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Jewish cosmopolitans on our screens: The case of *Unorthodox* (Schrader, Winger 2020)

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This article explores the relationship between cosmopolitanism, and secular and Orthodox Jewish identities in recent Jewish film and television dramas with a focus on the Netflix series *Unorthodox* (Schrader 2020). It argues that *Unorthodox* presents a cosmopolitan image of Berlin and has Jews constitute an affirmative, symbolic and embodied presence in the multicultural city. The article demonstrates how this stands in contrast to historical negative associations of Jewishness with parasitical and rootless cosmopolitans for Nazi Germany. In *Unorthodox* secular Judaism is equated with a positive form of cosmopolitanism. Nonetheless, this is dependent on a rejection of Orthodoxy; an enclosed Jewish Orthodox space comes to signify a negative counterpoint to Jewish cosmopolitanism.

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Jews and Cosmopolitanism

In this article I outline the negative historical associations of Jews with cosmopolitanism in order to frame the subsequent readings of secular and Orthodox Jews in *Unorthodox* (Schrader, Winger 2020). I argue that the text claims a positive Jewish cosmopolitanism in opposition to antisemitic historic negative associations of Jews as 'rootless cosmopolitans' in order to redefine Berlin through the re-integration of a Jewish population and reclaim the city from its Nazi past. Nonetheless, the series stages an opposition between a cosmopolitan LGBTQ inclusive Jewish secularism and an oppressive insular Haredi Orthodox Judaism. I ask whether access to a positively constructed cosmopolitanism in the series is reserved for a certain type of assimilated secular Jews, not community faith-based Jews. My reading of the series reveals that apparently inclusive representations of cosmopolitanism risk excluding members of religious minorities, and assume a narrative of LGBTQ inclusion at the expense of one-dimensional stereotypes of Orthodox communities, erasing the existence of queer religious Jews.

Jews throughout history have held a central position in theories and practice of cosmopolitanism as argued so effectively by Cathy Gelbin and Sander L. Gilman (2017) in their book *Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews*. They demonstrate 'how the Jews, however defined, come to shape the various contemporary models of the cosmopolitan and how such models, in turn, come to redefine what is understood as Jewish' (Gelbin and Gilman 2017: 5), despite their argument that contemporary theory on cosmopolitanism ignores and erases Jews (7). As the authors argue throughout the book, Jews have become either signifiers of cosmopolitan tolerance, or of evil outsiders contaminating the nation for nationalists, and the term 'cosmopolitan' occupies a privileged position in how European Jews self-identified across the ages.

In Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia Jews were demonised and cast as rootless cosmopolitans respectively (Gelbin and Gilman 2017, Azadovskii and Egorov 2002). For Hitler, Jews' apparent integration was a deception, and he cast them as 'superficial cosmopolitans, whose so-called acculturation was merely a form of cultural camouflage' (Gelbin and Gilman 2017: 158), and 'the Jew', for Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, 'is defined by the rootlessness of capital, the ability to move seamlessly across all boundaries, both geographic and moral' (Gelbin and Gilman: 164). In this way, Jews are cast as rootless, and simultaneously belonging nowhere and being everywhere, an insidious threatening monstrous fabrication that negates the realities of Jewish settled communities, embodied histories and lived experiences.

Despite knowledge of the then recent events of the Holocaust, Jews in post-war Stalinist Russia, and in particular intellectuals, also faced accusations of being anti-patriotic

and grovelling before the West, with the adjective ‘rootless’ increasingly paired with ‘cosmopolitan’ to highlight the supposed foreignness and the lack of belonging of Russian Jews, regardless of whether they were secular or religious (Azadovskii and Egorov 2002: 74). Jews were folded into notions of Western bourgeois culture, and from 1949, ‘at Stalin’s behest, Jewish writers, artists, and academics came under attack […]. Everything possible was done to ‘expose’ them, remove them, and ultimately replace them with “real” Russians of known loyalty to the regime’ (Azadovskii and Egorov 2002: 69). In these Nazi and Stalinist mythical fabrications Jews are constructed as the enemy through their association with a notion of cosmopolitanism that assumed no loyalty to their nations.

21st Century Jews as new cosmopolitans in the multicultural city on screen

In a striking contrast, in the context of a multi-cultural Berlin, the setting of *Unorthodox*, cosmopolitanism has assumed a positive and even utopian significance. What is meant by cosmopolitanism in contemporary critical theory is a much-studied area and this is not the place to rehearse debates discussed at length elsewhere (Urry 1995, Delanty 2012; Rovisco 2012; Taraborrelli 2015). Nonetheless a brief overview of associations and applications serves to illustrate how the term’s progressive usage is at the heart of an anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian world view. This progressive, positive conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism is shared by *Unorthodox* and revealed through its representations of secular (but not religious) Jews in their interactions in a multicultural Berlin, and is central to its mission to welcome back (certain) Jewish citizens as a corrective to Nazi exclusions and annihilation.

