ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
Jewish American Popular Culture
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Film

The history of Jewish representation in American film is a history of gradual assimilation, resulting temporarily in virtual disappearance, followed by a resurgence of activity that is still in full development. Throughout the history of American motion pictures, Jews have dominated film production, serving as producers, writers, composers, directors, and businessmen. In recent years they have also become performers in growing numbers.

The Early Silent Era. Jewish images proliferated during the era of silent cinema, revealing stories of European hardships and the tribulations of American immigrant life, all redeemed by opportunities in the Land of Promise. These stories were contrasted by a large number of comedies featuring ethnically stereotyped Jewish performers. In the United States the first images were also documentaries. In 1903, Thomas Edison released two one-minute films called Arabian Jewish Dance and Jewish Dance at Jerusalem featuring Hasidic dancing a hora.

Following these earliest moving pictures were a number of short comedies and dramas. Typical of these was Cohen’s Fire Sale (1907), which featured a large-nosed, gesticulating merchant who makes profits on naïve customers. Produced by the Edison Company, it reflected the prevailing anti-Semitism of the day. More sympathetic were films such as The Romance of a Jewess (1908), directed by D. W. Griffith, which dramatizes the tragic consequences for young Ruth when she goes against her father’s wishes and marries the man of her choice.

In the main, these films fell into three general categories. The first, ghetto films, depict immigrant life on New York’s Lower East Side, establishing several character types who persist through the decades—namely, the patriarchal father with Orthodox commitments; the prodigal son, who chooses a different path, usually toward assimilation; and the Rose of the ghetto, the innocent virginal typical of the Victorian era, ever on the verge of being violated. These characters turn up in such films as: Child of the Ghetto (1910), The Ghetto Seamstress (1910), Solomon’s Son (1912), The Jew’s Christmas (1913), and A Passover Miracle (1914).

The second genre, the pogrom films, drew inspiration from events in czarist Russia. Here Jewish oppression was graphically portrayed, with rescues provided by the intervention of Christian lovers. Often these works ended as the family set off for the Promised Land. Over a dozen of these films were made. Titles include In the Czar’s Name (1910), Russia, the Land of Oppression (1910), The Sorrows of Israel (1913), Escape From Siberia (1914), and Vengeance of the Oppressed (1916).

Two dramas deserve special mention: A Passover Miracle (1914) and The Jew’s Christmas (1913). The first feature chronicles a prodigal son’s philandering and eventual return to the fold. Produced and distributed with the aid of the Bureau of Education of the Jewish Community of New York, the film is an early effort to depict Jewish life and ritual in the hopes of furthering religious tolerance. The second work, produced by Lois Weber and Phillip Smalley, non-Jews, also aimed at interfaith understanding, but through different means. Here intermarriage is not only condoned, but the patriarchal rabbi, who is the first portrayal of a rabbi in American film, ends up celebrating Christmas as emotion triumphs
over religious difference. It is this scenario that becomes the dominant message in the years to come.

The third genre, the comedies, display character types including scheming merchants, as in *Levitsky's Insurance Policy* (1908) or *Foxy Izzy* (1911), or Jewish weaklings, as in *The Yiddisher Cowboy* (1909 and 1911) and *How Mosha Came Back* (1914), who use their brains to overcome their physical limitations.

In addition to these three categories, Jews appeared in the various adaptations of classic literature, such as *The Merchant of Venice* (1908, 1912, 1914) and *Oliver Twist* (1909, 1910, 1912, 1916), serving to perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes.

The 1920s. During the twenties, there was a plethora of films with Jewish subjects. Most were outgrowths of the earlier period, especially stories from the New York ghetto. Many character types persisted—the patriarchal father, the prodigal son, and the Rose of the ghetto. Added to these was a new figure, the long-suffering mother. The struggle for dominance within the immigrant family and the conflict between traditionalism and assimilation continued to be the central concerns. However, during the twenties the balance of power clearly shifted to the younger generation. Sons rejected their fathers. Families are reconstituted, but seldom do sons “go back home again.”

An important feature of this period is the emphasis placed on “making it.” Many films deal with sudden financial success and the movement out of the ghetto, reflecting the upward mobility of many Jews. Closely tied to satisfying the great American dream is the ready acceptance of assimilationist ideas. As in the earlier period, this usually manifests itself in a marriage contract between Jew and Gentile, a narrative element that constitutes a happy ending to a large number of works. The “melting-pot” mentality also emerges through the portrayal of relationships with the Gentile community at large. Frequently non-Jews appear as business partners as well as romantic lovers in films with such wonderful titles as *Kosher Kitty Kelly* (1926) and *Clancy’s Kosher Wedding* (1927). As in the earlier films, the Irish appear over and over again.

