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Evelyn Landy March 22, 2024

Unscripted Content

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2024

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

Unscripted Content
By Evelyn Landy

*Unscripted Content* is a feature-length screenplay with the goal of having authentic, complex, and diverse portrayals of Judaism in terms of characters' personalities, religiosity, heritage, and backgrounds as opposed to relying on stereotypes and traditionally monolithic representations of the religion. This feature is unique in that the protagonist returns to Judaism, and the religion's values are what save them as opposed to the more popular escaping extremism in religion narratives often seen with Judaism in film or TV that can portray the faith in a negative light. Furthermore, the script fills a need for a Jewish rom com, which does not truly exist, apart from a couple of Hanukkah Hallmark movies or films that follow characters who have Jewish names or characteristics that imply they are Jewish, but the story would be the same whether they're Jewish or not. Through the frame of a reality television show, the screenplay shows how on-screen representations can sometimes be negatively exaggerated or even false as a way to critique past problematic representations of Judaism or Jewish characters. More broadly, using reality television, this screenplay will explore what it means to be a young Jewish woman– or a young woman in general– reaching adulthood in the 2020s, exacerbated by the reality TV world that has a history of exploiting and manipulating women's emotions and actions for their own gain.

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## I. Introduction

*Unscripted Content* is a feature-length screenplay with the goal of having authentic, complex, and diverse portrayals of Judaism in terms of characters' personalities, religiosity, heritage, and backgrounds as opposed to relying on stereotypes and traditionally monolithic representations of the religion. This feature is unique in that the protagonist returns to Judaism, and the religion's values are what save them as opposed to the more popular escaping extremism in religion narratives often seen with Judaism in film or TV that can portray the faith in a negative light. Furthermore, the script fills a need for a Jewish rom-com, which does not exist, apart from a couple of Hanukkah Hallmark movies or films that follow characters with characteristics that imply they are Jewish, but the story would be exactly the same whether or not they are Jewish. Through the frame of a reality television show, the screenplay shows how on screen representations can sometimes be negatively exaggerated or even false, as a way to critique past problematic representations of Judaism or Jewish characters. More broadly, using reality television, this screenplay explores what it means to be a young Jewish woman– or even a young woman in general– reaching adulthood in the 2020s, exacerbated by the reality TV world that has a history of exploiting and manipulating women's emotions and actions for their own gain.

Given these themes, in my literature review, I will be examining the following topics: anti-Semitism and thus the importance of Jewish representation in film, the history of Jewish representation more broadly and then in terms religiosity, women, and love. Then I will look at general trends with rom-coms, feminized culture, and reality television, including questions of authenticity, over-emotionality, and the power of those who work behind the camera. Next, in my film and television review, I will examine Jewish representation in two films, *Shiva Baby* (2020)

and *Leona* (2018), in addition to a Jewish reality dating show, *Jewish Matchmaking* (2023). I will analyze each for the quality of their Jewish representation and any shortcomings. Lastly, I will share more about the process of writing my screenplay, and this includes the brainstorming and revision process as well.

## II. Literature Review

### *Anti-Semitism, Defining Jewishness, and the Importance of Jewish Representation in Film*

In her book, *Jews in Contemporary Visual Entertainment: Raced, Sexed, and Erased*, Carol Siegel writes, "According to the FBI's hate-crime statistics, a majority of religiously motivated hate-crime offenses are committed against Jews each year" (Siegel 15), signaling the large presence of anti-Semitism across the United States, and thus the importance of combating this hatred through authentic representation on screen. Karen E.H. Skinazi writes that anti-Semitism significantly increased at the turn of the twenty-first century with the War on Terror for a variety of reasons, among them "the collapse of the peace process in the Middle East, growth of anti-imperialist rhetoric, and declaration of Zionism as a form of racism at the UN conference in Durban" (Skinazi 52).

When discussing anti-Semitism, it is important to be able to identify what it means to be Jewish. Siegel proposes referring to Jews as a racialized group rather than a race, ethnicity, or religion because "the representations that constitute racialization are embodied and all embodiment of human beings involves the constructions of genders and sexualities" (Siegel 21). She poses this definition at a time when American Jews do not feel they constitute as white and experience "a sense of alienation and disengagement from whiteness" (Siegel 5), and I find this to be very valid, given instances of white supremacy that do not recognize Jews to be white in addition to the fact that not all Jews have European or white ancestry. After the Holocaust, many

saw the racialization of Jews as a bad thing and referred to Jewishness as only a religious belief, but this alienated secular Jews or Jews who followed religions other than Judaism (Siegel 22). Siegel writes, "Jewish Americans have been offered the option of being considered white… And many of us have taken this option although it entailed erasing our history and identities it confers" (Siegel 211). This has had a negative impact on visual representations of Jews in entertainment as this erasure unfolds on screen as well. Ultimately, Siegel argues that when Jews refuse to think of themselves as white, they will then be able to explore all the ways their identities are intersectional (Siegel 220). I am in agreement with Siegel in that when Jewishness is not equated with whiteness in various forms of entertainment, media can then explore Judaism in a more nuanced way that accurately reflects the diversity among the Jewish people.

