

## Article

# The Other Side of Hospitality: Migratory Aesthetics in Yael Bartana's *True Finn*

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**Abstract:** My paper examines Mieke Bal's concept of migratory aesthetics through the prism of hospitality. Critical of academic and institutional tendencies that either deny particularism or pin agents and artefacts to their alleged context, Bal develops her concept as a way of accommodating contemporary mobility without undermining cultural specificity. While arguing that "there is no such thing as site-unspecific art", Bal is also critical of new historicism's and traditional art history's overemphasis on "provenance", and underscores the political ramifications of this approach. Her critique can be read through the framework of hospitality. The notion of "provenance" frames the guest as the other and limits her ability to participate in the host's culture. Hospitality, however, as Jacques Derrida maintains, is an ambivalent concept. While extending a friendly welcome, it also preserves hierarchy between the host and the guest. In my paper, I examine this other side of hospitality in Yael Bartana's film *True Finn* (2014) and in *Lost in Space* (2005) of Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi. I explore how these films organise the host/guest relation and how they deal with the political entanglement of hospitality.

**Keywords:** migratory aesthetics; hospitality; Yael Bartana; *True Finn*

Yael Bartana's video art challenges customary categorisations that either pin artists to their country of origin, or see them as participating in an international, increasingly globalised art scene. While dividing her time between Berlin, Amsterdam and Tel Aviv and exhibiting her works across continents, Bartana's practice is also engrained in the cultural and political scape of her homeland, Israel. Thus, even though strongly resonating contemporary mobility, Bartana's oeuvre, like that of many of her peers, is more migratory than global. As such, it represents *difference in transition* rather than universal sameness.

This paper analyses the *migratory aesthetics* of Bartana's film, *True Finn*—Tosi Suomalainen (2014). Coined by the cultural theorist Mieke Bal, migratory aesthetics is not a fixed term but a "travelling concept" (Bal 2007, p. 23; Bal 2002), which might be transformed not only while "travelling" between disciplines, but also "between individual scholars" or in this case between two artists (Bal 2009). Accordingly, my paper will not only view Bartana's film through Bal's theory, but ponder on the meaning of migratory aesthetics by analysing both *True Finn* and *Lost in Space* (2005), an experimental film produced by Bal in collaboration with the Berlin based Iranian artist Shahram Entekhabi. The migratory aesthetics of these films will be analysed through the concept of hospitality. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's analysis of hospitality, I will broach the complexities and the instabilities of host/guest relations, and argue that hospitality not only denotes a friendly welcome, but also hinges on power.

## 1. Migratory Aesthetics and the Distribution of the Sensible

Yael Bartana's *True Finn* epitomises the impact of mobility on what can be now designated only by way of proximity as Israeli art. This is not to say that the term "Israeli art" has lost its classifying

power, nor that it ever had an essentialist validity. Israeli art can be seen as a *family resemblance* in which common features overlap, but do not characterise all the objects in the group (Wittgenstein 2009), or/and as a network of relations between agents, objects, ideas, and presuppositions which together form a distinguishable, albeit not discrete field of activity. A network is never fully closed and thus is not defined by boundaries, but by density (i.e., the participants' proximity to each other and their openness to other networks). If the Israeli art network was once more *con-dense*, now it is progressively dispersed.

*True Finn* reflects, even more than Bartana's other works, what Murat Aydemir and Alex Rotas call "migratory settings". "Migration not only takes place between places, but also has its effects on place, in place" (Aydemir and Rotas 2008, p. 1). Thus, in difference from works by Bartana such as *Kings of the Hill* (2003), which was shot in Israel but addresses a "universal" theme of masculinity, *True Finn* is not only culturally specific, but squarely addresses questions of identity and nationalism, albeit from a Finnish perspective. This is not the first time that Bartana engages with the question of nationalism outside the borders of Israel. Nevertheless, while in her famous trilogy *And Europe will be Stunned* (2007–2011), her identity as an Israeli and a Jewish artist played a central role, in *True Finn* Bartana explores a local issue of a foreign place. Crucially, if in works such as *A Declaration* (2006), *Summer Camp/Awodah* (2007) and *The Recorder Player from Sheikh Jarrah* (2010), Bartana problematizes and even undermines national narratives, *True Finn* takes an alternative route. It asks, as Bartana proposes on her website, "can an immigrant become a true Finn?" (Bartana 2014). Whereas *Declaration's* weary boatman, who settles on a rock island and replaces the national flag with an olive tree, reflects a post-national mood, *True Finn* seems more like a post-post-national exploration. Its protagonists, most of whom are immigrants who settled in Finland, examine what is the meaning of being a Finn and recreate national symbols such as the flag and the anthem. Instead of viewing the national discourse from the "outside", like *Declaration's* boatman, *True Finn* probes it from "within".