During the twenties, comedies evolved from one- and two-reelers to feature works. Like the melodramas, many center on ghetto life. Jewish shopkeepers continue to conduct business, but the scheming merchant disappears. The comedies tend to be structured around several leading Jewish performers, each of whom developed a unique film persona. The most popular was George Sidney. Beginning with *Busy Izzy* (1915), he portrayed throughout the silent era the small, rotund immigrant, struggling to stay on top of the situation. These appearances culminated in the 1926 film *The Cohens and Kellys*, a blockbuster that spawned six sequels. In addition, Alexander Carr and Sammy Cohen found their niches, creating comic characters such as Morris Perlmutter and Sammy Nosenbloom.

Representative of the twenties are also several prominent motion pictures. Inaugurating the decade is *Humoresque* (1920), a prestige production released by Paramount, based on a work by Fannie Hurst. The story follows the life of Leon Kantor who, spurred on by the encouragement and sacrifice of his mother, rises to great fame as a violinist. As one critic pointed out, “the spectator is not looking at the Jewish family life from the outside in but from the inside out.” In large measure, *Humoresque* set the pattern for the films to follow, including *The Good Provider* (1922), *Hungry Hearts* (1922), and *Salome of the Tenements* (1925).

Also influenced by *Humoresque* is the decade’s most celebrated feature, *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Remembered in history as the first talking film, *The Jazz Singer* featured Al Jolson as Jack Robin, a prodigal son, intent upon following a Broadway career rather than becoming a fifth-generation cantor as his father wishes. Supported by a loving mother, Jack not only reaches his ambition but also captures the heart of the lovely Mary, the shiksa. The film’s popularity made this pejorative term known to millions of non-Jewish Americans.
In between these two melodramas were several other ghetto films, most importantly His People (1925), We Americans (1928), and The Younger Generation (1929). His People, directed by Edward Sloman, and The Younger Generation, directed by Frank Capra, feature immigrant families and peddler fathers. Starring eminent actors such as Rudolph Schildkraut and Jean Hersholt, the films depict sons who achieve the American dream as lawyers, boxers, and successful businessmen. Although these works questioned the price for such upward mobility, in the main they affirm the goal. We Americans goes a step further, depicting intermarriage among different national groups and different religions as the natural result of good-hearted men.

The comedies echoed many of the same themes as the dramas. Two series typify the era—the three Potash/Perlmutter comedies (1923–1926), featuring two irascible Jewish partners, and the mishaps of the Cohens and Kellys (1926–1929).

The decade ended with perhaps the most affirmative plea for intermarriage, Abie's Irish Rose, released in 1928 with talking sequences. Clearly, Levy and Murphy, the fathers, represent the “old way” as well as the old world, while their children, Abie and Rosemary, have solved the problems of religious difference through marital bliss and the birth of a baby. As with the dramas, this resolution becomes more dominant as we approach the thirties.

**The 1930s and the Era of Sound.** In the two years following Warner Brothers’ The Jazz Singer, Hollywood frantically set about converting to sound. As the studios began importing New York talent, many Jews landed in Hollywood. Among the Jewish performers who made their way west were Jack Benny, Ben Blue, Fanny Brice, George Burns, Harry Green, Ted Lewis, the Marx Brothers, Sophie Tucker, and Ed Wynn. In addition, directors and writers shifted from theater to film, including men such as George cukor, Reuben Mamoulian, Sidney Buchman, Norman Krasna, Charles Lederer, Joseph Mankiewicz, S. J. Perelman, Robert Riskin, Morrie Ryskind, and Ben Hecht.

In film, the **Hollywood mogul** soon replaced the Jewish businessman as an object of jest and a character of self-parody. He turns up in Once in a Lifetime (1932), wherein the producer Julius Saxe demands a scenario of Genesis in 300 words, and in The Cohens and Kellys in Hollywood (1932).

Upward mobility continued to occupy the minds of screenwriters; however, in the films of the 1930s, there is an increasing ambivalence or, at least, a somber realization that every gain has its concomitant loss. Sometimes this theme is treated nostalgically, as in Symphony of Six Million (1932), when Felix Klauber decides to give up his fancy Park Avenue medical practice and return to the ghetto; sometimes comically, as in The Heart of New York (1932), where the Mendels do the same thing in an effort to once again be with their old friends; and sometimes dramatically, as when George Simon, the protagonist of Elmer Rice’s Counsellor at Law (1933), must reexamine the values that made him one of New York’s top criminal attorneys.