In its contemporary applied usage, cosmopolitanism includes: ‘openness to the world […] entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the Other’ (Delanty 2012: 42). Rather than searching for a purist ethno-nationalism, pleasure is taken in the encounter with difference, and societies that are cosmopolitan in outlook are more positive and desirable. This position is taken by John Urry, well-known theorist of the sociology of tourism, and is central to his category of ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism’ which presents ‘a stance of openness towards divergent experiences from different national cultures’ and ‘a search for and delight in contrasts between societies rather than a longing for uniformity or superiority’ (Urry 1995: 167). Media and screen images play their part in disseminating this cultural cosmopolitanism. Global media flows enable people to not only ‘imagine the world beyond their own locality, but to feel a kind of cosmopolitan connection to the world community’ (Molz 2011: 41). For Mette Hjort (2010: 23), ‘cosmopolitan transnationalism,’ is a site of ‘multiple belonging linked to ethnicity and various trajectories of migration [and]

becomes the basis for a form of transnationalism that is oriented toward the ideal of film as a medium capable of strengthening certain social imaginaries'. Likewise, Maria Rovisco (2013: 148) argues for the application of a cosmopolitan lens in reading films that through a focus on border crossings and mobility seek to generate compassion and empathy to encourage new relationships 'with 'others' whose access to cultural dialogue is severely limited'.[1]

This is diametrically opposed to the historical nationalist uses of the term. The above-mentioned cosmopolitan slurs levelled at Jews in specific moments in German and Soviet history were designed to prop up nationalist fantasies, fabrications which led to horrific acts of antisemitism, albeit on different scales. This is not to negate the continued presence and rise of new configurations of far-right nationalist groups across Europe, including the German AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) which continue to decry cosmopolitanism and new immigrant communities as damaging national cohesion and, in this iteration, Muslims are the religious group of people that are most under attack (Galpin and Rohe 2021).

Nonetheless, at the time of writing (2024) a 21st century media industry dominated by streaming platforms is part of a cultural landscape with an imperative to increase diversity and challenge racism including antisemitism. It is significant that *Unorthodox* is a Netflix original. The streaming platform has prioritised diversity and inclusion in its branding and its promotional material and in the staff roles it has created. A report and video promoting Netflix's values entitled 'Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix: Our First Report' (Myers 2021) features on the jobs section of its website, and viewers hear from an array of progressive job holders including the vice president of inclusion strategy, and the director of inclusion recruiting programs. In this cultural landscape Jews have once again become associated with cosmopolitanism, but in contrast to Stalinist and Nazi constructions, they have been welcomed into a positive representational fold and a multicultural body of screen images.

These representations from a Euro-American context, equate secular Jewish identity with a positive form of cosmopolitanism, and juxtapose it with a narrow interpretation of Judaic orthodoxy which must be rejected. Some recent examples that feature narratives of escape from repressive orthodoxy on screen include *Disobedience* (Lelio 2017), *My Unorthodox Life* (Mayes 2021), and *One of Us* (Ewing and Grady 2017). Even where there is a more positive representation of a Jewish faith as seen in the recent rom-com *Nobody Wants This* (Foster 2024), the series ends with Reform rabbi Noah (Adrian Brody) facing a conflict between his love life and his faith and exclusionary family,

[1] Her filmic case studies are *In This World* (Winterbottom 2002) and *Kandahar* (Waugh 2001).

and choosing to leave his job, rather than his non-Jewish girlfriend, Joanne (Kristen Bell). For these texts Jews constitute an affirmative symbolic and embodied presence in the multicultural city. Nonetheless, this is only once orthodoxy is left behind, and an enclosed ultra-orthodox space often comes to signify a negative counterpoint to Jewish cosmopolitanism. There is a long tradition of representing the orthodox community as insular and repressive, as noted by Nathan Abrams in his book *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (2012). Abrams observes that representations of the Haredi community on screen have frequently been represented from the outside with no input from the community itself, and they are either seen as an exotic other or have been subject to negative othering as a misogynistic and oppressive community (2012: 140). There are, of course, more positive screen representations of Orthodox Jewry (released after the research for Abrams book) such as *Shtisel* (2013 -) created by Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indusrsky, and *Fill the Void*, by Rama Burshtein (2012), in which the community is represented as a safe, generally loving and nurturing space, albeit with the conflicts that beset any community. It is notable that these are both Israeli productions, and these are not representations seen in commercial Euro-American productions.

The New York Williamsburg Satmar Haredi community in *Unorthodox* fits in with the more negative tradition of screen representation of religious Judaism and is a site of repression and oppression to be escaped from, with the cosmopolitan city of Berlin offering refuge to escapees. This is a text that emerges from a genre of Jewish ex-Orthodox writing chronicled by Karen Skinazi (2018), and has an authenticity lacking in representations mocking the community (Abrams 2012: 140). *Unorthodox* has its roots in Deborah Feldman's bestselling memoir *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots (2012)*, one of a series of 'off the derech' (off the path of Orthodoxy) memoirs and novels. Skinazi in her book *Women of Valor*: *Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (2018) analyses the genre of 'off the derech' texts about former Ultra-orthodox Jews who have left the community (Skinazi 2018: 30–74), in what she terms, 'a remarkably large new subgenre of Jewish literature' (32).

