

2023-9

(Un)Orthodox Jewish Women in Latin American Visual Representation

Mirna Vohnsen

Technological University Dublin, mirna.vohnsen@tudublin.ie

Daniela Goldfine

University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschlanart>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Goldfine, Daniela and Mirna Vohnsen, '(Un)Orthodox Jewish Women in Latin American Visual Representation', *AJS Perspectives*, Summer 2023, 70-73

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the TU Dublin Language Studies at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

Funder: This research received no external funding

(Un)Orthodox Jewish Women in Latin American Visual Representation

Daniela Goldfine, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Mirna Vohnsen, Technological University Dublin

Today, the Latin American Jewish population consists of approximately 400,000 people—a tiny number in a region of almost 700,000,000 inhabitants (Della Pergola, 2021). In spite of this, Jews have always played a significant role in the generation of culture in Latin America. Throughout the twentieth century, the Latin American film industry benefited enormously from Jewish directors, producers, theater owners, and screenwriters, yet on-screen representations of Jews were few. It was first with the fall of major dictatorships in the 1980s that the number of Jewish themes and characters increased on the big screen. Portrayed mainly as victims of authoritarian regimes, sexual abuse and persecution, Jewish females on screen began to gradually move from the margins to the center of cinematic narratives in the second half of the 1980s. While they remained seriously underrepresented until the 2000s, Jewish women took center stage during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The communist militant who is sent to a German concentration camp during World War II in the Brazilian film *Olga* (Jaime Monjardim, 2004), the adventurous photographer who discovers her Jewish roots in the Chilean-Mexican co-production *El brindis* (Shai Agosin, 2007), and the self-effacing mother who ends up abandoning her family in the Argentine-French film *La cámara oscura/Camera Obscura* (María Victoria Menis, 2008) are at the center of cinematic narratives that disclose the multiple experiences of Jewish females in Latin America. This upward trend led to the re-discovering of a slightly different female protagonist in the 2020s, the Latin American Orthodox Jewish woman.

In recent years, the entertainment industry has popularized representations of Orthodox Jewish women as main characters by juxtaposing the suffocating atmosphere of a religious life

and the liberation offered by secular society, a contrast deployed in films such as *Felix et Meira/Felix and Meira* (Maxime Giroux, 2014) and *Disobedience* (Sebastián Lelio, 2017), as well as in the Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox* (Anna Winger, 2020). A common trait in these fictional depictions is that the female protagonists challenge patriarchal authority by transgressing the boundaries of their Orthodox Jewish communities. This is true for the protagonist of the ten-episode Argentine television series *El fin del amor/The End of Love* (Erika Halvorsen and Tamara Tenenbaum, 2022), the first show to cast a Latin American (un)Orthodox Jewish woman as the lead. Loosely based on the eponymous essay by the Argentine journalist and writer Tamara Tenenbaum, the show premiered on Amazon Prime Video in November 2022 to audience acclaim. Following its release, it became one of the most watched shows on Prime Video in Argentina and in twenty-one other countries (Marinone, 2022). *El fin del amor* tells the story of the 29-year-old journalist and college professor Tamara Tenenbaum (Lali Espósito) who, despite living a secular life as a millennial in Buenos Aires, is constantly confronted with her Orthodox Jewish past. She chose to leave the Orthodox world in her late teens but still keeps a connection with her family and friends. By blending the past and the present as well as the private and public life of the main character, the series shapes the image of Tamara as a transgressor and rebel. Through the use of flashbacks, the show features several instances of her rebellious nature since she was a child. In the first episode, a flashback takes the audience back in time to Tamara's childhood: while she is playing with her childhood friend, Sara, a sheitel catches the girls' attention. Sara, who can guess Tamara's intention, cautions her against trying it on, explaining that only married women are allowed to wear a sheitel, but Tamara defies her friend and proudly puts it on. The flashback suggests that Tamara has been breaking down boundaries and challenging norms since childhood.