By the mid-thirties even assimilated Jews were of little interest to studio producers. The degree to which Hollywood eliminated a Jewish presence can be assessed by comparing The House of Rothschild (1934) with The Life of Emile Zola (1937). The former deals with the famous banking family and forthrightly depicts historic anti-Semitism rampant in the Germany of their day (and by analogy the 1930s as well). In this film, starring George Arliss who had twice depicted Benjamin Disraeli on the screen, there is no question of Rothschild’s identity. In contrast, The Life of Emile Zola depicts the infamous Dreyfus Affair, yet oddly, throughout the entire film the fact that Dreyfus was a Jew is never mentioned. Instead, he is portrayed as just an innocent French officer unfairly accused.

Despite Hitler’s appointment in 1933 as chancellor of Germany, the growing militarization, the suspension of civil liberties, and the subsequent legislated discrimination against Jews, Hollywood remained totally silent on the subject throughout the thirties. The producers reflected...
the policy of isolationism that emanated from Washington. MGM’s *Three Comrades* (1938) and Warner Brothers’ *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) merely intimated the true horror of the Third Reich.

Only one voice dealt directly with the plight of Jews. Charlie Chaplin, a non-Jew, who had worked independently since the 1920s, broke ranks by producing *The Great Dictator* (1940), a film that depicted contemporary conditions in his mythical Tomania. Despite its comic demeanor, the film ends with a passionate plea for hope and triumph over evil.

*The 1940s and World War II*. With the onset of World War II, Hollywood set about dealing with fascism, although it was less explicit about Jewish persecution. Several titles reached the screen at the beginning of the 1940s: *Escape* (1940), *The Mortal Storm* (1940), and *So Ends Our Night* (1941). It was not until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, however, that Hollywood went to war in full force. Increasingly, the victims are identified as Jews rather than non-Aryans, ironically a Nazi classification. These films included *The Pied Piper* (1942), *None Shall Escape* (1944), and *Address Unknown* (1944).

The war also saw the rise of the combat film, usually depicting a fighting unit of ethnically and geographically diverse soldiers. Among the films with Jewish characters who were fighting to keep the world safe for democracy were *Air Force* (1943), *Bataan* (1943), *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), and *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943). Most typically the Jews’ function was to provide the comic relief.

More serious depictions of Jewish participation in World War II can be found in *The Purple Heart* (1944) and *Pride of the Marines* (1945). Consistently, all the characters evidence intelligence, bravery, and patriotism.

Following the war and the full knowledge of the Nazi atrocities, it was natural to ask, “How could this happen?” “Could it happen here?” The response to these questions was two films, both released in 1947—RKO’s *Crossfire* and 20th Century Fox’s *Gentleman’s Agreement*.

*Crossfire* treats anti-Semitism as the cause for a seemingly unmotivated murder in a typical 1940s film noir. *Gentleman’s Agreement* presents journalist Gregory Peck posing as a Jew to get firsthand experience of what it feels like to suffer discrimination. Both films received critical and popular acclaim and, despite initial concern on the part of the Jewish agencies, both works proved through testing to be effective tools in combating prejudice. Although advanced for its day, the message of *Gentleman’s Agreement* (we are all alike except for what we call ourselves) leaves something to be desired.

Another response to the war was the creation of the Motion Picture Project in 1947, an organization funded by the major U.S. Jewish agencies, which sought to encourage Jewish themes in Hollywood films and to create positive images. Headed by a former schoolteacher, John Stone, the project accomplished its task quietly and effectively, working with producers and screenwriters behind the scenes. It accomplished its task so successfully that it was disbanded in 1967.

*The 1950s and the Postwar Era*. The postwar period also produced an unexpected backlash against Jews, most particularly in Hollywood. Spurred on by anticommunist fears, conservative individuals were able to act out their prejudices through the workings of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Of the original “Hollywood Ten” who faced investigation and later faced charges, seven were Jewish. Also, anti-Semitism emerges from the official records, as evidenced by comments such as Representative John Rankin’s description of Walter Winchell as “a little slime-mongering kike” (Erens, 1984).

In many ways, the films of the 1950s that deal with Jewish characters and themes can be seen as a direct result of the Motion Picture Project. In no decade are the screen Jews so intelligent, patriotic, and likable. At no other time are religious tolerance and good will so consistently echoed. Beginning in 1951 with the biopic *The Magnificent Yankee*, in which Louis Brandeis, a paragon of wisdom and virtue, fights to become the first Jewish Supreme Court justice, until 1960, when
for a typical setting, I get a feeling of being in a new world. I sometimes wonder if the characters are really Jewish, and if they are, how they manage to maintain their identity in the face of social discrimination.