Unorthodox and Orthodox refusal of cosmopolitanism

Unorthodox is a highly acclaimed Netflix distributed limited series; it is a co-production by German company Real Film and writer Anna Winger's Berlin-based company Studio Airlift. It is directed by Maria Schrader and co-written by Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski, is loosely adapted from Feldman's memoir written following the popularity of her blog on her experiences and decision to leave the Satmar community

(Skinazi 2018: 39). The film's flashbacks draw from the literary memoir, while Esty's story in present day Berlin follows her escape from Williamsburg, Brooklyn and its storyline is fictional, although Feldman has indeed made Berlin her home. The series depicts the Satmar community, an isolated Yiddish speaking Orthodox community originating from Hungary.[2] As Karen Skinazi explains (2018: x) The Satmar community are one of the groupings under the term of Hasidim applied to the followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov, an eighteenth-century mystical rabbi; they are known to be particularly opposed to integration within a secular world, a theme explored in the series, and a key reason for Esty's escape.

While there are individual sympathetic religious characters such as Esty's grandmother, Babby (Dina Doron), who raised her, and even her husband Yanky (Amit Rahav), Esty's escape is explained by the fact that the community is seen as damaging and restrictive, inhibiting identity formation and creativity, and imposing arranged loveless marriages on its young. The series' compassion and empathy are for the Jews who have left the community to find freedom (Esty's mother Leah [Alex Reid], and Esty). Berlin will rescue the young Esty and her mother, while acknowledging Germany as the site of trauma for Esty's relatives and ancestors. In the *Making Unorthodox* featurette released on Netflix to accompany the series, writer Anna Winger observes, 'there's a kind of doubling back on history in this show. We have a Jewish character and in order to escape the confines of her own life she returns to the source of her community's trauma' (Melchior 2020), and in so doing, according to the thesis of the series, she closes the circle of Berlin's trauma.

This trauma is overcome through Jews inhabiting the city and building new futures, relieving Berlin of Holocaust memories. This is illustrated most clearly at the end of Episode 1 in the trip to Wannsee lake by the conservatory students. Israeli student Yael (Tamar Amit-Joseph), jokes provocatively that they should take Esty to take selfies at the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, and dismisses Esty's outraged comment that her grandparents lost their families in the camps, with 'so did half of Israel'. Esty's shock continues when they reach Wannsee lake and Robert (Aaron Altaras) points out that in the villa across the lake the Wannsee conference took place where the Nazis planned the mass murder of the Jews in all the territories they invaded (Roseman 2002). He also adds that East German guards shot anyone attempting to escape to freedom in the West in the Soviet era. Robert's response when Esty questions how they can swim

[2] Dolce (2020) explains that 'the Satmar dynasty was founded in 1905 by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum in Szatmárnémeti, Hungary, now known as Satu Mare, Romania. Some say Satu Mare, or Satmar in Yiddish, was named after St Mary; others, that it means either Big Village or Big Sea. When the Nazis occupied Hungary in 1944, the sect was almost destroyed, but Teitelbaum escaped to Brooklyn with a small group of followers, settling in Williamsburg'.

there is that ‘the lake is just a lake’. As will be seen, the trip is with a multicultural, multinational friendship group of students and this points to the message that a cosmopolitan Berlin can heal from these historical wounds; history should be known, but people should be free from the trauma of the past and live fulfilled and free lives.

The lake becomes the site of Esty’s first significant act of personal liberation, the removal of her sheitel (wig worn by Orthodox married women) as she bathes in the waters of the lake, a reference that could be compared to a baptismal rebirth in its iconography (see **Figure 1**). The scene’s significance is revealed by this beginning of her new self and in the fact that it features on the cover of a re-released edition of Feldman’s book following the series (Feldman 2020). Interestingly, the original cover of the memoir features Feldman’s long hair flowing downwards at the front, while the back points upwards at the same time to signal her liberation from the sheitel, as her natural hair appears to project her forwards. As Skinazi (2018: 41) notes, sheitels ‘comprise the visible marker of Orthodox women’s difference’. In her writing on the shietel (44–49) Skinazi draws from literature where casting off the wig symbolised liberation, as ‘in Jewish literature, the wig is anachronistic, oppressive, dehumanizing, and unfeminist’ (46), and *Unorthodox* draws from this tradition.

Figure 1: Esty removes her sheitel by Wannsee lake.

Yet, there is something troubling and contradictory about the lake’s framing as ‘just a lake’, while also signifying liberating new beginnings for the film’s Jewish protagonist, when the weight of history and the Nazis’ plan to exterminate the Jews is both foregrounded and dispensed with. There are questions to be asked of a representation that roots liberation in a 21st Century secular Berlin and harm in Orthodox Judaism, when Satmar resistance to cosmopolitanism is based on its memories of the

Holocaust. Would the lake just be a lake if Esty did not remove her sheitel? Or, would her presence as an Orthodox Jew place an unbearable weight of history on the location, and disrupt Berlin's reinvention as a cosmopolitan city? Is the series more concerned with the absolution and liberation of Berlin, or that of the Jewish people? And, is there a place for religion?

