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タイトル	Ambiguous Boundaries : Jews in the Movies
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引用	北海学園大学人文論集, 16: 29-62
発行日	2000-07-31

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Ambiguous Boundaries: Jews in the Movies

Patrick O'Brien

. . . most Jews do not see themselves as privileged, as simply white people, as insiders in American society. Instead, they view themselves as outsiders who belong beneath the multicultural umbrella as an insecure minority with a separate culture and set of beliefs and values.

Cheryl Greenberg[1]

From its origins, Hollywood has been stamped with a Jewish identity, but nobody else was supposed to know about it. But somehow, no matter how thorough the attempt to suppress or disguise it, Jewishness is going to bob to the surface anyway.

Stephen J. Whitfield[2]

It makes no sense at all to try to deny the reality of Jewish power and prominence in popular culture. . . . Any Martian monitoring American television . . . would view Seinfeld, Friends, The Nanny, Northern Exposure, Mad About You, *and other shows and be surprised to learn that fewer than 1 in 40 Americans is Jewish . . .*

Michael Medved[3]

Given that Jews numerically prevail in some of our cultural institutions, and that in others they are represented in numbers and positions that automatically give them major influence, and given further that Jews have a Jewish sensibility, it follows that Jewish sensibility is likely to dominate some of our cultural institutions. It does.

Ernest van den Haag[4]

Introduction

This brief essay examines a range of Hollywood movies which touch upon the Jewish experience in modern America. Seen as examples of "narratives" Jews have constructed about themselves and others, these movies illustrate Jewish attitudes, longings, anxieties, and collective memory, all of which can be mined or "read" like any other cultural artifact or text. This essay can be seen as a continuation of my exploration of Jews as active agents in the production of that quintessential American cultural icon, the Hollywood movie.[5]

An Exceedingly Brief History of Jews and Hollywood

Neal Gabler, Michael Medved, Ben Stein, and others have documented the birth of Hollywood at the hands of Jewish "mogul" midwives. They have further chronicled its continuing Jewish makeup and sensibility, however masked it may at times be. Many actors and actresses of Jewish descent, for example, tended to mute their Jewish background by, among other tactics, anglicizing their names.[6] Later, beginning in the early 1960s, it was much less necessary to downplay Jewish identity or sensibilities. Taken as a whole, one could say that in the one hundred years of Hollywood history, Hollywood has been a thoroughly Jewish milieu. In this essay, I hope to highlight some of the ways the Jewishness of Hollywood shows itself.

Neal Gabler's study *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* celebrates the period of Hollywood's founding through the end of the mogul and studio era. This era covers the birth of the industry — from nickelodeons aimed at immigrants in America, to the founding of Hollywood and the studios, to Hollywood's Golden

Era — a span of time covering roughly the first half of this century. *An Empire of Their Own* convincingly demonstrates Jewish prominence in early Hollywood and beyond, and throughout the book Gabler traces how this "remarkably homogeneous group" of men gave life to their visions and presented them to audiences of millions and millions throughout America and the world. In a fascinating theme that runs throughout Gabler's narrative, he makes the point that though Jews were predominant in Hollywood, paradoxically, these same Jews were consumed with a sense of themselves as outsiders. This status continues to be one that Jews ascribe to themselves, even as they have become every bit the powerful and influential "insiders" in any number of important areas of American life in the second half of the twentieth century.[7]

Prior to the explosion of that most murderous occurence of modern anti-Semitism in Europe (as well as some highly publicized contretemps against Jews in America between the world wars), Jewish characters often appeared in the movies. Brandeis University professor Stephen Whitfield notes that the way Hollywood Jews treated the image of their fellow Jews "may constitute the most formidable case of how American Jewish identity has been expressed and forged, because it is virtually impossible to disentangle how the movies have mirrored some version of reality from how they have revised that reality." In Whitfield's opinion, Jewish filmmakers were, until recently, not overly eager to explore how their "distinctive origin" was "bound to affect how their brethren were presented and represented at twenty-four frames per second."

In the first phase of Hollywood, the "ghetto films," in Whitfield's words, "that characterized the silent era," themes about Jews were shown in movies covering adjustment to life in America, and intermar-

riage, as well as in comedies, "many of which lampooned the reputation clinging to Jews for their mercantile cleverness, for their adeptness in cutting corners as well as cloth." The series that followed the lives of the Cohens and the Kellys, for example, along with less memorable movies about intermarriage, "epitomized such dreams of assimilation." *The Jazz Singer* (1927), in which Al Jolson courts and marries a Gentile, should be considered, according to Whitfield, "the last important silent work . . . as well as the first 'sound' film."