***History of Jewish Representation in Film***

In his book, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema*, Nathan Abrams provides an overview of the history of Jewish representation on screen. When Jews first appeared on screen in silent short films in the twentieth century, these were "crude and overtly antisemitic racialized portrayals… which erased all intra-group differences (religious, regional, national, linguistic, class, socioeconomic, political)" (Abrams 2). What is worse is that Jews were portrayed as a "subhuman, avaricious, unrefined, venal, grasping, greedy, shifty and menacing cheat and/or dangerous subversive" (Abrams 2). There was a significant change to Jewish representation on film in the late 1960s and 1970s, when, after years of ignoring issues of Jewish identity, Jewish American filmmakers finally began to make films that explored Jewish self-definition. However, this resulted in "a proliferation of such inside images of Jews (many of which were imported from Eastern Europe) as the Jewish American Princess, the Jewish Mother, [and] the neurotic *schlemiel* (Yiddish: a sort of cosmic fool

combined with cosmic victim)" (Abrams 6). The JAP can be seen in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), the Jewish Mother in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1972), and the schlemiel in *Annie Hall* (1977). While it may seem positive to have an increasing amount of Jewish representation on screen, these filmmakers relied on well-known stereotypes rather than creating space for more fleshed-out, complex Jewish characters.

Abrams argues that Jewish representation on film has since evolved in the post-1990 period with an increase of films focused on Jewish characters as ideas of multiculturalism became increasingly accepted, encouraging Jews to take pride in their ethnic identities. The post-1990 period has become known for its "extraordinary and unprecedented flowering of overt, complex, stereotype-confronting exercises in Jewish representation that marked a 'new acceptance of the textures of idiosyncrasies of Jewishness'" (Abrams 6). I believe that while there has been a greater amount of Jewish representation in the post-1990 period, Abrams' view is too optimistic and in reality more could be done. I am in agreement with Seigel when she writes, "Jewish characters are always representations of people who are seen as Jews first and universalized humans second whether or not the filmmaker attempts to challenge stereotypes and provide new visions" (Siegel 3–4). She goes on to say that many films and television in the US, such as *Black Book* (2006) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013), do not try any sort of resignification of Jewish identities and instead depict Jews as a threat to non-Jews through "attributing to Jews dangerous levels of perversity, greed, and general subversive tendencies," (Siegel 4) which falls back on negative stereotypes.

***History of Representations of Judaism as a Religion in Film***

When considering representations of Jews on screen, it is vital to look at how depictions of religion are factored into these characters. Prior to 1990, Abrams asserts, "Films about Jews

were often meticulously non-specific in religious terms. Many Jewish directors perceived themselves in secular, ethnic terms…and hence their work was 'clearly uninformed by the practice or study of Judaism'" (Abrams 137). In turn, "Film did not, nor did it often aim to, convey any sophisticated or subtle understanding of Judaism, its beliefs, rituals and practices. Secular symbols of Jewishness are ubiquitous… Thus de-contextualised, Judaism became superficial, empty almost, when conveyed" (Abrams 137). When religion did appear in relation to Jews, such as in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), it was often about a character fleeing "from a repressive and restrictive culture that limits his/her social mobility or marriage prospects," (Abrams 141) harmfully portraying Judaism as oppressive instead of exploring the beauty of the religion's values and traditions. As a result, in *Unscripted Content*, it was important to me that many characters, most notably the protagonist, find their way back to Judaism and discover that it allows for them to live a better, more fulfilling life.

Contemporary cinema "defines Jewish identity both ethnically *and/or* religiously. In doing so, it mocks normative Judaism (in its various incarnations) on a fairly consistent basis, featuring many attacks on observant Jews," (Abrams 142) which is detrimental to others' understanding of those who practice Judaism in any form. On a more positive note, Abrams is correct in that the post-1990 period stands out in how it "does not require 'the abandonment of Judaism, or its thoroughgoing accommodation to non-Jewish norms' in its search to embrace Judaism and the non-Jewish world simultaneously" (Abrams 158). Moreover, Abrams holds that "Jews are increasingly being identified through religious rather than ethnic (names, physical looks, professions, locations) markers. Key points in the Jewish religious calendar, other than just Chanukah and Passover, are depicted" (Abrams 143). While it is true that more holidays are portrayed and this presents a different kind of identification of Jews, more could be done in terms

of exploring characters' personal connections to their Jewish observances. This way, there would be a deeper reason for depicting these holidays that is important for character development rather than these religious celebrations seeming as if they are only for show.

One element of representation that is missing from contemporary cinema is intra-religious differences. Abrams writes, "When Orthodoxy is represented, it is usually solely in terms of *haredism,* since it is 'the most obviously distinctive and colorful' branch of Judaism… Indeed *haredism* tends to stand as a metonym for *all* Orthodoxy… It acts 'strictly as a sight gag'" (Abrams 139). Typically, when films use haredism, they do not approach this sect in a nuanced manner as with any other kind of variation of Orthodoxy in Judaism. These differences among Orthodox Jews are "rarely, if ever, portrayed on film" (Abrams 141). Consequently, "Intra-religious differences were downplayed, and even when they were highlighted, the underlying message was that everyone is basically the same underneath despite any outwardly different religious observances" (Abrams 140). This issue of a lack of nuanced representation extends beyond religiosity to the different types of heritage Jews can have within being Jewish. On film, there is hardly ever a "distinction between Sephardi (North African, Southern European, Asian subcontinent), Mizrahi (Middle Eastern), Ashkenazi (Eastern and Central European) and Beta Israel (Ethiopian) traditions" and film will often "ethnocentrically projects an Ashkenazi culture onto a Sephardic history'" (Abrams 141) and put more value on European Jew-centric narratives, diminishing the diversity within the Jewish people.