Set in Finland's countryside, the film documents a group of eight residents of Finland, who volunteered to participate in Bartana's project and spent one week in a remote guest house (Figure 1). The religious, ethnic and national diversity of the participants was central to the development of *True Finn's* plot. During their stay, the participants discussed questions of identity, nationalism, immigrations and borders. The retreat also included traditional Finnish activities such as fishing, sauna, and wearing traditional Finnish costumes. The group participated in psychodrama exercises which simulated interethnic encounters and xenophobic conflicts. By the end of the week the participants were asked to elect their favourite True Finn, who was given the honour of hoisting the new national flag that the group designed.



Figure 1. Yael Bartana, *True Finn*, 2014.

Aesthetically, *True Finn* resonates with Bartana's other works. Its cinematography is melodramatic, the frames are meticulously composed and the imagery is highly polished. As in her other works,

the film references the history of cinema, in this case by integrating clips from old Finnish films.<sup>1</sup> In my analysis, however, I will focus on the film's documentary and reality-show features and explore the relation between the director and her protagonists according to Bal's notion of migratory aesthetics and Jacques Rancière's conceptualisation of aesthetics as the *distribution of the sensible* (Rancière 2013). While both Bal and Rancière are concerned with the politics of aesthetics, they view the domain of the sensible differently. Bal is interested in the engagement of the viewer with the artwork and the impact of the latter on the former. Forging "an aesthetics that does not leave the viewer, spectator, or user of art aloof and shielded, autonomous and in charge of the aesthetic experience" (Bal 2007, p. 23), Bal disorients the viewers of her film *Lost in Space* in order to replicate the immigrant's distorted acoustic mirror.

Rancière's perspective is markedly different. Questioning the traditional hierarchic relation between the artist and the viewer, Rancière believes that the politics of the artwork lies in a democratic distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2013). One of the many instances of this egalitarian distribution that Rancière provides as an example, is documentary cinema. While in fiction cinema the plot is imaginary and fabricated, it tends to imitate "a certain stereotype of actions and characters" (Rancière 2013, p. 34). Documentary cinema, on the other hand, is not bound by the linear succession and the logic of the plot. "This gives the documentary much greater leverage to play around with the consonance and dissonance between narrative voices, or with the series of period images with different provenances and signifying power" (Rancière 2006, p. 161). This does not mean that documentary films are not organised around plots or not manipulated by the director. For Rancière there is always a tension between the director's "voiceover" (both the literal and the metaphoric), and the multiplicity of images that speak for themselves (Rancière 2006, p. 167). Rancière views the director's intervention in documentary cinema as unescapable. The director's presence undermines the film's democratic distribution of the sensible, but without it the film will be too saturated or too opaque to generate meaning.

Bal's attempt to make her viewers identify with the experience of the immigrant, involves, from Rancière's perspective, a hierarchic distribution of the sensible. She "imposes" a specific experience on her viewers and orchestrates her protagonists' narratives into her non-linear and fragmented plot. Alternatively, Rancière's articulation of the politics of aesthetics cannot accommodate the migratory issues that Bal addresses. It is precisely due to his egalitarianism that his discourse cannot exercise empathy toward the other, or in the case of Bal towards the immigrant. Bal's hierarchic compassion and Rancière's egalitarian indifference, I maintain, derive from two different approaches or orders of hospitality. While Bal demonstrates the inevitable entanglement of hospitality with power, Rancière adheres to a universal order which nullifies the notion of hospitality. Thus, instead of Rancière's abstract approach to the cinematic relation of inclusion and exclusion, I propose to see *True Finn* and *Lost in Space* not only as films that thematically address (directly or indirectly) hospitality, but as *sites of hospitality*. I thus approach the relation between Bal and Bartana and their protagonists as a relation between host and guest. Looking at the films as activating hospitality, rather than merely reflecting on its concept, I will underline, following Derrida, the complexity, ambiguity and risk that hospitality entails.

## 2. The Violence of Hospitality vs. Universal Hospitality

Derrida differentiates between two regimes of hospitality. "Ordinary" hospitality is regulated and conditioned by rights and rules ("laws of hospitality"), whereas the "law of hospitality" (in the singular) is absolute, unlimited and unconditional (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). "[A]bsolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner ... but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them ... without asking of them either

<sup>1</sup> The clips were taken from the following films, *The Gypsy Charmer* (1929) by Valentin Vaala, *The Sampo* (1959) by Alexaander Ptusko Ristoorko, *The Unknown Soldier* (1955) by Edvin Laine and *The White Reindeer* (1952) by Eric Blomberg.

reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 25). While the law of unconditional hospitality contradicts the laws of conditional hospitality and vice versa, they are also interdependent. Without the laws of hospitality, that put limit to the law of unconditional hospitality, the latter “would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 79). Alternatively, “conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required, even, by the law of unconditional hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 79).