In these two works, several important films came to the screen. In 1952, (Isidore) Dore Schary adapted Sir Walter Scott's novel Ivanhoe for the screen, with Elizabeth Taylor in the role of Rebecca. Her father, Isaac of York, a moneylender, is not only distinguished in his white beard but proves his loyalty by ransoming Richard the Lion-Hearted. In 1953, the first remake of The Jazz Singer appeared with Danny Thomas in the lead role. The once Orthodox family have now become assimilated Reform Jews. In Good Morning, Miss Dove (1955), Jennifer Jones uses the presence of a Polish Jewish immigrant to teach her class a lesson in religious tolerance, first by studying Palestine, the "original home of the Jews," and second by visiting the Jewish student's home.

Three Brave Men (1957) deals with the Abraham Chasenow case, in which a government employee is accused of communist activities. Not only do the charges prove false, but the film's main characters are clearly the exemplary all-American family. Other positive images appear in Home Before Dark (1958), which portrays a Jewish college professor, and The Last Angry Man (1959), in which Paul Muni plays a kindly doctor who puts the welfare of his patients before material ambition. Two war films, based on bestselling novels, depict anti-Semitism in the United States Army—Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (1958) and Irwin Shaw's The Young Lions (1958), with much sympathy going out to Montgomery Clift playing the role of the Jewish character Noah Ackerman.

Only Marjorie Morningstar (1958), Me and the Colonel (1958), and The Diary of Anne Frank (1959) deal with other themes. Marjorie Morningstar, which was filmed on the strength of its popularity as a novel by Herman Wouk, is one of the first films to focus on Jewish domestic life and anticipates the emergence of the ethnic consciousness of the 1960s, especially in its self-critical approach to contemporary Jewish values. Both Me and the Colonel (starring Danny Kaye) and The Diary of Anne Frank were based on successful Broadway plays which treat the plight of Jews both during the war and the Holocaust. As initial steps into a difficult terrain, they are to be applauded. In comparison with the more directly engaged material that is to follow, these efforts seem light indeed. Also of note, the major roles of Marjorie Morningstar and Anne Frank, following precedent, went to non-Jewish actresses—Natalie Wood and Milly Perkins.

Lastly, The Juggler (1953), starring Kirk Douglas, became the first U.S. production shot entirely in Israel, and it sets the tone for a positive image of the land. This film is later eclipsed by the epic Exodus (1960), which not only creates heroic Jewish men and women but also created a positive image of Israel in American popular culture.

The 1960s and the Reawakening of Jewish Identity. With the arrival of the 1960s, the scene was set for major changes. Not since the silent era had so many Jewish characters appeared, especially in major roles. And once again, Jewish actors and actresses were cast for these parts, with some glaring exceptions. During this decade, there also emerged a growing recognition of the Jew as an identifiable individual who has experienced a unique fate. This is mirrored on screen by several Jewish characters of great suffering, dignity, or courage—Sol Nazerman in The Pawnbroker (1965), Colonel David "Mickey" Marcus in Cast a Giant Shadow (1966), and Yakov Bok in The Fixer (1968).

The reawakening of ethnic identity was being felt by almost all national, racial, and religious groups. For the most part, Jews had followed a path of acculturation, assimilating in their public life, while keeping Jewish customs in the privacy of their homes and synagogues. By
the 1960s, new attitudes were being voiced by many minorities.

Beginning in 1968, a series of comedies set a new direction and established Jewish humor as a major trend for the next two decades. Most prominent are *Bye, Bye Braverman* (1968), *The Producers* (1968), *Funny Girl* (1968), *Take the Money and Run* (1969), and *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969). In *Goodbye Columbus*, based on Philip Roth’s collection of stories, the film introduces Brenda, the personification of the “Jewish American princess,” as played by Ali McGraw, a non-Jew, acting in her first starring role. The film also depicts an unflattering picture of her upper-class Jewish family. Together these films highlight the Jewish urban experience, their continued drive to succeed, and the outsider’s perspective on American life.

The comedies also introduced to film audiences a group of young Jewish actors and actresses who openly acknowledged their heritage by the parts they chose to play, by their personal publicity, and by the sound of their names. Unlike the Jewish performers in Old Hollywood (Edward G. Robinson, Sylvia Sydney, John Garfield, Tony Curtis, and Jerry Lewis, among others not previously mentioned), the new performers were able to assume star roles without having to sacrifice their religious or ethnic identities. Barbra Streisand clearly led the way in *Funny Girl*. Other members of this group include Dustin Hoffman, Richard Benjamin, Richard Dreyfuss, Elliott Gould, Jeannie Berlin, and, of course, the director-actors Mel Brooks and Woody Allen.