In *Unscripted Content*, I wanted to present a variety of religious characters. Asher is a retired pro-surfer who grew up Modern Orthodox but rejected his faith until later in life when he went to yeshiva and found a new appreciation for Judaism. Now, he tries to pray three times a day and even has a *chevruta* (a learning partner for Talmudic study). Ruth grew up in a

traditional, Persian Jewish household and understood how important keeping Judaism was to her ancestors but did not have a reason for keeping it for herself until she experienced a great loss in her life. Then there is my protagonist, Sydney, who does not care much for being Jewish until she is thrust into this hyper-Jewish world of a reality dating show and her discovery of Judaism, and its concepts like *teshuvah* (repentance), lead to her self-growth. Similarly, Guy is a Moroccan Israeli who is not very observant but finds himself on a Jewish dating show and comes with the background of connecting with his Jewish ancestors through food. Thus, this script has a diverse array of characters, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi, who observe Judaism on various levels in their own ways.

***Representation of Jewish Women in Film***

When discussing Jewish women in literature, Skinazi writes, "Women's Judaism is almost a character itself– other characters love it, hate it, struggle with it, but they can never forget it, ignore it, or fail to learn from it" (Skinazi 77). In his study of Jewish cinematic history, Abrams relays how Jewish women on film "suffered from consistent under-representation, being relegated to a limited number of secondary roles" and prior to 1990, "she is defined largely by the viewpoint of and her relationship to the Jew[ish]" male. She rarely "stray[ed] from a prescribed range of characteristics that confine her to a set of unflattering and negative stereotypes" (Abrams 43) as seen by the Jewish women in *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972) and *Love and Death* (1975). However, as a result of the liberation and feminist movement in the 1960s, "Jewish women began to move towards the forefront of US cinema" (Abrams 50).

One of the most prevalent stereotypes for American Jewish women in cinema is the Jewish American Princess (JAP). Known for being "Spoiled, whiny, materialistic and shallow, the Jewish American Princess dominates her father and then her husband, taking advantage of

their money in exchange for the honor of being associated with her" (Abrams 49). She represents everything the Jewish male "hated about American culture. The JAP was the catastrophic blend of what is Jewish and American. She possessed none of the charm of her mother. She had her strength and assertiveness but none of her warmth or devotion" (Abrams 49). The stereotype of the JAP still persists, but it is evolving in contemporary cinema. Now, Jewish women "can be openly and explicitly identified as smart" and are usually a "professional, economically comfortable, middle class, well to do, and her parents and family live in suburban affluence" (Abrams 52). With an increase of Jewish women working in Hollywood in the post-1990 period and a rise of female-focused films (Abrams 52), "new character-types are emerging in cinema which do not simply conform to previous notions of the Jewess, but begin to introduce a more variegated spectrum, and are pointing towards greater normalization" (Abrams 67). This trend is apparent through the Jewish female protagonists in films such as *Clueless* (1995), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (2008). Jewish women on film are "entering the space once reserved exclusively for the [Jewish male] and we *sympathetically* view her inner conflicts, 'while the Jewish male is either objectified or excluded altogether as an object of desire' She is becoming normalized" (Abrams 67).

Despite the strides in complex, or even positive, representations of Jewish women on film as Abrams details, Siegel highlights negative images that still persist in film and television, particularly on the physical level. A Jewish female on screen will usually serve as a contrast to the "'all American heroine' whose femininity is naturalized to a female sidekick whose Jewishness is often used as shorthand for bad taste and obnoxious manners, which in turn suggests a lack of femininity" (Siegel 161). Siegel points out how "Women identified as Jews in cinema tend to have hair that is almost always both curly and frizzy" and will usually have

"Embarrassingly big breasts and full hips and behinds [that] wobble as they walk, alerting us of their impurity, their disgustingly fleshy presence" (Siegel 161). And of course, they will have "America's most despised nose: a long, hooked one. The Jewish nose stands for all that is inferior about the Jewish body and specifically due to its phallic association, in women this nose represents defunct femininity" (Siegel 161), making Jewish women less sexually appealing, and thus not the ideal heroines in films with romantic plots. Meanwhile, in reality, "there are all sorts of Jews with widely different appearances, including many who meet these [American] beauty standards, they– and certainly not the Jewish women typically depicted on film– are not the norm or the stereotype" (Siegel 161). Siegel is correct in that just like women in general, Jewish women can greatly differ in their physical appearance.

In writing *Unscripted Content*, just as it was important for me to show diversity in Jewish observance and heritage, I also wanted to show a breadth of Jewish women who differ in their personalities, appearance, and how they connect to Judaism. I made a point to not specify appearance in my character descriptions, only background, because as Siegel notes, Jewish women can look different even though that may not be how they are usually portrayed on screen. I also call attention to typical negative stereotypes of Jewish women in the opening audition sequence such as being spoiled to the point of carelessness with their parents' money or even having a casting director outright telling Sydney that she should act more like a JAP in her performance. Most significantly, I play with the negative, stereotypical expectations a wider audience might have of Sydney being a young, Jewish American woman through her performance on the reality show as she begins to lose herself in the role of being a mean girl. Through Sydney's time on the show, the screenplay shows how the public responds, with the Jewish community even calling her a problematic and negative representation of Jews.