After this, Whitfield believes, Jewish themes became universal ones, and Jews disappeared from the screen. This next period was a dormant period for open portrayals of the Jews where "the endearing comic immigrants depicted in the silent era were replaced by crypto-Jews, or by 'non-Jewish Jews,' or by Jews who thought of themselves only as Americans, or by no Jews at all." This was, writes Whitfield, "the Hollywood version of the Marrano," which lasted, he believes "at least until the end of the 1950s."[8] If Jews appeared at all in films of the fifties, it was usually in minor roles. Studios resisted "problem" pictures that dealt with "racial and religious relations." Even in biographical films about Jewish characters, such as *Houdini* or *The Benny Goodman Story*, screenwriters tended to "downplay the Jewish elements or to eliminate them altogether. In cases where dramas, plays, or novels with Jewish themes are adapted for the screen the same holds true. Jewish characters are de-Semitized or de-Judainized."[9] This was a period about which the Jewish milieu of Hollywood was not considered important. After all, "Two classic social scientific studies of Hollywood as a community do not even mention the Jewish character of the movie industry, though both authors — Leo Rosten and Hortense Powerdermaker — were Jews."[10]

Modern Hollywood and the Reappearance of the Jew

The period of the "crypto-Jews . . . the Hollywood version of the Marrano," as we have seen, came to an end with the end of the fifties. While there were some Jewish movies in the fifties (there was a 1953 remake of *The Jazz Singer*, for example, and *Marjorie Morningstar* appeared in 1958), Stephen Whitfield argues that such films were "devoid of *Yiddishkeit*"; "Americans themselves were tending toward greater homogenization, seeking in many ways to model themselves after white Anglo-Saxon Protestants; and Jews too were becoming suburbanites."[11]

The 1960s represented a great awakening of Jewish public sensibilities, and screen fare reflected that shift, as Patricia Erens attests:

> With the arrival of the 1960s, the representation of the Jew on the American screen bursts into full bloom. Not since the 1920s have so many Jewish characters appeared, especially in major roles. Once again the Jewish family emerges as a central theme. Likewise, Jewish domestic comedy makes a reappearance, and the majority of Jewish characters are played by Jewish actors and actresses, although not without some important exceptions. In short, the late 1960s and 1970s become a second Golden Age for Jews on the screen.[12]

Stephen Whitfield concurs. Once the 1960s began, there was "an almost exultant revelation in the fortuitous fact of Jewishness, with sprinklings of minor characters and occasional phrases soon overwhelmed by whole movies devoted to the residual mysteries of modern Jewish identity." And, unlike the earlier periods of silent films and "Marrano" Hollywood, Jewish stars now kept their easily identifi-

able ethnic names. "In the second phase, Julius Garfinkel had become John Garfield; in the third phase, Art Garfunkel kept his name. In the second phase Emanuel Goldenberg became Edward G. Robinson. In the third phase Jeff Goldblum kept his name; and a gentile, Caryn Johnson, actually changed hers to Whoopi Goldberg."[13]

Of the Jewish artists working in modern Hollywood and appearing on the screen, the list of explicitly Jewish ones is long, including "many young actors who rose to stardom playing Jewish characters types (George Segal, Elliott Gould, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen, Richard Benjamin). In the seventies more would be added to this rooster: Richard Dreyfus, Dustin Hoffman, Jeannie Berlin, Gene Wilder, and Mel Brooks."[14]

What also changed in this period was the depiction of the non-Jew, the Gentile. Earlier, when some Gentiles, particularly Catholics, had complained that Hollywood Jews were denigrating Christians, Jewish studio owners, producers, and directors where generally quick to respond to such complaints.[15] Charges that Hollywood consistently portrayed Christians or Gentiles negatively never gained enduring currency, however, suggesting that such imagery was probably no more common on the screen than the messiness of real life warranted. After all, among the tens of millions of American Gentiles, real behavior ranged from that of the sinner to that of the saint, as would be expected. Thus, to the extent Hollywood Jews created negative images of Gentiles at the time, it could plausibly be argued that they were merely reflecting contemporary reality.