Hospitality, according to Derrida, is entwined with violence and power. “No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 55). Derrida, however, attributes the violence of hospitality only to its conditional laws. “This collusion between the violence of power or the force of law (Gewalt) on one side, and hospitality on the other, seems to depend, in an absolutely radical way, on hospitality being inscribed in the form of a right ... ” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 55). If violence manifests a breach in the harmonious universal order, by distinguishing between conditional and unconditional hospitality Derrida preserves the latter’s ideal universality (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 79). Nevertheless, if hospitality is to (conditionally or unconditionally) invite the other into my house, any invitation inevitably entails a declaration of ownership. Either by “direct” violence or by what Derrida designates as the force of the law, any form of hospitality establishes relationship of power, “[this is my house] come in!”.

If both conditional and unconditional hospitality are predicated on power, the distinction between the two regimes of hospitality that Derrida develops while reading Kant has to be rearticulated. Kant famously argues that the prohibition on lying should persist even if by telling the truth one risks someone else’s life. “For if one granted some right to lie, for the best reasons in the world”, Derrida explains Kant’s logic, “one would threaten the social bond itself, the universal possibility of a social contract or a sociality in general” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 67). If assassins are asking the host for his guest’s whereabouts, the former should always tell the truth even if it leads to the latter’s death. Derrida ascribes this surprising view to Kant’s adherence to the laws of conditional hospitality. When the laws of conditional hospitality clash with the unconditional necessity to tell the truth, the latter must prevail.

In difference from Derrida, I propose to historicise Kant’s position, and thus offer a different interpretation for his preference of “the absolute duty of veracity” over hospitality (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 71). Kant’s hospitality, I maintain, is not conditional, as Derrida argues. Rather, for Kant there is no hospitality, at least not in the sense that Derrida renders it. His concept of “universal hospitality” is a metaphor at best. The gap between Kant’s conditional and Derrida’s unconditional hospitalities does not derive from “the juridicality of his [Kant’s] discourse” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 71), but from their adherence to two different historical orders of hospitality.<sup>2</sup>

Kant does not weigh actions in the light of justice, but considers them in relation a universal order. Any ethical and political decision must take into account its impact on the order of humanity as a whole. Virtue is not evaluated for its own sake, but is measured through its congruence with the universal order (Kant 2006).<sup>3</sup> His universal hospitality is predicated on this new global vantage point which was developed in the second half of the eighteenth century, and on its new classification system that sees the totality of humanity as a distinct category. The right to own land, according to Kant, stems from this universal rationality. “This right to present themselves to society belongs to all mankind

<sup>2</sup> Derrida in fact oscillates between the two orders since he attempts to preserve the universality of hospitality as discussed above.

<sup>3</sup> Comparatively, for both Socrates and his interlocutor, Cephalus justice does not serve any purpose beyond itself. They both agree that “if a man borrows weapons from a sane friend, and if he goes mad and asks for them back, the friend should not return them, and would not be just if he did. Nor should anyone be willing to tell the whole truth to someone in such a state” (Plato 2004, p. 5).



in virtue of our common right of possession on the surface of the earth on which, as it is a globe, we cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side: at the same time, originally no one individual had more right than another to live in any one particular spot" (Kant 1917, p. 138). The right of land possession does not derive from ancestry heritage nor from economic exchange. It is only since "we cannot be infinitely scattered" that a conditional right to possess space is granted. The globe belongs to "humanity" as a whole which is not (only) the sum of the people living on the globe but a new taxonomic category. From Kant's universalist perspective the globe belongs to each and every living being, or better, since this possession is too abstract, it practically belongs to none.

Kant's notion of universal hospitality, according to which any guest from other country should not be treated with hostility, is based on this universal logic. Universal hospitality does not stem from the permission that the host grants to the guest, but from the conditionality of the host's possession over the territory, which belongs to humanity as a whole and practically to nobody. For Kant, there is no concept of hospitality in the sense that Derrida grants it, simply because the "host" does not (or only conditionally) own her land. Thus, Derrida's reading of Kant's hospitality should be inverted. It is not hospitality that is conditional, but rather—the very possession of one's home and land. While Derrida opposes conditional and power-laden hospitality to unconditional and universal hospitality, I distinguish between the order of hospitality which hinges on power, and the universal order in which *allegedly* there is no violence but also no possibility of hospitality. In the following I will explore *Lost in Space* and *True Finn* through the paradigm of hospitality, with focus on the convolution of hospitality and violence. My aim, however, is not to undermine the notion of hospitality by exposing its relation with power. Rather, I will show how power enables hospitality.

### 3. Lost in Space

Set against both globalist and context oriented approaches to art making and art analysis, migratory aesthetics is not a fixed concept but "a ground for experimentation" through which the impact of mobility on contemporary culture can be addressed, explored and formulated (Bal 2007). In her article, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library", Bal attempts to characterise migratory aesthetics through an experimental film that she created with Entekhabi. Accordingly, instead of simply analysing *True Finn* in light of Bal's theory, I will analyse Bal's and Bartana's films in tandem, as two possible ways of articulating migratory aesthetics.