Unorthodox, then, has an ambivalent relationship with Judaism; religious Jews stand in opposition to a secular, assimilated, creative Jewish identity that must be reclaimed for Berlin to be truly cosmopolitan and heal from its own trauma as the site of the trauma of others. In this there are comparisons with the Netflix series *My Unorthodox Life* (2021) in which Julia Haart, CEO of modelling company Elite World Group, presents her narrative as one of escape from her Jewish Orthodox community in Monsey (Rockland County, north of New York City), which she describes frequently as fundamentalist, repressive and the source of personal trauma. As the antidote she offers her success story of high fashion businesswoman, sexual openness, and wealth. Rhonda Garelick (2021) critiques the series, in particular its 'splashy consumerism that resembles a Jewish version of the Kardashians' franchise'. Here too, Jewish Orthodoxy is framed as a site to escape from, and a cosmopolitan city is the site of liberation, in this case New York. This is despite the fact that Haart's ex-husband who remains in the Orthodox community appears to be a kind man and caring father, and restrictive religious life is replaced by the restrictive rules of the high fashion business (Garelick 2021), and unchecked consumerism.

Recent Netflix screen representations such as *My Unorthodox Life* and *Unorthodox* depict a US rooted community that eschews the cosmopolitanism of secular Jews and focuses on negative restrictions and fears the world outside their community due to historical cycles of antisemitism. The fact that both series prefix Orthodoxy with the negative 'un' denotes Jewish Orthodox culture in itself as something to be rejected without any attempt to consider a community from the perspective of those who choose to remain. This is in contrast to the Israeli series *Shtisel* (2013–2021), also globally distributed on Netflix, that presents the characters in the Haredi community in a positive light. Audiences are not shown a community fixating on a traumatic past, rather characters are seen to have agency within their religious structures, and the focus is on their everyday dramas, lives and loves.

The Satmar community in *Unorthodox* is cast in negatives and allows for the drama to be generated through the excitement of the escape and the subsequent hunt/search for Esty by her husband and his cousin Moishe (Jeff Wilbusch), an unethical character who has an ambivalent relationship with his community as he has a predilection for hard drinking and gambling. Cosmopolitan Berlin offers sanctuary to Esty and her

mother, Leah, who escaped due to an unbearable life with a drunken husband, and the community's inability to allow her to live as a lesbian. There is, however, no place in the city for the Satmar community featured in the series, seen in Yanky's discomfort in Berlin when searching for Esty. They, according to their representation in the series, exclude themselves, dedicate themselves to conserving the memory of the Holocaust, and see integration as inviting God's wrath. While the community is known to be isolationist, it is interesting to note that there is a growing Orthodox community in Berlin, a community that is entirely absent in the multiculturalism of the series ('Orthodox Jewish community takes hold in Berlin').

In the scenes that take place in the US, *Unorthodox* establishes Williamsburg as a world of its own, separate from any national affiliations or modern secular identity formations. As Esty tells her piano teacher in Episode 4, 'Williamsburg is not America', and this is reinforced in the first frames of the series through the eruv. An eruv is a 'man' made boundary that demarcates a geographical space usually through walls, fences, poles, and, as in the case of *Unorthodox*, wires, a demarcation that allows Orthodox Jews to follow the strict laws of the Sabbath with more ease. As Fonrobert (2005: 10) explains, 'joining an eruv community permits Jews to carry any kind of object out of and into their houses on the Sabbath' which they would be prohibited from doing without the eruv in place. Yet it is also much more than this, and the eruv is central in creating a community structure. Fonrobert notes that, 'these ritual systems (...) have a collective significance that is, for building and circumscribing communities. A neighbourhood is thus transformed into a more or less intentional community by ritualizing it or inscribing it with a ritual structure' (11). Within the series, the eruv follows the boundaries of the community that *Unorthodox* marks out as a separate space to keep the non-Orthodox world out and the Orthodox in. It serves to symbolise a world outside of the nation with its own rules, traditions and language, with the Germanic language Yiddish exclusively spoken, and reveals a Satmar space with closer links to pre-war Jewish Hungary than to present day New York.

That the opening shot is of a dangling wire (the broken eruv), followed by an explanation of what has happened by a group of Orthodox women telling Esty she can't leave her building with her bags, is then highly symbolic. It replaces the idea of community (which may have positive connotations) with themes of entrapment, restriction and conformity and adds heightened drama and a further obstacle to Esty's escape as she is forbidden from leaving with her bags as she plans her escape during the Shabbat. The enclosed nature of the Satmar Jews and mistrust of the outside world is a consistent theme throughout the flashback sequences of Williamsburg and is best illustrated in the Passover (Seder) scene in Episode 4. Esty's Zeidy (grandfather) (David

Mandelbaum) presides over the Seder, and in his speech connects the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt to other key historical moments in Jewish oppression – the Inquisition, the Khmelnitsky Uprising, the pogroms, the Nazis:

> In every generation they rise up against us. When we trusted our friends and neighbours, G-d punished us, when we trusted them and wore their clothes. When we tried to wear their clothes and speak their tongue, G-d punished us […] Now we accept who we are and that is the only way to be free.[3]