Sassy, intelligent, empowered, irreverent, rebellious, and assertive are attributes that conjure up Tamara's personality. The opening scene of the first episode offers a window into her life and personality, immersing the viewer into Tamara's world. The first images show Tamara at

Ladorada—a nightclub to which she often goes clubbing with her two non-Jewish friends—while she is talking to an acquaintance she has just met. Their conversation leads them to discuss the topic of religious symbols, like the cross and the Star of David, and ends with Tamara trying to persuade her interlocutor that these symbols change their meaning according to the context in which they appear. Her strong convictions on the topic discussed expose her assertiveness but also her Jewishness, which she is not very keen to talk about. Ofelia (Mariana Genesio Peña), the bartender who also left her Orthodox Jewish community, overhears the conversation and accuses Tamara of shying away from her Jewish roots, an accusation that makes her uneasy, but one which she does not accept nor reject. By wearing a green bandanna around her wrist - a symbol of abortion rights in Latin America—Tamara is portrayed as a feminist activist. Once she is left on her own at the bar of the disco, she checks her WhatsApp messages and reacts with a deep sigh to a caring but also inquisitive message from her male non-Jewish partner, a reaction that indicates her irritability and her unwillingness to be controlled. Tamara is starting to realize that she and Fede (Andrés Gil) fundamentally disagree on how to sustain a relationship where both have different ideas of how to be a companion. While Tamara feels suffocated by the attention her boyfriend gives her, her approach to their relationship is more laissez-faire with ample room for outings that do not involve him and freedom to come and go without explanation.

From the beginning, then, Tamara is portrayed as a transgressor who does not only rebel against her Orthodox upbringing like Esty (Shira Haas), her counterpart in *Unorthodox*, she also defies heteronormativity, motherhood, victimhood, romantic love, and desire. Tamara has sex with males and cis and trans females; has rejected the idea of being a mother since she was a child; never identified as a victim although her father died in the 1994 AMIA bombing—a terrorist attack on the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association that killed 85 people; breaks up with Fede, her partner of four years; and prioritizes attraction in fulfilling her sexual desires. Tamara's experiences, beliefs, and actions serve a double purpose: they destabilize the underpinnings of

patriarchy by inverting male power and domination while also challenging long-standing film and television stereotypes of Latin American Jewish women as passive.

El fin del amor speaks to a movement in Latin America that centers on empowering women at all levels, including those portrayed in film and television. As a result of the feminist mobilizations that have swept across Latin America in the past decade, scriptwriters of films and television series began to question traditional patriarchal gender norms and shifted the focus to representation of strong female characters through controversial themes that disrupt the status quo. This disruption is key to understanding the success of the show and its quick turnaround to develop the second season. The show, its creators, and actors seem to speak to an audience that has been waiting to see transgressive female characters. Transgressiveness is embodied not only by the Orthodox-born (and raised) female protagonist but also by the cohort of women who accompany her, among them—her widowed mother who is also a victim of terrorism; a trans female who embraces Jewish rituals; and the protagonists' friends, who in their quest to find themselves in twenty-first century Buenos Aires with all its freedom, hit a wall. The patriarchal rules that hung over generations of women before these young protagonists, linger, and even though the grip is not as strong, these women feel the weight of the restrictions imposed on their antecessors. The new player in the field is social media, which can asphyxiate the attempts at reaching that absolute freedom. How to navigate these new, unpredictable, and turbulent waters, is a learning curve for the younger generations. Tamara and her cohort can only aspire to do their best and keep fighting to not just stay afloat, but to rise above the murkiness like many other women did before them.

El fin del amor turns the inherent patriarchy that prevails in Latin American culture on its head, yet the show also brings a sort of voyeuristic thrill in watching someone “lose their religion”. Tamara and her friends awaken such a fascination in the audience that is hard to ignore. In showcasing a variegated portrayal of transgressive females led by an (un)Orthodox Jewish

woman, the show emboldens its female characters by putting them at the forefront of cultural, religious and societal changes.

References

Della Pergola, Sergio. 'World Jewish Population, 2021', in *The American Jewish Year Book, 2021*, edited by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (Cham, SUI: Springer) pp. 313-412, 2021.

Marinone, Belén. "El fin del amor": la historia real y las ideas detrás de la serie que protagoniza Lali Espósito'. *Infobae*, 11 November 2022.

<https://www.infobae.com/leamos/2022/11/11/el-fin-del-amor-como-es-el-provocador-libro-de-tamara-tenenbaum-detras-del-exito-de-la-serie/> (accessed 15 April 2023).