Although comedy dominates the decade in terms of Jewish film, the Holocaust is approached in two works with forceful impact. First, *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) soberly approaches the range of Nazi injustices. Although Jews as a group are perplexingly not mentioned, documentary footage of the camps is shown as part of the trial. In 1965, *The Pawnbroker*—based on a novel by Edward Lewis Wallant, independently produced and distributed by Ely Landau, and directed by Sidney Lumet—stars Rod Steiger (a non-Jew) in the role of a German Jewish survivor. The film is the first American fictional work to treat the camp experience with such harrowing reality. The virulent anti-Semitism that set the stage for the Holocaust is depicted in *Ship of Fools* (1965). Closely related, *The Fixer* (1968), starring Alan Bates, depicts Jewish victimization under the czarist regime and by implication called attention to the then-prevailing anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

The decade closes with one of the most celebrated films about Jewish life ever to reach the screen—*Fiddler on the Roof* (1969). Based on Sholem Aleichem’s story of Tevye and his five daughters, the film exposed millions around the world to the warmth of Jewish family life and the traditions associated with life in the Russian shtetl.

The 1970s, 1980s, and Jewish Self-Parody. Overwhelmingly, the Jewish films of the seventies concentrated on speaking the unspoken. For such purposes, comedy represented an ideal medium, and it is not surprising that a majority of the films in this decade are comedies, sericomedies, or comic romances.

As in the twenties, the Jewish family once again emerges as central. Although the same character types appear—father, mother, son, and daughter—many shifts have occurred. Whereas the father-son conflict dominated earlier ghetto films, the contemporary works focus on the mother-son relationship. In many cases, the father is totally absent.

In his place appears the mother, totally metamorphized. In the ghetto films, although her position is insignificant, she is the adored long-suffering mother. Beginning in the postwar period, she slowly evolves into the suffocating mother, an object of fear and scorn. By the 1970s, the central conflict is no longer the need to break with traditional Judaism and assimilate, but rather the son’s efforts to sever the emotional umbilical cord and to establish his manhood and autonomy.

Two films that portray the suffocating mother are *Where’s Poppa* (1970) and *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1972), based on the Philip Roth novel. As the
memorable Mama Hocheiser, Ruth Gordon is obscene and senile, possessive, and intent upon making her son's life as miserable as possible. Likewise, Lee Grant as Sophie Portnoy appeared dominating and self-serving, holding her son (played by Richard Benjamin) emotionally captive. Quite expectedly, these women produced neurotic sons, the heroes of the above-mentioned works, as did mothers in Move (1970), The Steagle (1971), and the Woody Allen classic films—Play It Again, Sam (1972), Annie Hall (1977), and Manhattan (1979). These sons were fearful, indecisive, and insecure men, craving boundless sex and affection, most frequently from shiksas as unlike their mothers as possible. Despite their infantile tendencies, these characters were frequently sympathetically presented, a result of their Jewish male authorship.

Compared to the depiction of Italian gangsters in film, Jewish underworld figures have gotten short shrift in the movies. Nevertheless, there have been a number of films made about Jewish underworld figures. The story of the so-called "Murder Incorporated" group, or Brownsville Boys, was turned into a film based on Burton B. Turkus's book Murder, Inc. (1951), which was about the mostly Jewish gang. The film version, Murder, Inc. (1960), was a commercial film in which Peter Falk, who played the Jewish gangster Abe "Kid Twist" Reles, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. In the 1968 film Funny Girl, based on the life of Fanny Brice, Omar Sharif played the famous gambler Nicky Arnstein, who was married to Brice and was the friend of the notorious gangster Arnold Rothstein, who fixed the 1919 World Series. Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather (1972) featured Lee Strasberg as Hyman Roth, a Jewish gangster based on Meyer Lansky. The life of the notorious Jewish gangster Louie Lepke was depicted in Lepke (1975), in which Tony Curtis played the title role. The success of The Godfather films spurred the Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone to produce Once Upon a Time in America (1984), which featured Robert De Niro and James Wood, among others. The film tells the story of Jewish ghetto youngsters who rise to prominence in New York City's world of organized crime during the Prohibition era.

Jewish womanhood came off little better during this period. The Jewish heroines of Such Good Friends (1971), Made for Each Other (1971), The Heartbreak Kid (1972), and Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York (1975) are as equally insecure and dependent as their brothers, a marked contrast to the Jewish American princess of the previous generation. Only those films with a strong female input—such as The Way We Were (1973), starring Barbra Streisand; Hester Street (1975); written and directed by Joan Micklin Silver; and Girlfriends (1978), written and directed by Claudia Weill—avoid the stereotypes. These works also make other contributions; for example, The Way We Were implies that intermarriage does not always work; Hester Street focuses on Orthodox Jewish life, a topic untreated since the late 1920s; and Girlfriends depicts an autonomous Jewish woman who is not looking for a husband.