These words of Satmar Jewish identity are undermined through the presentation of the scene. Zeidy, the family patriarch, sits at the head of the long table and initially holds all the attention of his large extended family (see **Figure 2**). Yet, as he says the words, 'now we accept who we are', the camera settles on Esty, flanked by her aunt and her husband, and looking increasingly uncomfortable. As Zeidy finishes his speech with 'that is the only way to be free', Esty exits the table to head to the kitchen, before leaving the house, and then finally the country. The fact that audience identification is fully with Esty, and well established by the final episode, puts the community's idea of freedom into question. Although part of her discomfort is explained by her early pregnancy and hunger, the actions accompanying Zeidy's words cannot be ignored, and an identity forged in memories of suffering and sustained through a refusal of cosmopolitan integration and distrust of all outsiders is very firmly rejected by *Unorthodox* (both Deborah Feldman's memoirs and the Netflix series). Esty's retreat to the kitchen enhances this message. The kitchen has been prepared for Passover and is entirely covered in cellophane to ensure that no leavened bread (Hametz) is present, and while this is authentic, indeed all the orthodox Jewish practices have been painstakingly researched,[4] it is not explained and thus appears strange and alien to the non-Jewish or non-religious Jewish viewer.

Zeidy's speech is in Yiddish, as is all of the language of the Williamsburg community; a Germanic language that faced near extinction as a result of the Holocaust, and principally spoken in Hasidic communities, is brought back to life in one of the few mainstream productions to feature the language (aside from *Shtisel* with elder members of the Hasidic community speaking Yiddish, and younger members speaking Hebrew).[5]

[3] Religious Jews would not write the word God in full to prevent erasing or disrespecting God's name.

[4] In the *Making Unorthodox* film on Netflix (Melchior 2020), it is explained how Eli Rosen, an actor and Yiddish specialist was hired as a cultural guide in addition to his role as Reb Yosele in the series; his role helped to ensure authenticity in the representation of orthodox customs.

[5] Another example is *Menashe* (Weinstein, 2017), that tells the story of a Hasidic Jewish widower struggling to raise his son and facing pressures from the community to remarry.

Figure 2: Zeidy presides over the Passover gathering.

Nevertheless, and in contrast to *Shtisel*'s affectionate portrayal of its Hasidic characters, it marks the Williamsburg community as self-selecting foreigners in America. It is also primarily a language of oppression within the diegesis of *Unorthodox*. Esty's mother, Leah, refuses to allow the language to be spoken in her home as she associates it with her oppressive life in Williamsburg, insisting on English (although her fluency in Yiddish has allowed her to find work in a Jewish old age home in Berlin as a carer). Indeed, English is associated with the language of liberation and cosmopolitanism as Esty switches to accented English once she is in Berlin to speak with her international new music conservatory friends. It is noteworthy and perhaps realistic that English, not German, is the language of cosmopolitan Berlin in *Unorthodox*, despite the linguistic closeness between German and Yiddish.

This ambivalence towards Yiddish and thus towards religious Judaism where it is preserved, is seen in the final part of the series in Episode 4 when Esty sings in Yiddish in her audition for the conservatory scholarship. Her first performance is 'An die Musik' by Schubert, and sung in German, showing her willingness to be open to the outside world and to release German from the single memory of the Holocaust maintained by her Satmar relatives. It also speaks to the love of secular music that she secretly shared with her grandmother. The song is an act of liberation and she explains to the judges that she comes from a world in Williamsburg where women are not allowed to sing in public as it is considered immodest and seductive. But, it is the second song, sung in Yiddish, that moves the judges, her musician friends, her mother, and even Yanky who has tracked her down in Berlin. The song, *Mi Ban Siach* (composed by Rabbi Schneur

Zalman – 1745–1812), is sung with great passion, but it is unexplained in the narrative. It is in fact a Jewish wedding song and sung in Episode 2 by a cantor during Esty and Yanky's wedding. The Chabad (branch of Hasidism) learning site informs readers that, 'this short hymn extols the bride's modesty and fidelity, and [...] appeals to Gd to bless the bride and groom' (The Procession). As Esther Zuckerman (2020) notes, 'It's a song that should signify her bond to a man, but she's turning it into something that can extricate her from that bond, using a voice that she wouldn't have been able to use in her former world where women's singing is prohibited'. Esty's performance is disobedient, from an orthodox point of view, and speaks to her lack of modesty and infidelity, yet it is the key to her liberation, and Shira Haas is entirely compelling as she performs Esty performing a woman possessed by the music (see **Figure 3**).

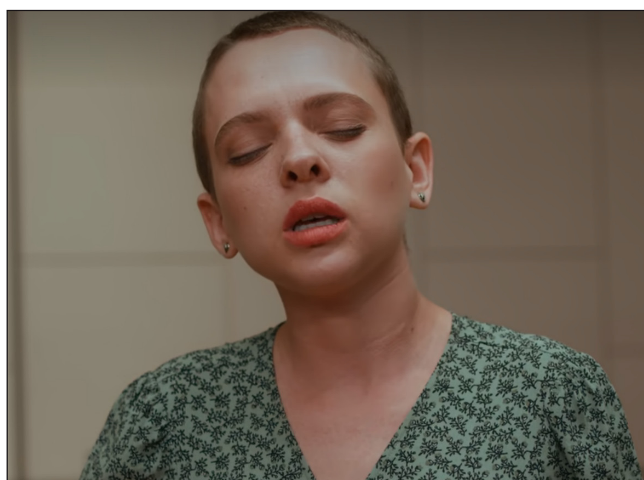

Figure 3: Esty sings *Mi Ban Siach* for her audition.