Mieke Bal situates migratory aesthetics in opposition to the overemphasis of "provenance" in new historicism, identity politics and disciplinary art history, each in its own intellectual context (Bal 2007, p. 24). This overemphasis, Bal maintains, entails methodological and political problems, which are linked together. Unequipped to grasp mobility, new historicism, which once was a revolutionary position, runs the risk of joining forces with the disciplinary approach that is blind to inequality. In order to illustrate the political entanglement entailed by the notions of context, Bal briefly discusses the reception of non-western artefacts in European museums. Despite the contemporary museal inclusion of non-western artworks—which were "hitherto kept at bay, buried in regional museums or considered folklore"—insistence on the notion of provenance enforces a new form of seclusion (Bal 2007, p. 25). Thus, "the masterpieces from a particularly sophisticated culture such as east-Asian Buddhism either get their own museum—in Paris, the Musée Guimet—or their own, somewhat separated section in national museums such as the Louvre" (Bal 2007, p. 25). Similarly, the reception of contemporary art produced in India is conditioned by the made-in brand. Accordingly, Bal argues that "bringing together art from a region or country on the simple basis of the "made in" label, in shows like "Indian Summer", Fall 2005 in the Ecole des Beaux Arts, smacks a bit of exploitation, of the new colonization after de-colonization" (Bal 2007, p. 25).

Bal's aesthetic approach in *Lost in Space* was triggered by her meeting with an Iranian asylum seeker who lives in Berlin. The encounter was dented by a lingual gap. The asylum seeker could only speak Persian and Greek whereas Bal speaks Dutch, English and French. After struggling to

communicate in English, Bal asked him what he missed most about his homeland. Unable to respond in English, Bal allowed him to reply in Persian. This authorization of lingual difference disrupted the already knotty dialogue between Bal and the asylum seeker and introduced a *différance*. The asylum seeker's foreign discourse deferred Bal's ability to grasp its meaning. His enunciation, which was perceived by Bal as "only musical", became meaningful only when Bal's Iranian collaborator translated his words (Bal 2007, p. 27). What he "most missed was speaking his own language" (Bal 2007, p. 27). In order to describe this problematic relation of the immigrant to language, Bal uses the term *acoustic mirror* which she borrows from Kaja Silverman (1988). The asylum seeker, she maintains, is unable to recognize himself in his new environment due to the absence of an acoustic mirror.

The film's aesthetic approach reflects the immigrant's distorted acoustic mirror that Bal briefly experienced. The "double discrepancy—between speech and understanding, and between meaningful sound and senseless sound . . ." was replicated in order to disorient the viewers (Bal 2007, p. 27). Thus, "the most foregrounded element of the film's aesthetic: [is] the separation of language as it is visible—in mouths, in gestures, in bodies—from language that is audible . . . First you see it, then you hear it. Furthermore, while you hear it, you are almost being distracted from it by the written word" (Bal 2007, p. 29). This strategy of deferring meaning was coupled with the fragmentation of interviewees' narratives. The viewers are forced to perceive the enunciations of the interviewees without their contexts, without even their "full" narratives.

Bal seems to adhere to one of the imperatives of Derrida's absolute hospitality, whereby the host should welcome the guest without asking for her or his name, i.e., without any *background check* (Derrida 25). Viewers of *Lost in Space* cannot engage with the guests on the basis of their national, ethnic and biographical background, simply because the film does not provide this information. But hospitality by necessity entails violence, and thus this strategy has its own ramifications. In the absence of coherent distinctions between each narrative, migrancy is perceived in a disorienting yet unified mode. Since the viewer does not have access to the identity of the interviewees—whose names appear only in the closing credits—the film practically portrays migration as a cohesive phenomenon. It amasses the statements of western immigrants such as the artist and academic Catherine M. Lord,<sup>4</sup> the Palestinian scholar Ihab Saloul<sup>5</sup> and Gayatri Sinha, one of the leading curators in India. In parallel, the film shows other, less privileged immigrants and an asylum seeker; as viewers, however, we are not afforded enough information to distinguish between them. This suppression of differences comes to the fore, if one compares the fleeting appearance of the asylum seeker in the film and Bal's narration about him in her essay. While the film's aesthetic strategy enhances the asylum seeker's muteness (we cannot even know that he is an asylum seeker), it is only through the essay that the reader can grasp the intensity of his need for language.

Bal herself is attentive to the power relation that underpins any host/guest encounter. Thus, while extending hospitality to the asylum seeker she weighs her words.

In a culture of displacement, the insight that the acoustic mirror is the cultural home of individuals gives *settled people* a specific ethical task. "We"—if I may be forgiven for using, albeit ironically, this problematic pronoun, qualifying it as people who do live in a more or less continuous acoustic environment—we, then, to be sure, cannot return to. . . [the asylum seeker], or any of the other speakers who might crave it, their mother tongue; nor can we make up for that loss. But we can produce a substitute, poor as it may be, to that primary acoustic mirror. We can produce, that is, an acoustic, indeed an integrated sentient mirror that would be not a mother tongue but a friendly tongue: a linguistic, sonoric environment of friendliness and welcome, interest and collaboration. (Bal 2007, p. 33)

<sup>4</sup> Lord is also the co-editor of the volume on migratory aesthetics in which Bal's essay appears.