The seventies also introduce many new types: the Jewish gambler (The Gambler, 1974), the Jewish madam (For Pete's Sake, 1974), black-listed artists (The Front, 1976), the Jewish gumshoe (The Big Fix, 1976), the Jewish lesbian (A Different Story, 1978), a Yiddish cowboy (The Frisco Kid, 1979), a Jewish union organizer (Norma Rae, 1979), a Jewish murderess (The Last Embrace, 1979), and an elderly Jew pushed to violence (Boardwalk, 1979).

The Frisco Kid deserves special mention. Despite its high comedy, the film is one of the few Hollywood works to treat Jewish values as a serious topic. Briefly stated, the film shows the influence of Talmudic piety, as practiced by a rabbi played by Gene Wilder, as it confronts American pragmatism, portrayed in the person of Harrison Ford, and how the two characters influence each other as Jews meets Gentile in the American West.

The Holocaust and Israel continued to provide material for scenarios; however, the tendency was to create thrillers from this material rather than thought-provoking works. Two films, however, stand apart in this genre—Cabaret (1972), which deals with the rise of the Nazis in the Germany of
the 1920s, was the cinema version of the award-winning Broadway musical, and *The Man in the Glass Booth* (1975), loosely based on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, was also the film version of the Broadway stage play. Other films include *The Odessa File* (1974), *Marathon Man* (1976), and *The Boys From Brazil* (1978), plus *The Jerusalem File* (1975), *Rosebud* (1975), *The Next Man* (1976), and *Black Sunday* (1977).

In the main, the 1980s continued the themes and characters from the 1970s, through a preponderance of comedies and a barrage of minor characters, some familiar, like doctors, lawyers, businessmen, moguls, and performers; others more novel, like werewolves, basketball coaches, and cops.


Several of the works of the 1980s feature exclusively Jewish worlds, even the world of Orthodox Jewry, for example, *The Chosen* (1981) and *Yentl*. Other films that deal with Jewish life include *Brighton Beach Memoirs, Sweet Lorraine, Tell Me a Riddle, Dirty Dancing, Crossing Delancey* (1988), *Enemies: A Love Story* (1989), and *The Plot Against Harry* (1989). Here the Gentiles are the outsiders, the marginal group.

In fact, the differences between “us” and “them” continue to fascinate filmmakers who deal with Jewish subject matter. Whereas during the 1940s, films seemed to go to great lengths to prove we were all alike under the skin, contemporary works stress the opposite. Woody Allen, long obsessed with this issue, deals with it again in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), in *Radio Days* (1987), and in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Likewise, the issue seems at the heart of such diverse works as *The King of Comedy* (1983), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Dirty Dancing*, and *Broadcast News* (1987), or even in *Sophie’s Choice* (1982), where the traditional roles of victim and victimizer are reversed.

*The 1990s into the Twenty-First Century.*

The 1990s witnessed a number of Holocaust films produced both in the United States and in Europe. First and foremost among the films that made an impact on American audiences was Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1984). The film, which won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Cinematography, chronicled the story of Oscar Schindler, a Nazi businessman who saved the lives of hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his factory. Not without its detractors, the film still remains the definitive representation of the Holocaust in American commercial cinema.

In addition to *Schindler’s List*, there were other Holocaust films of note. *Jakob the Liar* (1999) was a remake of a Czech production. Featuring Robin Williams, Lieb Schreiber, and Alan Arkin, the film told the story of a concentration camp inmate who attempts to raise the spirits of his fellow prisoners by inventing fictitious radio reports of the advancing Soviet army. *The Grey Zone* (2001) took a painful look at the Sonderkommandos, the special squads of Jews who processed the corpses from the crematoria at the Birkenau death camp. Equally chilling was HBO’s dramatization *Conspiracy* (2001), a reenactment of the 1942 Wannsee Conference where top Nazi officials worked out the details for “the Final Solution.”
During the 1990s, Hollywood filmmaking directed by David Mamet revolved around a Jewish detective who unwillingly accepts an assignment investigating the murder of a wealthy Jewish businessman. In order to solve the crime first, he has to understand his own roots. "Shivite (1993), produced by Sherry Lansing, was a new twist in the early part of the twenty-first century. Benton Cultural Learning Nation of Healthcare for Make Believe Clarion Nation of Healthcare". 

