration agency Sochnut which has been operating in Russia since the early 1990s (Liudi begut 2022).

Russia 's recent all-out war on Ukraine can only heighten this perception and more people are likely to emigrate in the near future (in addition to millions of Ukrainians, displaced and dispersed all over Europe). However, as each migrant wave to Israel has its own specificities, so does this Putin-induced wave. It has for example been reported that some Russian Jews actually travel back to Russia once they have received their Israeli passports (Klein 2022), suggesting an uncertainty about the future development and outcome of the war. It is also worth noting that the current migrant wave mostly consists of 'middle-class people working in creative professions' (Boutsko 2022) and 'hi-tech fields' (Klein 2022), which presumably bodes well for Russophone cinema in Israel. That said, 50% more migrants to Israel apparently come from Ukraine now (Maltz 2022). These immigrants may not necessarily desire a strong family belonging to a Russian speaking community.

The beginnings of Israeli Russophone cinema

A part of the history of Russophone cinema in Israel that will be absent from this special issue is the manifestations of Russian-speaking filmmakers in early Israeli cinema. The relationship between Soviet Jewish settlers in Palestine and the Soviet Union is less well researched than other more contemporary periods, but nonetheless important for the framework that we seek to establish. For this reason, we will briefly sketch out an outline of, and encourage more research into, this period.

Before beginning with the history of Zionist filmmaking, it is important to first touch upon the issues of Palestinian cinema. In the tradition of early cinema and the rapid speed that cinema travelled across Europe and the Middle East, the moving images of Palestine appeared as early as 1896 with the Lumière brothers' film, *Palestine 1896*. Here in the tradition of travelogue, we are introduced to an exotic location through the Western lens of Orientalism. We see a veiled Sunni Muslim woman, an orthodox Jew and an Armenian priest walking the busy streets of Jerusalem, but the focus (for Western audiences) is on the Holy Land. This is also true of the films that follow on from the Lumières, several of which centre on the life of Jesus (Kronish 1996: 5). While an Arab cinema exists outside Palestine (predominantly in Egypt, see Shafik 2007: 9) and film theatres are built during the Ottoman period, only during the British mandate we can start talking about a Palestinian cinema, whether Arab or Jewish.



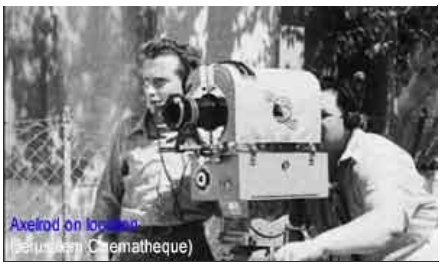
Political Zionism is closely intertwined with the advent of cinema as an artform (Tryster 1995: 1). While both Zionism and filmmaking were moulded before the late 19th century, it is in this period that both came to their own in their development. Immigrants from Russia and present-day FSU were leading figures in establishing both the Jewish state and its cinema and it is difficult to completely separate the two. For example, the actual films by Russophone filmmakers made during this period featured the effort of Jewish settlers in Palestine. Film companies in countries like the UK and Poland, but also pre-Soviet Russia, were producing propaganda films for large international Jewish organisations encouraging Jews to settle in Palestine. One example is The Mizrash company, which was founded by Noah Sokolowsky, a Russian Zionist in Odessa, to film and exhibit 'Jewish life in Palestine' (Tryster 1995: 20). Even if Mizrash 's films were not explicitly diaspora films but more recruitment and promotion films, they show how entangled Zionism is with filmmaking and migration from Russia/FSU. In fact, several of the most famous filmmakers of the

early period in Israeli cinema were Russian speakers, e.g. Yaacov Ben Dov, Nathan Axelrod and Baruch Agadati, with roots in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. All three were among the filmmakers who, according to Ella Shohat, 'filmically represented Jewish progress in Palestine from a Zionist perspective' (Shohat 1989: 18).

While early Soviet cinema excelled worldwide, cinema in Mandatory Palestine was still in its infancy. Once there, Nathan Axelrod, for example, had to abandon a project on making a feature film, and forced to make a Zionist-themed film in 'an idealised manner' (Shohat 1989: 22). Axelrod naively thought that Eretz Yisrael already had a film industry when he arrived, but found only a single photographer in Jerusalem, Yaacov Ben Dov. The two bonded by speaking Russian:

> When I made inquiries, I discovered that there was a photographer in Jerusalem by the name of Yaacov Ben Dov. I went to see him and I found a photographer 's shop with pictures on Jaffa street. To my joy Ben Dov spoke Russian. He was dubious about the business of a film industry in the country (Nathan Axelrod, in Tryster 1995: 136).