***Jews and Representations of Romance in Film***

Given the negative stereotypes and depictions of Jewish women, they are not always at the forefront of romance movies. It is important to consider how Jews are typically represented in romantic relationships and Skinazi points to how the "romantic and religious [can be] deeply intertwined" (Skinazi 110). Unfortunately, "American Jews most often appear in films as uglies that simply cannot inspire sexual desire, although they may be given a sort of pitying love" (Siegel 162), which is not equal to other non-Jewish characters. When looking ahead at a more concrete depiction of love, marriage, Siegel explains how "American Jews are often depicted as people who marry for the wrong reasons because they fail to properly value romantic love" (Siegel 65) as seen in films such as *Radio Days* (1987). Because of the assumption that Jews are unable to value romantic love, it is challenging for them to appear at the forefront of a romantic story or for their love to seem genuine. Later, Siegel writes, "Even a happy and equitable marriage between two Jews is depicted as something that only exists in a romanticized past" (Siegel 78), solidifying the fact that in entertainment, Jewish characters do not get a "happily ever after" kind of love story.

With the feature screenplay, I whole-heartedly challenge the assessment that Jews cannot find love or be in genuine, loving relationships on screen. A large part of the script takes place on a Jewish reality dating show with the goal of helping Jewish singles find love and the characters on the show are all presented as viable romantic options. Additionally, Ruth's backstory with her husband plays with the idea that Jews cannot get into marriages for the right reasons given that she initially entered the marriage out of convenience, however both individuals soon found that they felt a genuine, romantic love for one another. Lastly, in a feel-good ending to the script,

Sydney and Guy are both in a committed, loving relationship with one another, proving that Jewish characters can find love just like anyone else.

***History of Rom-Coms***

In his article, "Romantic comedy and the virtues of predictability," Kyle Stevens provides an overview of love stories in that they "are about flux, fundamentally temporal, so it makes sense that artists and entertainers have so often turned to cinema to tell them," (Stevens 28) which only serves to highlight why a Jewish love story is one that should be explored through film. Stevens continues, writing, they "traditionally occur between conventionally attractive cishet characters (in fact, films often rely on our understanding of physical attractiveness to establish a couple's compatibility), yet different genres handle love's presentation differently" (Stevens 28). Stevens' emphasis on the attractiveness of a typical couple in a rom-com could illuminate why there are not many films in the genre that follow outwardly Jewish characters, given the bleak portrayals of the physical beauty of Jewish women. In her article, "Love and Microphones: Romantic Comedy Heroines as Public Speakers," Eleanor Hersey outlines how Hollywood romantic comedies began to receive more criticism starting in the '80s, but "most critics are ambivalent about the genre's liberating potential for its large female audiences" (Hersey 150). As a result, these types of films are shifting from narratives that have romance at their forefront to "comedy about women fighting to achieve their educational and professional goals, who fall in love as part of the story" (Hersey 158). In "'I'm Taken … by Myself": Romantic Crisis in the Self-Centered Indie Rom-Com, Beatriz Oria provides a brief history of the level of success rom-coms faced in the 2000s and 2010s. While rom-coms thrived in the 2000s, as seen in 2002 with "eight rom-coms in the top one hundred highest-grossing films of the year, and they collectively took in $687 million in domestic box office alone," in the 2010s

the genre "plummeted at the box office or virtually disappeared altogether from the big screen" (Oria 3).

Even though romantic comedies are not doing well in Hollywood at the moment, indie rom-coms have been thriving as they "deploy the conventions of romantic comedy, reinventing the genre in the process through new formulas that are contributing to its renaissance" (Oria 3). She goes on to say that "there is a clear tendency in the contemporary rom-com to 'diversify' the film's focus– that is, to pay attention to other issues apart from romance. One of the most frequent variations is emphasis on the characters' quest for identity and self-improvement" (Oria 3). These popular ideas of self-discovery and growth in today's rom-coms can easily be applied to a rom-com that explores Jewish identity, however a film like this has yet to be made. Nowadays, "romance is either sidestepped or subordinated to other aspects, such as friendship, parenthood, professional accomplishments, family ties, or simply self-discovery" (Oria 4). Oria lists many films, among them *The Spectacular Now* (2013)*, Sleeping With Other People* (2015), and *The Big Sick* (2017)*,* to highlight this trend in which a character's journey of self-growth is more important than their finding love. Moreover, several notable films from the 2010s, such as *How to Be Single* (2016), *I Feel Pretty* (2018), and *Isn't It Romantic?* (2019) "choose to focus on their female protagonists as nuanced, fully fleshed-out characters in process of growth rather than highlight the romantic quest exclusively" (Oria 4) and this trajectory can be kept up as we continue through the 2020s.

Similarly, in *Unscripted Content*, Sydney's romance is secondary to her self-growth journey as she learns more about her Jewish identity and pursues her acting career. In the past she gave up her relationship with Nate in favor of trying to break into acting and her "romance" with Asher is just a means to an end of finally getting a role. Towards the end of the story, while

Sydney is aware Guy has feelings for her and she may feel the same, she decides to work on herself and does not seek out a relationship with him. This attitude towards romance does not only apply to Sydney but extends to Aviva and Ruth who both have career ambitions to be a lawyer and engineer, respectively, and happen to find romance on the way to getting there. Interestingly, romance seems like more of a priority for the men in the story than it is for the women, which allows for the women to emerge as more fully-fleshed out and nuanced characters.