The film's ability to create negative feelings towards the Jew. Another film that played upon an old stereotype was Roman Polanski's version of "Oliver Twist (2005). The film did little to counter the image of the Jew, although it comes across as tragic as well as quaint. Turning anti-Semitism into horrific comedy was a new twist in the early part of the twenty-first century. Benton Cultural Learning Nation of Healthcare for Make Believe Clarion Nation of Healthcare."
Film

(2006) was written and directed by and starred the British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, posing as a country rube from Kazakhstan, who comes to America and discovers, among other things, home-grown anti-Semitism. Building on his television popularity, Cohen found a receptive audience in the United States.

As in the past, Jewish gangsters and criminals continued to hold a fascination for some segment of the population. Bugsy (1991) followed the life of Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, played by Warren Beatty, as he worked towards realizing his dream with the creation of Las Vegas. L ansky (1999), starring Richard Dreyfuss, chronicled the life of Meyer Lansky. Swoon (1991) recounted the Leopold-Loeb case, and the “crime of the century.” This version used the actual court records for details and included references to the boys’ homosexual relationship. On the good side of the law, American Gangster (2007) featured the real-life, incorruptible Jewish police detective Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe), as he brings to justice the Harlem crime boss, Frank Lucas.

A new theme in the 1990s was the subject of aging. Used People (1992) featured a Jewish widow as she faces aging and a new romance. The Cemetery Club (1993) was set in the world of an elderly retirement community. This theme is reprised in Boynton Beach Bereavement Club (2005). Two variations on the theme are Driving Miss Daisy (1989), featuring an elderly Southern, Jewish woman (Jessica Tandy) and her black driver as they forge a relationship over a 25-year period. It won best picture for the year. In I’m Not Rappaport (1996), two older men, one Jewish, the other black, meet in New York City’s Central Park over a period of years to talk about life and politics.

As always, the largest categories representing Jewish characters and Jewish themes are the comedies and comic-dramas. Many of these feature Jewish family life. One of the first films of the 1990s was Barry Levinson’s Avalon (1990), which depicted the most universal story in American Jewish life—immigration and assimilation. The story followed a somewhat typical Baltimore family as things change from one generation to the next. In this work, Levinson drew upon his childhood memories, also depicted in Diner (1982).

A less typical family story is seen in The Smurfs of Beverly Hills (1998), starring Alan Arkin as a single father who moves his kids from one cramped apartment to another so that they can get an education in the prestigious Beverly Hills school district.

Family comedies, which often go hand in hand with comic romances, were in full force beginning with the new millennium. In Meet the Parents (2000) a lovely non-Jewish woman brings home her new Jewish boyfriend (Ben Stiller), which results in a series of hilarious incidents. The sequel Meet the Fockers (2004) reverses the situation when Greg Focker brings home his girlfriend to meet his parents (Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand). Both films did well at the box office, but many viewers felt Meet the Fockers played upon old, demeaning stereotypes. Ira and Abby (2007) presented another update on the theme of interfaith courtship. The film also featured a large array of Jewish psychoanalysts. The Jewish analyst made another appearance in The Treatment (2007), mostly as the nemesis of the Jewish protagonist.

Ethnic humor and dysfunctional families mix in When Do We Eat? (2006). The film is a comedy centered on a Passover Seder where everything goes wrong. Another Jewish celebration is featured in Keeping Up with the Steins (2006). Here, a large a cast of Jewish actors romp and collide as they prepare for a family Bar Mitzvah. Adam Sandler’s Eight Crazy Nights (2002), a riff on Hanukkah, offered an animated feature that managed to offend everyone. The film included Sandler’s popular “Chanukah Song.” The fact that all of the above works include Jewish religious holidays demonstrates how familiar Jewish cultural traditions have become in mainstream American society.

Since 1990, Woody Allen has continued to release approximately one film a year with greater or lesser results. In those works in which he
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Coen Brothers' The Big Lebowski

Micklin Silver's A Fish in the Bat-

South Park: Bigger, Longer, Uncut

Mamet's dark comedy, State and Main

Saving Silverman (2001); The Hebrew

Hammer (2002), a satire on comic book heroes;

Turning to the representation of Jewish

women, there was a strong body of work released

during the 1990s and after. The Governess

written and directed by Sandra Gold-
bacher, turned its lens on the British Sephardic

community of the 1800s. Here a young woman

(Minnie Driver) takes a position in Scotland in

order to support herself. Posing as Gentile, she

becomes a photographic assistant and then lover
to the man of the house. Eventually she sets up

her own studio in London. The focus on this

dom depicted part of the Jewish community, as

well as that of an independent nineteenth-

century woman, was a fresh contribution to

Jewish cinema.