While audiences never learn if Esty is accepted into the conservatory, the way the performance impacts the judges emotionally suggests that she will be. Thus, Yiddish can and should be reclaimed through culture, but it is only granted a positive status when it is included within a cosmopolitan feminist context in a modern Berlin in the music conservatory, and removed from its religious trappings. In *Unorthodox* Yiddish is then celebrated as a cultural artefact, while its use as an everyday language is linked to conservative and outdated practices that oppress women.

Berlin Open City

Unorthodox presents a modern cosmopolitan Berlin with Jewish and queer identities at its heart. The Chalhulm music conservatory stands at the centre of this vision of Berlin.

It is run by Karim, whom we hear speaking Arabic, but whose specific national origin is not explained. His cosmopolitan function is fulfilled by the fact that he is secular, fluent in English and German, cultured, Westernised, and open-minded. In reference to the music academy that Karim presides over, Anna Winger, the series co-writer and executive producer, has noted: its inspiration is from 'the Barenboim-Said Akademie 'where Jews and Muslims play classical music together, like a whole utopia. We were inspired by this idea, as the sort of institution that could only begin in Berlin' (Bramesco 2020). The Barenboim-Said Akademie evolved from the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra founded by the Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Baremboin and the Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said in 1999, and is a strong template for the utopian cosmopolitan vision of *Unorthodox* with classical music acting as a universal language to bring people together, hosted by Germany. Their Barenboim-Said Akademie opened in Berlin in 2015, and their mission was:

> to unite young Arab and Israeli musicians [...] The two men were convinced that peace in the Middle East could not be achieved by military means, and they dedicated themselves to the search for alternative approaches to a political solution. (A Founding Vision).

The Barenboim-Said Akademie is funded by The Federal Government of Germany (operational costs) and Germany's Foreign Ministry (the scholarships), while the building has been leased to the Akademie by The State of Berlin for 99 years (Welcome).

The Chalhulm music academy in the series *Unorthodox,* like its model, the Barenboim-Said Akademie, is very much a German project that shares the image of a multicultural Germany welcoming Jews and Arabs (while extending out to other geographical regions) and inviting them to create music together to transcend national conflicts. Karim is played by Yousef 'Joe' Sweid, an actor and dancer who is Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, and this is significant despite the fact that it is unmarked, in the series' ambitions in bringing together individuals from past and present conflict zones. The students who come to form Esty's friendship group reveal a post-national Berlin with music and creativity at its centre: Robert is the only character from Berlin; Ahmed (Langston Uibel) is from Nigeria and is gay; Dasia (Safinaz Sattar) is from Yemen, but grew up in Munich, and Yael is Israeli. The national identity of each character has a symbolic function in the presentation of a post-national, cosmopolitan Berlin. Dasia and Ahmed with origins in the global south, represent a Berlin that acts as a sanctuary to those who need it. The fact that Robert becomes Esty's boyfriend signifies Berlin opening its heart to this refugee from a Jewish Haredi background, and is a symbolic homecoming for a member of a community that that experienced genocide by the Nazi regime. Their sexual encounter

following a night out in a club is the first that Esty has had from desire not duty, and the first that she has taken pleasure in. This reinforces the messages that both she and Berlin can heal through a symbiotic relationship built on love and desire. As Deborah Feldman observes in *Making Unorthodox* (Melchior 2020), Berlin, where she has made her home following her own escape from her Haredi background, has seen the creation of a new diaspora as more and more Israeli and American Jews are coming to Berlin in what she describes as a movement. Winger and co-writer Alexa Karolinski are both Jewish and living in Berlin, and Winger has spoken of the need to create a story of Jewish Berlin told and acted by Jews: 'In every respect this is a very integrated diaspora project. Jews of all stripes were involved in making this TV show' (Meza 2020).[6]

The present-day Berlin celebrated in *Unorthodox* welcomes Jews, but only a certain type of cultural Jew. Nathan Abrams (2012: 134) perceptively notes the distinction in the history of film 'between Jewishness as racial, ethnic, political and cultural identities, and Judaism as a religion and set of beliefs, behaviours and values', and the series places value on the former at the expense of the latter. This point connects to the presence of Yael in the series; Yael, a secular Israeli, is an attractive, talented violinist and is entirely at home in the Berlin of the music conservatory and within her diverse circle of friends. As an Orthodox Jew, Esty is initially 'other' to her, part of 'the lunatic fringe' as she tells her friends, but as Esty sheds her religious garb and embraces a more cosmopolitan outlook, the two can become friends. Yael thus represents a Jewish identity that can be accommodated within a cosmopolitan Berlin, that significantly is not religious. Her Middle Eastern politics are unknown and importantly she is not coded as a Zionist nationalist. As Gelbin and Gilman (2017: 70) have noted 'cosmopolitanism formed one of the intellectual sources of early Zionism', and was at the heart of Theodor Herzl's ideas of Zionism (75). Nonetheless, despite the tourist promotion of Tel Aviv as a modern cosmopolitan city, 'the strongly nationalistic tone of modern Zionism, which has dismissed and continues to dismiss the cosmopolitan as an aberration of Jewish identity, has paralleled much of the recent general movement against a positive cosmopolitan identity, at least for Jews' (Gelbin and Gilman 2017: 7). This nationalistic Zionism has parallels but important differences with anti-Zionist Haredi communities, whose anti-cosmopolitan stance is rooted in the preservation of traumatic memory and rebuilding and maintaining an 'uncontaminated' religious identity whether that be in Williamsburg, Antwerp, North London, or Jerusalem. That Yael is not marked as a nationalist Zionist and that Esty rejects her ultra-Orthodox identity, means that both are accepted to form part of cosmopolitan Berlin.