<sup>5</sup> Another contributors to the volume on migratory aesthetics.

Bal is walking on a tightrope. In order to extend hospitality to the asylum seeker she has to announce herself as the host. The tortuous phrasing of “settled people” and the apologetic “we” reflect this anxious awareness. Bal, however, no longer “live[s] in a more or less continuous acoustic environment”. In the host/guest encounter both parties experience distortion or lack of an acoustic image. In the short exchange between the asylum seeker and the film makers, it is Bal who becomes the other, due to the asylum seeker’s participation. Bal is dependent on her contributor’s translation in order to make sense of her migratory settings. “The guest [the asylum seeker and Entekhabi] becomes the host’s [Bal’s] host” (Derrida 125). Even if her command over English and French enables her to feel at home in the Continent, migrancy posits Bal and her fellow Europeans face to face with a migratory setting that renders their home-land mobile and transitional. The risk of hospitality is reciprocal. It affects both the guest and the host. “The very precondition of hospitality may require that, in some ways, both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other” (Rosello 2001, p. 176). Bal’s creation of a friendly acoustic mirror involves the reclamation of authority over the acoustic environment. Her acoustic hospitality undermines the immigrant’s disturbing presence. Nevertheless, without this (re)possession of the acoustic landscape, Bal’s hospitality and compassion would not be possible.

#### 4. A Host of Guests

There are several similarities between *True Finn* and *Lost in Space*, and equally some crucial differences. Both films integrate interviews with immigrants and both are located in “neutral” spaces, which are neither their directors’ homeland nor of many of their characters. Furthermore, both address issues of hospitality and respond to practices of exclusion. While Bal responds to academic and museal exclusion, Bartana appropriates her project’s title from the unofficial English name of the Finnish right wing party, Perussuomalaiset, and takes issue with its ideology. In short, *Lost in Space* addresses a tacit form of exclusion, whereas *True Finn* deals with straightforward xenophobia. Accordingly, the questions that the films pose are fundamentally different. While Bartana’s protagonists ponder who might be a true Finn, Bal asks “how can we be culturally specific in our analyses of cultural processes and artefacts, without nailing people or artworks to a provenance they no longer feel comfortable claiming as theirs?” (Bal 2007, p. 24). In response to these questions, Bartana and Bal forge different strategies. Bal attempts to blur the notion of “provenance” and to create an aesthetics in which the notion of difference is never stable. Therefore, she deliberately detaches voices from visuals, sentences from narratives, and enunciations from their agents. *True Finn*, on the other hand, “adopts” the nationalist terminology and explores it from “within”. Instead of undermining its rhetoric, it puts the guests in charge of the nationalistic discourse, determining, as it were, the “essence” of True Finnishness.

*True Finn* introduces its protagonists gradually. It first shows them arriving at the guest house and mentions their first names in the subtitle. Later, as the film proceeds, the personal journey of each character unfolds, but only partially. The film focuses instead on the participants’ actions, opinions and debates, and lets them decide what they are willing to share with the group and the film’s prospective viewers. The viewers, in fact, have to pick up bits and pieces throughout the film in order to assemble the protagonists’ profiles. Thus, the first monologue of *True Finn* does not reveal much about the protagonist. Peter, a self-described anarchist, as we come to know later, moved to Sweden when he was one-year-old, and returned to Finland in the 1980s. “Nature isn’t really my thing. It’s so quiet, it hurts my ears” (4:15), he tells the camera. Peter’s annunciation is hosted by Bartana in the dual sense of the term. Bartana opens her film to Peter’s view, but also hitches his reaction to the narrative that she composes. Peter’s repulsion from nature is juxtaposed to the pastoral landscapes that Bartana captures around the retreat’s location, or inserts from the old Finnish films. One possible reading of this deliberate juxtaposition is that Bartana places Peter’s repulsion in competition with the romantic-nationalist view that maintains, as the Israeli poet Shaul Tchernichovsky famously put it, that “man [sic] is nothing but the pattern of his homeland’s landscape” (Tchernichovsky n.d.).

It proposes that the naturalist perspective is not the only way to view national identity. This, however, is not the metanarrative of the film, but rather one of its many voices.