***Feminized Culture***

Rom-coms fall under the category of feminized culture, meaning that they are seen as inferior and less serious, because of how "in debates about mass culture, feminine qualities– emotion, sentiment, passivity– are used to signify the worthlessness of mass culture" (Battles 1280). In her article "This is UnREAL: Discourses of Quality, Antiheroes, and the Erasure of the Femininized Popular Culture in 'Television for Women,'" Kathleen Battles uses "the term 'feminized' to indicate such culture as discursively situated as for and about women, without relying on an essentialized notion of either woman or the feminine" (Battles 1280). This is seen in other scholarly work as well with "a great deal of contemporary popular and academic discourse about television work[ing] to legitimate forms as quality by distinguishing hierarchically from television most often associated with women, minorities, children, or older adults" (Battles 1281). This sentiment is important to highlight, especially given the scope of a project that follows a female protagonist from a group of people that go improperly represented in media, and therefore could be delegitimatized and not be taken as seriously as it should be. On the subject of feminized culture, Hersey weighs in, saying, "tastes and preferences constructed as masculine are more likely to be privileged even when the text in question is meant to appeal

primarily to women" (Hersey 150), which adds another, more complex layer to the term of feminized culture.

Similar to rom-coms, reality television (RTV) is seen as a form of feminized culture because "women figure centrally in the RTV genre, especially in shows about romance," (Dubrofsky 353) such as a dating competition show. When studying *The Bachelor* in her article "Fallen Women in Reality TV," Rachel E. Dubrofsky notes how elements of the show "fit that category of melodrama to situate the series as part of a feminine genre that explores the emotions of women" (Dubrofsky 358). Moreover, the series "is about women, geared to a female audience and has romance and relationships as its central themes" (Dubrofsky 358), so the show is inexplicably linked to women and seen as inferior or less worthy of being taken seriously. Similarly, in her article "'It's a Mix of Authenticity and Complete Fabrication' Emotional Camping: The Cross-Platform Labor of the Real Housewives," Evie Psarras notes that RTV is rooted in "the hidden, precarious, and unregulated labor behind RTV, which also happens to depend on the disparagement of 'women's work'"(Psarras 1385), meaning women work hard on the show in front of the camera and this work is belittled. Because of the way *Unscripted Content* is constructed, the reader can see how much work Sydney puts into becoming her on-screen persona, whether it is the plotting with Isla or taking into account when the cameras are around so that her words and actions can factor into the show's narrative. However, Sydney's work is delegitamized by most. Even she herself recognizes from the very beginning that the show would be a get fame quick scheme and later her parents look down on her for going on the show while not understanding how she intends to use the situation to advance her career.

***Reality Television (RTV)***

Dubrofsky defines RTV "to mean the filming of real people over time with the aim of developing a narrative about their activities segmented into serial episodes. The term designates shows that are unscripted, though most have a specific structure" (Dubrofsky 354). She continues to say that her "analysis assumes that what occurs on a RTV show is a constructed fiction, like the action, like the action on scripted shows, with the twist that real people create the fiction of the series" (Dubrofsky 354). She also writes that with RTV, "the shows are based on access to 'reality' (footage of real situations) without suggesting they *are* 'reality'... often only a tiny percentage of the footage actually appears in the final edited version" (Dubrofsky 354–55), indicating how reality television very rarely, if ever shows its audience the whole picture.

This notion draws upon similarities with regards to typical representations of Judaism in film in that they do not provide a comprehensive look at this group of people in their on-screen representations, and thus reality television's shortcomings can be used as a metaphor for Jewish representation in media. In *Unscripted Content*, there are several instances where elements of Judaism are exaggerated or falsely portrayed. For example, a Shabbat dinner, traditionally on Fridays, is filmed on a Monday. The most notable example is the character of Levi Cohen who pretends to be Jewish for the sake of getting a job and only wears a kippah and tzitzit, Jewish garments, when he is about to go on camera. His dialogue in the show is also intended to hyper-characterize him as Jewish whether it is his not exactly timely "Mazal Tov" exclamation or his introductory speeches before challenges. The revelation at the very end of the script that Levi is not even Jewish is only one example of how false reality television can be.

***The Emotional Power Dynamics of RTV***

Dubrofsky notes "The display of women, emotional women, in particular is ubiquitous in the reality TV (RTV) genre" (Dubrofsky 353). When considering the importance of emotions in reality TV it is essential to explore the concept of emotional labor, which "refers to the work people are compensated for, which includes conveying the proper emotions and feelings to complete a job. Emotional labor requires one to evince certain emotions and suppress others" (Psarras 1384). In the case of *The Real Housewives*, "these women are performing on a network that benefits from them losing control of their emotions. The women of RH therefore have to appear to lose control of their emotions in whatever way the scene demands" (Psarras 1385). Shots of over-emotionality can be harmful for the women themselves as they "can be used in an aggressive manner to reveal an emotional side of a woman against the woman's expressed desire not to show this side, or to show her as unstable" (Dubrofsky 366) Most harmful is that "*The Bachelor* recruits women into the job of governing the behavior of other women" (Dubrofsky 366).

Those working behind the scenes of RTV have the power to exploit their stars to advance stereotypes and gender norms. Psarras puts it simply, "RTV stars are often exploited by the networks that employ them" (Psarras 1383) and "while the women of RH are exploited, they demonstrate awareness by performing in ways that emphasize certain stereotypes" (Psarras 1388). She also adds that "ironic framing tactics assist producers in shifting criticism about the stereotypes the show creates and perpetuates, to the women" (Psarras 1387). Producers have an unfair hold on RTV stars and "The best way [for them] to communicate compliance is to play whatever role producers need them to play by delivering the reactions and scenes they ask for during filming. In other words, the women must put on a show" (Psarras 1391–92).