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[6] It is interesting to note that this choice even extends to the non-Jewish Robert played by Jewish actor Aaron Altaras.

The same cannot be said for Yanky, who, while treated sympathetically, cannot find a home in Berlin; his clumsy attempts to navigate the modern European city are given a comedic treatment as he flounders when away from his sheltered Satmar community (despite that community being located in New York). While he dramatically cuts off his payot (sidelocks) in an attempt to reunite with Esty in the final episode of the series, there is now too much distance between them, and their separation and awkwardness in the German city suggests that as a Haredi Jew there is no place for him in a cosmopolitan Berlin. It is also noteworthy that the prime antagonist in the series is Moishe, a flawed member of the Satmar community, yet there is no mention of the greatest threat to cosmopolitan Berlin that of the resurgent far right, ultranationalist AfD.

While there is much to commend *Unorthodox* for in its desires to bring together communities and present a welcoming cosmopolitan city, parts of the narrative rest on a form of cosmopolitanism that lacks cultural and religious sensitivity. At the beginning of Episode 2, Karim discovers homeless Esty sleeping at the conservatory; he takes pity on her and takes her for breakfast to a local caf**é**. He buys her a ham and cheese croissant and viewers watch as Esty learns that she has just unwittingly eaten ham, forbidden under the laws of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws), and runs outside to await whatever punishment is in store for her. Karim looks on sympathetically, but unconcerned as she returns surprised that the ham did not make her sick, and he follows her explanation that her community has many rules, with the comment, 'in music you have to break the rules to make a masterpiece'. While we do not know Karim's religious affiliation, the fact that he is from an unspecified Arab country means that he is likely to be of Muslim heritage, or if of Christian heritage at least familiar with the rules of Halal which share the prohibition of eating any pig products. In this scene a refusal to eat pork is represented as a rather silly superstition rather than a deep religious conviction shared by two of the world's Abrahamic religions. It reveals that the commonly accepted definition of cosmopolitanism cited above, that is, an 'openness to the world (...) entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the Other' **(**Delanty 2012: 42), does rather fall short here as the other can only be incorporated into the national body if it is secular with more change asked of the 'Other'.

The cosmopolitan vision presented in *Unorthodox* is illustrated when we first see Esty's friends rehearsing. Karim requires each member to cease playing as individuals in order to play in harmony, and this too becomes a symbol for cosmopolitan Berlin. As he tells them in rehearsal following a flawed performance, 'you are no longer separate individuals; you are one symbiotic being. One organism'. Significantly, the common language is English, and they are playing the *Menuetto* from the Serenade for Strings (Op.22) by the Czech composer Dvořák. Thus, although they are from diverse

backgrounds, in the moment of the performance any difference must be left behind to achieve the musical equivalence of societal cosmopolitanism: harmony. The sense given is that music is a universal language, but the version of universalism brought to life in the series is Western.

Queer Berlin

Another key component of the cosmopolitan vision is queer Berlin, and this too stands in contrast to the Haredi religious world view as depicted in *Unorthodox*.[7] As Esty first arrives in Berlin in a taxi, eagle-eyed viewers glimpse a rainbow pride flag in a shop window (Episode 1, 9 minutes,13 seconds), and throughout the series Berlin is associated with conspicuous representations of lesbian and gay relationships. Leah's (Esty's mother) lesbian relationship offers a positive counterpoint to her Satmar life with a drunken husband in Williamsburg. Esty first goes to find her mother outside of her apartment in Episode 1. She refrains from approaching her as her mother's partner, Nina (Isabel Schosnig) arrives with an ice-cream and the two women kiss. The theme of Jewish integration is enhanced by the fact that we learn from Moishe that Nina is a 'shiksa' (a derogatory term for a non-Jewish woman). The kiss and ice-cream present a banal everyday act of affection, yet this sighting of her mother and partner cause Esty to flee, as it is implied that it is seen by Esty as a shocking act, and the two do not reconnect until Esty visits her in the final episode when she is more open minded as a result of her friendship group that includes Ahmed who is openly gay. Esty has been told by her family in Williamsburg that her mother abandoned her, although Leah reveals in the final episode that Esty was taken away from her once she and her small daughter left her drunken husband. Leah was forced to endure threats by the community to ensure that she stayed away, and she lost access to her daughter in court.