A few moments after Peter's morning grumping, we meet Stanislav, an immigrant from Estonia, meticulously and militarily folding his blanket (4:50). Speaking of his experience in the Finnish Army, he remarks that "... they were good times. Some might not think that. Comparing the army with the Estonian, Finland or the Russian one, Finland is the best" (5:12). Stanislav presents another enigma in relation to the "true Finn". On the one hand, if language is the house of culture (to paraphrase Heidegger after Derrida and Bal), Stanislav, as the film later suggests (33:32), is uncomfortable with Finnish. On the other hand, and especially from an Israeli perspective, the army is considered to be the melting pot of the national identity that Stanislav gladly embraces. A similar ambiguity regarding language is presented by Tuisku, who despite living in Kemio Islands, a territory which officially belongs to Finland, speaks Swedish in her first monologue, like most of her island's inhabitants. Alternatively, Anni-Helena, who visits the group during the retreat, despite speaking perfect Finnish, refuses to consider herself a Finn. As a Sámi, the native people of Finland, adopting Finnish identity, for her, is to give in to forced assimilation.

Many of the conversations and the debates in the film hover around identity and exclusion. While discussing their new design for the Finnish flag, Anna proposes a flag which will reflect an inclusive approach toward outsiders.<sup>6</sup> Tiina, who belongs to the Roma (or Finnish Kale) community that was marginalised by the Finnish society ever since they moved to Finland in the 16th century, questions her: "Is it the flag that invites people to Finland or does the flag tell people about Finland?" Anna, however, wants to have it both ways, but does not explain how. "It tells people about Finland, and can also represent a vision of the future" (12:27). On the other hand, in response to Anna's criticism that her design is too traditional, Tiina asks "what's wrong with traditional?" But when she attempts to define how the Finnish flag represents Finland she underlines the moral superiority of her homeland. "Finland is pure, there's innocence, whiteness, purity" (12:47).

Curiously, not only Tiina, but also most of the immigrant participants reiterate nationalist rhetoric. Mustafe, an observant Muslim who was born in Somalia and later in the film will be chosen as the True Finn, insists on distancing Finland from other northern countries such as Sweden and Norway. "We are a great country and we can defend ourselves" (14:23), he says (Figure 2). When Martin-Eric, who migrated to Finland from Quebec, proposes that in the age of globalisation the role of the nation-state is over (14:40), Mustafe objects and argues that "[n]ationality is about belonging somewhere" (14:57). Martin-Eric, however, also raises concerns regarding Finnish cultural particularity. While speaking about the relation of Finland to the European Union, he feels that the character of Finland is prone to change "[a]fter EU has turned our laws upside down, one by one" (18:38).

Similarly, most of the group members are opposed to selling Finnish land to Russians. Martin-Eric complains that 80% of the population of Imatra speaks Russian, and that the Russians own most of the city (20:36).<sup>7</sup> Even Tuisku, who is often critical of Finland and the Finns, expresses similar concerns, and Mustafe reminds the group that Finland was in war with Russia. He thus opposes selling land to the Russians as absurd. Tuisku concludes that "you should have to be Finn to buy land" (20:51), and Martin-Eric echoes this with "Finland belongs to the Finns" (20:53). Anna seems to be the only participant who questions this assumption. "[W]ho is a Finn?" she asks, and adds that for her "it's great that foreigners buy Finnish land" (21:13).

<sup>6</sup> Curiously, the film does not reveal Anna's nationality. She was born in Germany, but it is not clear if she is German or Finn. This presentation resonates with her liberal and inclusive politics, but also demonstrates its ramifications.

<sup>7</sup> Imatra is located in east Finland next to the border with Russia.





Figure 2. Yael Bartana, *True Finn*, 2014.

The challenges of nationalism that the protagonists address are not coming only from the outside but also from within. Martin-Eric raises questions regarding the Sámi people, who live also in Sweden, Norway and Russia, and do not regard themselves as Finns. “Do the Sámi fit into the [nation’s] picture or not? Or does the majority decide?” (13:57). The Sámi suffer from what Aamir Mufti calls the crisis of minority, as a community that does not fit into the world’s division into nation-states (Mufti 2007). Martin-Eric’s question underscores the problematic wedding between the nation-state and democracy, which enables majoritarian groups to dictate the “nature” of the state. The issue of the Sámi comes up again when a Sámi guest, Anni-Helena, visits the group (34:08). The cultural position of Anni-Helena is complex. She is both native and anti-national, dispossessed but also a sophisticated woman who lived in the capital, Helsinki, for 10 years. Anni-Helena does not see herself as loyal to Finland, or equally loyal to Finland and other countries in which the Sámi live.

Like every other guest, Anni-Helena’s visit poses a danger. She can take, as Derrida remarks, the host as a hostage (Derrida 125).<sup>8</sup> Thus, her opinions cast doubt on some of the participants’ convictions. Mustafe asks her surprisingly: “You don’t define yourself Finnish, even though you were born here, speak perfect Finnish, you’re Sámi, an indigenous people, but you’re not Finn. We are trying to find our own identity. Where the boundary is. I say I’m Finnish, even though I wasn’t born here. How do you see this?” (35:59). Anni-Helena does not provide a straightforward answer, nor does the film attempt to find a coherent or conclusive answer to the question of who a true Finn might be. The pluralism that the film projects is different from the universal hospitality of Anna, which is allegedly inclusive for everyone, but undercuts any possession over one’s home, land and territory. From the perspective of universal hospitality, Finland does not host immigrants, but belongs to all humanity, or rather, since this notion is so abstract, it belongs to nobody.