One of the most important relationships in the screenplay is that of Sydney and Isla. Isla is a duplicitous manipulator who takes advantage of Sydney and others on the show to advance her own agenda of making the most dramatic and salacious show she can with no regard to the damage she is causing. Isla knows how to use the desires and emotions of the contestants to get what she wants such as showing Sydney heavily doctored footage of Ruth so that Sydney is willing to sabotage Ruth in the show's various competitions. As Sydney takes on the mean girl persona, she willingly becomes the stereotypical jappy mean girl she had once rejected in her auditions, only now the role is on steroids because it is conflated with her identity as Sydney Aaronson. Soon, Sydney realizes the hold Isla has on her and tries to fight back, only for Isla to unveil Sydney's audition video, forcing Sydney to face who she is and move on and out from Isla's influence.

**III. Film and Television Review**

**Shiva Baby**

One of the most popular Jewish films over the last several years has been *Shiva Baby*, which follows Danielle, a young Jewish woman on the brink of her college graduation, who is attending a shiva, which becomes increasingly chaotic as people from her past arrive. The film is situated in an inherently Jewish environment and oftentimes will not only feature Jewish elements, but utilize them to create tension and dramatic situations. The Jewish women at the shiva are huge gossips and are extremely nosy so they keep asking Danielle different iterations of the same questions or ask these questions amongst themselves behind her back as her personal problems escalate. They will say things like "She lost so much weight." "Is she okay?" "Do you think she has an eating disorder?" And after a particularly tense moment, Danielle starts eating food and multiple women spot her, sharing "she's eating, she's eating." In an intense moment,

Danielle stumbles backwards, knocking over a table with a glass vase and several prayer books. Danielle kneels down, becoming obsessed with kissing each prayer book and returning it to the table as her mother tries to engage her in conversation to figure out what is wrong. While it is customary to kiss a prayer book when it falls on the ground, the film expertly takes this situation and allows Danielle to hide behind this religious action as she prolongs her admission that she is not okay, ultimately breaking down in her mother's arms.

One unfortunately realistic, yet problematic part of the film, is some characters' attitudes towards a couple that consists of a Jewish man and his wife who converted to Judaism. When talking about them, Danielle's mother says of her conversion, "conversion schmersion" which makes the wife out to be lesser than everyone else because she is a convert whose conversion Danielle's mother doesn't seem to respect. After the couple shows Danielle's parents pictures of their baby, Danielle's mother later remarks how the child does not have a nose, giving into the negative stereotype of Jews having big noses. This is only emphasized when the wife mentions how the baby inherited her nose. Interestingly enough, the actress who plays the wife is Jewish in real life while the actress who plays Danielle is not, which shows how Jews do and can look different.

In terms of attitudes towards love in the film, Danielle's dating life is a repeated conversation topic throughout the narrative. Many women at the shiva ask Danielle if she is dating anyone and some berate her on the subject, going on to ask her why not. In one scene, in a conversation with a friend, Danielle's mother says, "I want someone good for Dani. I need to find someone," illustrating the importance of Dani being in a relationship. When Danielle has her breakdown at the end, her mother tries to reassure her saying, "You're going to get a great job, meet a great man, fall in love." Through these interactions it is undeniable that a part of

Danielle's self-worth comes from whether she is dating someone and this is important to those in her community. What stuck out to me most is that it is key to Danielle's mother's notion of happiness that she falls in love, which combats the expectation that Jews do not marry out of love.

**Leona**

Also a coming-of-age narrative, *Leona* tells the story of Ariela, a 25-year-old Mexican-Jewish woman who falls in love with a non-Jew and attempts to make the relationship work despite the intense pressure from her community to end it. The film shines in its depiction of the typically underrepresented Syrian Jewish community in Mexico. The film uses Jewish traditions such as immersing oneself in a mikvah, a ritual bath, to both open and close the film. The reemergence of the mikvah at the end of the film where the protagonist creates a makeshift mikvah in her bathtub is a powerful closing. This scene shows how she embraces and takes ownership of her Judaism despite the challenges she has had to face from her community  when she was dating a non-Jew. *Leona* also features several Shabbat dinner scenes, which many Jews can relate to, even if they come from a different background than Ariela. In the film, the family goes through the various Shabbat prayers, such as those on wine and on bread. At the end of the night, Ariela hugs her various family members, wishing them a "Shabbat shalom." Overall, the film does a great job of taking these small, yet authentically-captured details of a Shabbat meal, so that the audience is able to feel more immersed in the story's world. At the same time, Ariela has a complex relationship with her Judaism and although she keeps traditions like Shabbat, she will still eat grasshoppers and non-kosher meat when she is not around her family. Another key scene that shows how Ariela embraces her connection to Judaism is towards the end when she creates a

mural titled Leona, or lioness which is her namesake in Hebrew, showing how despite the turmoil she has endured, she will still embrace this part of who she is.