Esty has to unlearn her previous attitudes towards sex and relationships in Berlin, and scenes of sexual liberation in Berlin are juxtaposed with her patriarchal and repressive sexual education in the Satmar community. The series focuses on the physical pain she experiences during attempts at intercourse with Yanky, and the couple's lack of preparation for a fulfilling sex life, with all her 'education' emphasising the focus on her husband's needs, and her duty to have children. Within her husband's family the blame is put entirely on her for her inability to withstand the pain and allow him

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[7] Berlin is well known for its progressive attitudes to sexuality from the late 1800s, and this history even features in tourist promotion of the city ('History of Homosexuality in Berlin'). Queer Berlin, the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* created by Magnus Hirschfeld, and its trans and lesbian and gay inclusive culture also features in season 2 of the Amazon series *Transparent* (2015) created by Joey Soloway, and the Netflix documentary *El Dorado: Everything the Nazis Hate* (Cantu and Lambert, 2023).

to ‘finish’, and her subsequent ‘failure’ to conceive.[8] This is the aspect that compares most closely with Feldman’s memoirs and despite the changes in the temporal shift to a future in which the protagonist has left the community, the retention of sexual dysfunction allows openness towards sexuality to be a key signifier for cosmopolitan Berlin. Contrasting attitudes towards sexuality are then, central to representations of a closed Orthodox Jewish community and an open cosmopolitan world which (only) secular Jews are invited to join.

The key to Esty’s sexual openness is found in Ahmed who is happily partnered with his German boyfriend, Mike (Felix Mayr). He speaks honestly about the repression he faced in Nigeria and the impossibility of living as an out gay man, and he is often shown making out with his boyfriend while in their friendship group. Esty finds that she cannot be shocked when their relationship is entirely accepted within the group, and these attitudes towards mixed ethnicity, mixed religious heritage, and ‘same sex’ relationships help to free her and create the mental space for her sexual relationship with Robert, and for her acceptance of her mother and Nina. The series also embraces the queer idea of the chosen family so central to LGBTQ cultures (Demory and Pullen 2013; Halberstam, 2018; Shaw and Stone 2021). It is assumed that Esty will make her home and bring up her child with her mother and her mother’s partner and with her new friends in the music school, as her Williamsburg family is rejected. Thanks to this new expanded family Esty will become a rooted cosmopolitan, rather than a rooted anti-cosmopolitan Orthodox Jew.

While this is a compelling narrative as part of an accomplished series, it does present a reductive dichotomy in that it erases the homophobia that does exist in Berlin, and also erases queer Orthodox identities and the struggles that many religious Jewish people have had to reconcile their sexualities with their faith and community. In this approach the series also has parallels with the aforementioned Netflix series *My Unorthodox Life* in which Julia Haart’s daughter Miriam is seen dating girls, much to her mother’s approval, and her colleague/personal assistant/best friend Robert Brotherton, is an effeminate (single) gay man. The series holds up this sexual freedom to contrast to the ‘fundamentalism’ that Julia declares characterises Orthodox life. This issue is dealt with in a more sensitive way in *Disobedience* (Lelio 2017) based on Naomi Alderman’s novel (2006). Bisexual Rabbi’s daughter, Ronit (Rachel Weisz) has left North West London’s Orthodox community for a secular, cosmopolitan life working as a photographer in Manhattan, New York, and teaches another Esti (Rachel McAdams) and her husband Dovid (Alessandro Nivola) that being a lesbian does not mean that Esti need leave the

[8] It is revealed that she is pregnant when she leaves for Berlin.

community or repress this identity. The ending of the novel sees Esti and Dovid stay together leading their community, as they will fight for more openness, and the ending of the film has Dovid calling for personal freedom as he and Esti separate amicably. Nonetheless, the two versions of *Disobedience* share a vision: a call for openness within a Jewish Orthodox community and the possibility for lesbian desire to co-exist with a Jewish faith without shame. There are also many queer women who have sought to maintain their faith within an Orthodox community as documented in the book *Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires* edited by Miryam Kabakov (2010),[9] and the work of Jerusalem-based group Orthodykes written about in the aforementioned book. Thus, some orthodox women have challenged cultural and theological censure of lesbians in ways that break with the limited vision of the Jewish community represented in *Unorthodox*.

Unorthodox is a progressive television series that depicts two contrasting worlds, using cross-cutting between the two as its principal editing narrative driver. One world is shown to be open, multicultural (there are many wide angled shots of Berlin featuring its multi-ethnic population), culturally rich and LGBTQ+ friendly, and the world that must be left behind is depicted as closed, oppressive, restrictive. *Unorthodox* thus shows the limits to cosmopolitanism and paradoxically reveals its own orthodoxy in its worldview. In this the music conservatory is a fitting metaphor, in that all appear to be welcome, but in fact members have to pass the audition to be accepted. This is appropriate for a musical programme built on excellence; whether it is appropriate for an inclusive society seeking to make peace with its legacy of antisemitism is questionable. There is a certain irony in the fact that while totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia) cast Jews as villains due to their supposed rootless cosmopolitanism, the progressive Germany depicted in *Unorthodox* is not open to Orthodox Jews who are not cosmopolitan enough.

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