Similarly, the film, as a site of hospitality, hosts its protagonists in the dual sense of the term. It welcomes its protagonists to express their views and to pull its narrative threads in different directions. At the same time, Bartana is not a neutral or an unbiased host. Throughout the film she utilises her host privileges. For instance, when Mustafe speaks about the right of Finland to defend itself, Bartana inserts a clip from *The Unknown Soldier* which shows soldiers sitting on moving armoured vehicles. This intervention circumscribes the film’s distribution of the sensible, but also enables its hospitality. Bartana imposes her interpretation on Mustafe’s enunciation and thus participates in the conversation. Rather than an abstract observant, she sets the discussions’ premise and enters into dialogue with her guests.

<sup>8</sup> The danger that the guest represents and the fear that he or she incites is also represented by bear head that the participants wear from time to time during the film. Bartana intensifies this uncanny experience of meeting the other by not providing any explanation to who is wearing this head and why.

## 5. Who Is the True Finn?

The “pluriversal” rather than pluralist prospect of the film, to borrow Walter Mignolo’s terminology, comes to the fore in the election of the true Finn, in which each of the participants expresses different views about the meaning of Finnish identity (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 2). Tiina argues that the group should vote for her, since her community resided in Finland since the 16th century. Unlike the Finns, who mixed with the Swedes and the Russians, the Roma preserved blood purity and hence “are a real Finnish people” (42:22). Martin-Eric, on the other hand, sees identity as a sum of cultural features and persuades the group to vote for him because he is mostly dressed in black and often goes to the sauna. Moreover, he says, “I’m also very Finnish in the way that I’m never good enough to claim to be anything” (39:57). Similarly, Stanislav claims to be a true Finn since he engages with typical Finnish activities such as sauna, fishing and skiing. Furthermore, he is quiet, has *sisu*<sup>9</sup> and can stand anything: cold, threats, sadness, and pain (41:22). Tuisku also claims that she is Finnish because of her character, namely, she does not speak when she does not have to, especially if she has nothing to say (40:28). On the other hand, Komugi, who was born in Japan, confesses that she is experiencing an identity crisis that is bothering her “like hell”, and refuses to vote (42:31). Peter tells the group the he is a misanthrope and says to them: “go fuck yourself and die” (40:18). Anna also refuses to compete and hopes that Finn identity will not exclude anyone and at the same time “would still be part of the background to where we come from” (40:40).

In practice, however, it is not so easy to articulate cultural specificity to which everyone unconditionally belongs. In order to prevent exclusion, Anna nullifies the Finn identity from any content. While voting for the candidates, she announces that “anyone can be a Finn” (43:14), but unlike Martin-Eric, who also refuses to vote for one candidate and instead votes for everyone (Figure 3), Anna votes for none. While Martin-Eric elaborates how each of the candidates carries an attribute that qualifies her or him as a Finn, according to Anna’s abstract universal hospitality those features are of no concern.<sup>10</sup> Martin-Eric’s choice is not pluralistic. Rather, it is a hospitable approach, which negotiates and forms identities dialogically, through conversation between host and guests.

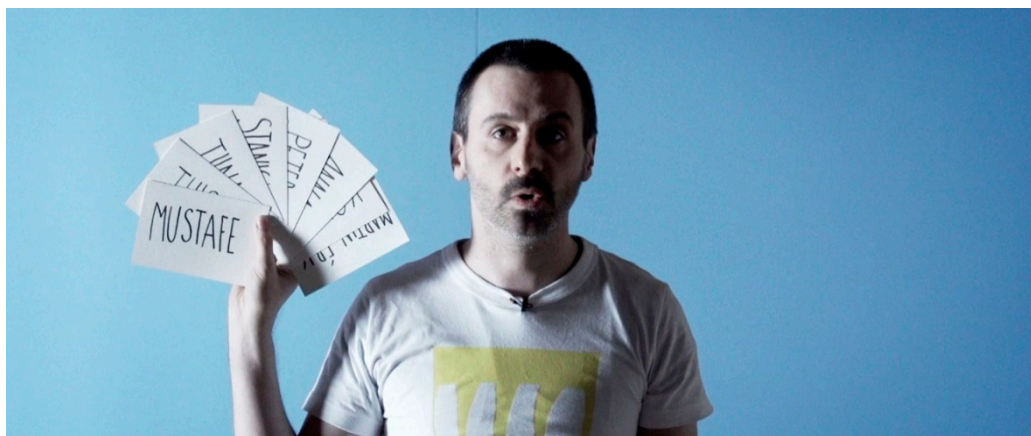


Figure 3. Yael Bartana, *True Finn*, 2014.