Two things are important to note from this quote. Firstly, the fact that Axelrod already had an understanding of cinema and the filmmaking that he would pursue in the host country, which is something that we can also link to the more contemporary migration of filmmakers. Secondly, there is a shared sense of community through being a Russian speaker, even though this accented voice was not palatable in the new national context where the focus was placed on fostering the New Hebrew-speaking Jew away from the European pogroms and antisemitism. Yaacov Ben Dov's dubious sentiment toward creating a film industry perhaps stems from access to other film industries with large audiences like the one in the Imperial Russia or the Soviet Union. It seems, however, that audiences other than the Jewish settlers were not included in the number of the projected spectators. It is evident that the early pioneers of filmmaking were keenly aware of the fact that Russophone cinema (even the word 'Russophone' is not entirely appropriate here, given that until the mid-1930s pre-state Israeli cinema was silent) in Mandatory Palestine would be closely tied with Zionism. This separates the pioneer filmmakers from, for example, displaced filmmakers, who are 'capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of their home and host societies' alike (Naficy 2001: 13). Paradoxically, these filmmakers emigrate to British-mandate Palestine because of racism, but once in Eretz Yisrael they can be said to produce new forms of racism by excluding the Arab population from their film industry designs. This is something that Raz Yosef notices in his study of masculinities and nationalism in Israeli cinema: "While the idea of the Jews as a race was central to debates about the construction of the Jewish body in the anti-Semitic European discourse, the racial and racist politics of the Zionist project were almost completely ignored" (Yosef 2004: 32).



Nathan Axelrod had to rethink his cinematic vision in the new host country in order for it to fit in with the Zionist vision. The early Russophone filmmakers in Israel rarely took their "home" culture as a springboard for their filmmaking. In many of the newsreels that Nathan Axelrod made over the years, not one of them seems to be focusing on the issues pertinent to Ukraine or Russia (if the online archive of Axelrod 's films is anything to go by). This is also what separates these early Russophone filmmakers from their later compatriots. Where the latter filmmakers were forced (or felt compelled) to accentuate their accentedness, as it were, the former filmmakers, such as Nathan Axelrod, had to downplay their Slavic origin (Gershenson 2011b: 165). Even later on, in Bourekas films, when appearing as Zionist pioneers, these Russian speakers are fluent and unaccented in Hebrew (Gershenson 2011a: 136), suggesting a perception of Russophone migration as identical with Zionism and Hebrew revival.

We argue that in the politics of representation in Israeli cinema, Russophone cinema, its portrayal and its filmmaking, develop from aiming at creating an integrated Jewish land where the settlers' country of origin does not play a significant role or is effaced in order to make way for a picture of unified Zionism, to something that is on a par with other immigrants, accented and in open conflict over attention and resources, as seen in one of the more recent films reviewed in our collection, *The Children of USSR* (2005).

Films of the third wave happen to occupy the majority of this special issue. While not even dreaming of encyclopedic comprehensiveness, we have nevertheless attempted to cover as many genres and angles as we possibly could, with the generous help of our gallant contributors. Docu- and comedy dramas tend to dominate our material, as (hope-inspiring) human interest stories are apparently expected to appeal to a wider audience than, for example, cinematic essays or horror movies. Still, we have managed to include, among others, a Georgian-Israeli interpretation of a Russian classic (Dover Koshashvili 's film version of Chekhov 's 'Duel ' , reviewed by Ewa Mazierska); a Latvian Jew 's inside view of his own body on an Israeli operating table (Zane Balčus's review of *Flashback* by Herz Frank); a Mountain Jew 's take on a blood feud, shot in Ukrainian Crimea (Libbie Katsev 's review of Aleksandr Shabataev 's *Jewish Vendetta*) – and, last but not least, a female gaze onto the life of the Russophone diaspora in Israel (Kathy Rivkin 's article about Lena Chaplin). The collection is concluded with two interviews, to move beyond the director-centric narrative a little: we speak to Dmitry Malinsky, a scriptwriter for the 50-episode Israeli TV series *Mezhdu strok* (by Evgeny Ruman, whose 2019 feature *Golden Voices* is reviewed in this issue by Doron Galili); and to Vladimir Friedman, the most ubiquitous Russian-speaking Israeli actor ever.

There is plenty more where it came from. We hope that Russophone Israeli cinema will be studied more consistently and systematically than it has been the case hitherto, and that our modest special issue will inspire more and more expertise on the matter.

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