One part of the film that I do think is problematic in its representation of Judaism, but is very much embedded in the story's premise, is how Ariela cannot find love within the Jewish community. These narratives where a Jewish character finds love outside of the Jewish community are more common and overdramatized compared to stories about a romantic relationship between two Jewish characters. In one scene, when Ariela discusses her forbidden relationship with a non-Jew, her grandmother asks her if she loves him. When Ariela nods, her grandmother tells her, "It's not about that, sweetheart," which contributes to the problematic notion that Jewish people do not marry for romantic love. Although Ariela's grandmother's sentiment may seem outdated, in their community marrying Jewish takes precedence over love; however, the film takes the troublesome position that having both is not possible. Similarly, when Ariela finally does get a Jewish boyfriend, their feelings for one another are not the priority in the relationship. One family member tells Ariela, "His father does really well" and in another scene when her boyfriend comes to visit the family, he greets every one of her family members before sitting down next to her and barely acknowledging her, thus indicating how for him the families are more of a priority than the two individuals in the relationship. Later in the film, when her boyfriend plans to propose, everyone seems to know except for her since he has not paid much attention to her needs or taken the time to truly get to know her. Apart from her boyfriend, Ariela attempts to date several Jewish men and all are depicted as unsuitable options from a guy who hardly lets her get a word in to another guy who orders for her and terribly delivers a cheesy pick-up line. While it is clear that this film strived to authentically portray an

underrepresented Jewish community, it does highlight the lack of stories that show it is possible for a Jewish couple to be happy and have a successful love story.

**Jewish Matchmaking**

*Jewish Matchmaking* is the sole American dating show dedicated to matching Jewish singles and is thus a very important model for creating a Jewish dating show in my feature. For the purpose of this paper, I will only be analyzing the first three episodes to demonstrate how the show follows Jews from a variety of backgrounds and levels of observance. The show's resident matchmaker, Aleeza Ben Shalom says it best, "There's 15 million Jews in the world and there's about 15 million different ways to be Jewish." Through Ben Shalom's conversations with her clients, it is clear that she accepts them all regardless of their level of observance, and this in turn leads to the viewer being more accepting of them as well. Similarly, one of the singles, Ori, a Morrocan Israeli now living in LA shares, "I'm very spiritual. It's about a spiritual connection to a higher power" and goes on to say that he does not like how Judaism is divided into different sects because everyone is Jewish regardless. When describing his Judaism, he says he prays in his own way, does not keep kosher, and loves eating pork. Meanwhile, Cindy is an American woman who recently moved to Israel and keeps Shabbat fully but acknowledges that she will not always dress modestly, or follow the rules of *tzniut*, to which Ben Shalom says she is "flexidox." The show thrives in showing an authentically wide spectrum of Jews who observe and connect with Judaism in different ways.

*Jewish Matchmaking* also does a great job of depicting Jewish traditions in a way that demonstrates how Judaism is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of those clients on the show. The first episode opens with footage of a Jewish wedding in Israel as those in the wedding go through the different wedding rituals as the momentousness and joy of the occasion shines

through. Later, Ori helps his mother prepare for Shabbat and helps set the table. Afterwards, he and his family sing "Shalom Aleichem," a song typically sung at the Shabbat table, in a lively manner with everyone in his family clapping along. Meanwhile, another single on the show, Noah, prays in his home, wearing tefillin and a talit, something he does on a daily basis as a part of his observance.

While I critiqued *Leona* for not depicting a truly happy Jewish romance for the protagonist, in *Jewish Matchmaking* several characters openly express why having a Jewish partner is important to them and therefore why they plan to marry someone Jewish. Cindy tells Ben Shalom, "For me, marrying Jewish is important. My grandmother fled Libya in a thieves' caravan with gold in her bra, you know, to keep her Judaism. And my grandfather survived the Holocaust to keep his Judaism. And for me, it's such a beautiful religion and culture and there's so much there. I want to be a part of the miracle that continues that." This quote encompasses what I am trying to show with my thesis in that the Jewish people have been through so much in order to keep their religion, and there is such a gift in carrying on that tradition and sharing that commitment with one's partner.

## IV. Writing Process

### Inspiration and Brainstorming

As someone who has always loved writing and consuming entertainment, I had always known that writing a feature-length screenplay was a feat I wanted to attempt. After interning at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival a couple of years ago and being exposed to a wide variety of Jewish stories on film that I felt a deep sense of connection with, I decided I wanted to make a story centered around Judaism myself. At first, I came up with an idea of a family drama centered around a Passover seder. The family members would all arrive with secrets and as the

night progresses, the things they have been trying to hide would come to light with the potential to change their family forever. As I began doing research for my thesis over the summer, I found that I was no longer interested in a story that only spanned one night nor one so serious in tone. Instead, I had a new idea, inspired in part due to a research project I had done about a reality television dating show in the semester prior as well as having recently watched *Jewish Matchmaking*. I decided I wanted to make a rom-com feature set on a Jewish reality dating show. I was excited by the possibilities for commentary on Jewish representation that this premise allowed for. I also thought a story with a more comedic tone would not only be more enjoyable to write, but would allow for more creativity in how I approached the subject matter of Jewish representation on screen.