*True Finn* has a deceiving appearance. Its protagonists do not express radical political views, and the movie mostly does not undermine nationalist or conservative views in any fundamental way. Bartana’s production, in this sense, seems much more conventional and far less experimental than

<sup>9</sup> Sisu is defined by Wikipedia as “a Finnish concept described as stoic determination, tenacity of purpose, grit, bravery, resilience, and hardiness and is held by Finns themselves to express their national character. It is generally considered not to have a literal equivalent in English” (Anon 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Martin-Eric says, “We all have qualities that have something to do with being a Finn. For some it’s religion, for some it’s behaviour, sulking, for some it’s family values, for some going to the sauna. We are all Finn” (43:30).

Bal's project. Nevertheless, while Bal integrates her protagonists into her migratory discourse, Bartana takes the risk of hospitality. As the author of the film, Bartana is responsible for the program of the retreat, the editing and the archival film inserts, but she also endows her protagonists with agency and autonomy, and lets them create multiple narratives and come up with different conclusions.

One might obviously object that the film hosts many regressive, banal, and at times xenophobic views. This, however, is precisely the jeopardy of hospitality. Thus, after Mustafe wins the election by two votes, and just before he hoists the flag, the group is in a cheerful mood and the participants feel free to speak mischievously about identity, exclusion and xenophobia. The newly elected Mustafe says "Somali and Roma, get out of Finland" (45:44). Then he says, "Finns, get out of Finland", and proposes to send all of them to Africa. Later, when seeing Stanislav using his mobile, he adds, "I don't get these Russians, always on their mobile phones" (46:27). One of them suggests that Stanislav is spying on Finland, and Mustaphe playfully says "Yes, that's right" (46:30). This parodic imitation of racist and xenophobic comments ridicules and thus undermines their validity. One can also sense that the participants release in this conversation an accumulated pressure of the unspoken racist discourse that haunts their more polite and inclusive conversations. Nevertheless, this scene also simulates a plausible situation in which the guest-turned-host objects to the principles of hospitality.

The UK's recent controversial immigration bill, promoted by the British home secretary Priti Patel, presents this kind of situation. While her family migrated from India to Uganda and then to the UK, Patel is of the opinion that only "skilled" immigrants should be welcome in the UK. Her approach to hospitality is unashamedly opportunistic. "A firmer, fairer and simpler [immigration] system that will attract the people we need to drive our country forward through the recovery stage of coronavirus laying the foundation for a high wage, high skill, productive economy" (Syal 2020). Derrida's discourse on hospitality focuses on instances in which the guest threatens the physical, cultural and economic conditions of the host. At the time, it might have been difficult to conceive a situation in which the guest-turned-host would oppose hospitality as bluntly as Patel. Addressing Patel's involvement in the bill is a "catch 22". On the one hand, to criticise Patel for forgetting "where she (or her parents) comes from" is to treat her as a guest and thus to break the law of hospitality. But, on the other hand, letting Patel ignore the hospitality that brought her family to the UK in the first place is also against hospitality's codes. The law of absolute hospitality, as Derrida observes, is not a duty, but a gift (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 83). As an act of benevolence, hospitality's empathy is based on *identification* with the other. In difference from the language of universal order, hospitality reiterates the logic of compassion. "And you should love the foreigner because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper I explored the migratory aesthetics of *True Finn* through the prism of hospitality. Following Derrida, I underscored the ambivalence of hospitality and its entanglement with power. While Derrida discerns two regimes of hospitality, unconditional and conditional, and accentuates their interdependence, I proposed to historicise these regimes, and thus interpret them differently. I argued that Kant subordinates ethics to a *universal order*, a new taxonomic system that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century. The universal is not the arithmetic sum of individuals and nations, but a new classifying category that mitigates conflicts but also undermines individual and communal possession over home and territory and thus nullifies the notion of hospitality. Without possession over one's home there is no hospitality.

Predicating my discussion on these insights, I analysed Bal's and Bartana's films from the perspective of hospitality, underscoring its entanglement with power, but also the latter's necessity. Following Rancière, I explored *Lost in Space's* and *True Finn's* distribution of the sensible, and more specifically, the relation between the director's and protagonists' voices. As distinct from Rancière, who sees the director's intervention as crucial in order to generate meaning, but problematic in terms

of a democratic distribution of the sensible, I proposed to see the films as sites of hospitality and the directors and protagonists as hosts and guests.

Both Bal and Bartana deploy apparatuses of power. Without declaration of ownership, hospitality is not possible. Their approaches to hospitality, however, are different. While Bal undermines the notion of provenance and forces the host to identify with the immigrant, Bartana enables her guests to negotiate their notions of belonging. But despite its openness to the other, *True Finn* is not pluralistic in the liberal and abstract sense of the term. The views of *True Finn*'s protagonists are constantly in dialogue with Bartana's tacit yet pervasive voice.

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