Also in 1998, A Price above Rubies depicted the

American Orthodox Jewish community. Here, an

unfulfilled mother (Renee Zellweger), hemmed in

by the rigid life of the community, finds escape in

two love affairs and a part-time job. Eventually

she gains the courage to go off on her own. A Walk

on the Moon (1999) starred Diane Lane as a Jew-

ish wife and mother in the Catskills during the

summer of 1969. She finds herself drawn into a

love affair with a non-Jewish salesman. Eventually

everything is sorted out with the help of her wise

and sensible mother-in-law (Tovah Feldshuh). It

is significant that all three films about Jewish

women starred non-Jewish actresses and that all

three women found temporary satisfaction in the

arms of non-Jewish men.

In the realm of comedy, Amy's O (aka Amy's

Orgasm) released in 2001, starring writer/director

Julie Davis, chronicled the trials and tribulations of

an attractive, successful, nice Jewish girl trying to

find a nice Jewish man. In the same vein, Kiss-

ing Jessica Stein (2002) presented a frustrated

heroine who turns to a lesbian relationship when

no worthy man seems to present himself. Like

Amy, Jessica (Jennifer Westfeldt, also co-

scriptwriter), finally finds her match. Reprising

her role as the understanding mother figure, Tor-

ovah Feldshuh finally puts to rest the old stereo-

type of the interfering Jewish mother. Also focus-

ing on women's relationships, In Her Shoes

(2005) took a look at two very different sisters

and the influence of their grandmother who lives

in Florida.

A film that ran counter to the works mentioned

above was Welcome to the Dollhouse (1996). Here

an awkward seventh grade Jewish girl functions

as the center of an often uncomfortable story.

Another uncomfortable film was Sarah Silver-

man's Jesus is Magic (2005). Based on her edgy

brand of stand-up comedy, Silverman offered her

own take on sex, race, and religion.

The Middle East became the subject of two

hotly anticipated films. First Steven Spielberg's

Munich (2005) told the story of a group of under-

ground Israeli agents whose mission it is to mur-

der the terrorists who killed the Israeli Olympic

athletes in 1972. The script was cowritten by

Tony Kushner. The second work, A Mighty Wind

(2007), starred Angelina Jolie as Mariane Pearl,

the wife of Wall Street journalist Danny Pearl,

who was kidnapped and executed by a Muslim

militant group in Karachi in 2002.
Film Stars

Finally, there were several works that featured biography, genius, science, and history. Musical prodigy David Helfgott’s life story and struggle to recover from mental illness is recounted in the film *Shine* (1996). *Pi* (1998), directed by Darren Aronofsky, focused on a Jewish mathematical genius who is approached by a Hasidic group hoping to further understand the Kabbalah. *Infinity* (1996) centered on the life of Richard Feynman, a 1965 Nobel Prize-winning physicist, and his work on the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. *Enigma* (2001) told the story of the British efforts to break the Nazi Code. *American Splendor* (2002) focused on the life of cartoonist Harvey Pekar. And *Bee Season* (2005) presented a Jewish school girl whose spelling triumphs are touched by religion and mysticism.

All told, the last 20 years have seen the continuation of specifically Jewish themes related to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Likewise, the areas of comedy and Jewish family life still constitute the largest categories for screen narratives. Within these categories, however, several changes are apparent. The films reflect a greater sense of ease at being Jewish in America, and the old stereotyping that plagued works in previous decades has practically disappeared.

The biggest change, however, was in the representation of Jewish women. The number of female Jewish protagonists, as well as the range of their roles, expanded dramatically. No doubt this trend reflects the new opportunities available for American women in general and for Jewish women in particular. As Jewish women increasingly found their way into writing, directing, and producing, especially in the independent sector, it is not surprising that their input would be reflected in a positive way on the screen.

In sum, the last 20 years have been a productive period for Jewish filmmaking, especially for films produced independently. This is true for Jewish documentary filmmaking as well, although the documentaries are not covered in this entry. The more than 50 Jewish film festivals throughout the United States attest to an active audience willing to support these works. In short, Jewish film is still alive and well.

*Patricia Erens*


**FILM STARS**

The Jewish presence in the American film industry has been massive. Most of the famous Hollywood studios were founded by Jews and while all the major studios are now in the hands of large, publicly traded companies, Jewish executives continue to hold many key positions. Likewise, Jews were and continue to be heavily represented in “creative” fields like screenwriting, directing, and movie music composition. In the last century, however, the number of American major film stars who were (or are) Jewish has declined, and several reasons may well account for this drop in representation.

Moviemaking was a relatively low-status and wide-open field when the major Hollywood studios were founded in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Jews got in on the “ground floor” and, as critic Neil Gabler aptly put it, they could and did create “an empire of their own.” The Jewish founding fathers of the Hollywood studios were acutely aware that their film product