Before I began writing the actual script, it was vital for me to make sure I had a solid grasp of my story and my characters. To do so, I wrote a synopsis along with character bios. I found the character bios to be an enjoyable activity that not only helped me learn more about my characters and their backstories, but surprisingly I got a better sense of what the tone of the script would be through how I wrote them. I found the synopsis to be more challenging and went through several drafts as I ironed out the different plotlines and made sure the story flowed in a believable and efficient manner. Once I had a solid draft of the synopsis, I moved on to a scene-by-scene outline where I got to go more in depth than the synopsis. Because I had the framework from the synopsis, the outline was less difficult to make, and I enjoyed being able to consider the progression of the story on a more detailed level. I went through a few drafts of the scene-by-scene outline and struggled most with making sure that the different storylines throughout the script each progressed in a way that best contributed to the story. In my final draft, I included the different storylines each scene contributed to and found that this helped me

better understand and visualize how the various parts of my story would progress. Also, before I started writing, I decided to compose expanded character bios to give my characters more detailed backstories. Although most of this information never made its way into my script, I had a much more comprehensive understanding of who my characters were. Equipped with my scene-by-scene outline and expanded character bios, I felt fully prepared to begin writing the script.

**Writing**

Once I started writing, I decided I wanted to go ahead with writing the script without going back to revise until I had a completed first draft. I found this made it much easier to write as I did not have to worry about making anything perfect since my focus was simply to get words on the page. I made myself a writing schedule with the deadlines of: first act, second act part 1, second act part 2, and act 3. Breaking up the writing this way allowed me to not be too overwhelmed by the task of writing an entire screenplay and having set deadlines helped me stay on task. Since I stuck to my schedule, I was able to finish my script within two months, giving myself another two months for revisions.

**Revisions and Challenges**

After leaving my script alone for a week, I was ready to jump back into my revisions. Using the feedback I had gotten along with my own assessment of things I wanted to change about my script, I created a scene-by-scene list of all the different revisions I wanted to make. Having the revisions broken up this way made the editing process much more manageable for me. At first, I split up my revisions into four parts as I had done with writing the script so that it would not be as daunting as tackling the entire script at once. After the first round of revisions, I

was able to break up my revisions by first half and second half. I continued to do this until I reached a fourth round and felt that the script was in good shape.

There are several challenges I want to note that I encountered during both the writing and revision process. First, I struggled with Sydney's character, specifically with testing the limits of how bad a person she could be. I found it difficult to make sure she did not come across as a negative stereotype while also being tasked to show how the media takes advantage of her in her less than ideal moments. Ultimately, I realized that I could make Sydney more redeemable by giving Isla more power and thus take the responsibility of being a terrible person off of Sydney. As the things Sydney did became worse, I had Isla resort to blackmail to get Sydney to reluctantly go along with the character she played on the show. Another area I struggled with, even back when I was outlining the story, was balancing the outside world with the reality TV world. I wanted to make sure that the reality TV world did not seem too contained or isolated from everything else happening on the outside. While I wrote, especially while working on my first draft, I did not do a great job of highlighting the reality TV world and its hyper-surveilled universe, so in my revisions, I was sure to add details about camera crews and production team members, which showed me how much small details could affect the believability of a story's world. To resolve the issue of making sure the story was not so contained, I included a montage from the outside world and kept up the storyline of Sydney's parents' reluctance to support her acting dreams.

Another area that I struggled with was making sure that the relationship between Sydney and Guy was believable. While I was following the more contemporary tradition of the romantic plotline in rom-coms being secondary to the protagonist's goal of self-discovery, I did find that I was not giving as much attention to the evolution of Sydney and Guy's relationship as I should

have been. In order to fix this, I went back and strengthened existing scenes between the two so they could develop more chemistry with one another and, on a smaller level, made sure to include reaction shots of Guy to Sydney's actions so that he would feel like a bigger part of the script, even if it was in this more minimal, yet visual way. Lastly, a significant issue I faced was my tendency to overwrite and make dialogue heavy scenes when they were not necessary to telling the story. At one point in my revisions, I discovered that I had added nearly 25 pages since my completed first draft. In my third round of revisions, I was able to cut down on my dialogue and did a better job of starting and ending scenes when necessary. Through this strategy, I cut down a significant amount of pages, which allowed me to have greater freedom in terms of elements I needed to add in future revisions to make the story stronger.

**V. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I hope that *Unscripted Content* emerges as a significant contribution to the landscape of Jewish representation in film and television. By centering authentic, complex, and diverse portrayals of Judaism, the screenplay challenges stereotypes and offers audiences a fresh perspective on the religion. My intention is that *Unscripted Content* stands out in its commitment to showcasing the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity, encompassing characters' personalities, religiosity, heritage, and backgrounds. In doing so, the screenplay not only entertains but also educates and celebrates the diversity of Jewish experiences, fostering greater understanding and empathy among audiences. Through my framing of the script within the context of reality television, my goal for *Unscripted Content* is to offer a poignant critique of past problematic representations of Judaism and Jewish characters. By exposing the exaggerated or false portrayals often found in reality TV, the screenplay invites its audience to question the

authenticity and ethics of media production, particularly in its treatment of poorly represented communities.

Furthermore, by exploring the intersecting themes of womanhood and exploitation within the reality TV world, *Unscripted Content* underscores the broader societal issues of gender dynamics and power imbalances that permeate the entertainment industry. By delving into topics such as anti-Semitism, Jewish representation in film history, and contemporary trends in rom-coms and reality television, this paper has shed light on the importance of accurate, nuanced, and inclusive portrayals of Judaism. Through the critical analysis of specific films and television shows, including *Shiva Baby*, *Leona*, and *Jewish Matchmaking*, I have examined the quality of Jewish representation within contemporary media offerings, identifying both strengths and weaknesses, with special attention to their representations of Jewish love. Ultimately, *Unscripted Content* stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to challenge stereotypes, inspire empathy, and spark meaningful conversations about identity, religion, gender, representation, and what all of these mean for the human experience.

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