Goyishe Notions

In the new Hollywood, however, the collective power of Chris-

tianity in America had waned, while that of Jews (in business, politics, the arts, academia, science and medicine) had grown measurably. If Jews individually and collectively now chose to show negative images of Gentiles, they could do so more effectively and more easily than thirty or forty years earlier. As it happens, Jews have often opted for negative portrayals of American Gentiles, as two of my film analyses will attest.

Often, there is an assumption about images of American Gentiles in Hollywood fare. It is that no one has constructed these images. But the power to construct the image of the Other reveals the height to which any group has risen, and the lack of power to effectively contest images one does not find accurate or flattering reveals the degree of impotence or oppression of the group in question. Political scientist Michael Parenti investigates how such power is wielded. In *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, he writes:

> The existence of a common pool of culturally determined (systemic, nonconspiratorial) political values cannot be denied, but where did this common pool come from? Who or what determines the determining element in the culture itself? And can we reduce an entire culture . . . to a set of accumulated habituations and practices that simply build up over time? . . . A closer look reveals that the unconsciously shared "established" view . . . is not shared by everyone and is not in fact all that established. . . . In other words, it may be true that most media elites . . . share common views on these subjects, but much — and sometimes most — of the public does not. What we have then is an "established *establishment* view" which is given the highest media visibility, usually to the exclusion of views held by large dissident sectors of the populace. The "dominant shared values and beliefs" that are

> supposedly the natural accretions and expressions of our common political culture, are not shared by all or most . . . although they surely are dominant in that they tend to preempt the field of opinion visibility. . . . In sum, media owners — like other social groups — consciously pursue their self-interest and try to influence others in ways that are advantageous to themselves.[16]

Social scientist and media gadfly Ernest van den Haag adds further comments on how power is employed and how Jews in particular may use it, in this case with respect to cinema's younger sibling, television:

> The Jewish cultural establishment goes far beyond the strictly intellectual and academic milieu. It is spread throughout the communications industry and thereby enters almost every home in America.
>
> Hollywood has always been a largely Jewish institution . . . On the other hand, the television industry was founded and staffed by a much later generation of Jews. Both its cultural and its news offerings are ardently liberal; . . . But it is not so much what is presented as what is left out in programming that manifests the power of the cultural establishment in the communications industry. . . .
>
> Once more, there rarely is conscious bias. It is what the producers are most sensitive to, and where their natural affinity lies. . . . In the main, they are biased because their background is such that they cannot understand that there is another side. Who could possible take seriously such *goishe* views? The medium becomes biased because of the homogeneous background and, therefore, outlook of those who dominate it.[17]

Michael Medved, in *Hollywood vs. America*, makes a compelling

case for the estrangement of Hollywood people from mainstream American society and their subsequent hostility toward "the traditional." While noting Hollywood's cumulative attacks in recent years on the traditional family, patriotism, and traditional sexual mores, Medved's clearest message is that so much of what has emanated from Hollywood is now shockingly anti-religious, in particular with respect to Christianity. While Medved does not state it explicitly, we may be witnessing the effects of cultural hegemony exercised by a distinct group of alienated Hollywood writers, producers, etc. who are predominately Jewish (or, if you prefer, "non-Jewish Jews"). Hollywood hostility toward established religion is a key area Medved examines:

> In the ongoing war on traditional values, the assault on organized faith represents the front to which the entertainment industry has most clearly committed itself. On no other issue do the perspectives of the show business elites and those of the public at large differ more dramatically. Time and again, the producers have gone out of their way to affront the religious sensibilities of ordinary Americans.[18]

Citing a 1991 study which found that "89 percent of Americans claim affiliations with an organized faith," Medved describes in detail how Hollywood has produced fare hostile to its audience's beliefs. He starts with a long account of the protests related to the showing of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.[19] Twenty-five thousand people protested in front of the MCA/Universal offices to register their unhappiness with a film which profoundly insulted the dignity of the founder of one of the world's great religions. Groups and religious figures as mainstream as "the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the

National Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention (with 14 million members), the Eastern Orthodox Church of America, the archbishop of Canterbury, the archbishop of Paris . . . and Mother Teresa" protested the showing of the film; Hollywood executives ignored them.[20]

Medved poignantly asks if Hollywood people (represented by Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America) would be as insensitive to a film with a "revisionist view of Holocaust victim Anne Frank that portrayed her as an out-of-control teenage nymphomaniac who risked capture by the Nazis night after night to satisfy her raging hormones?"[21] MCA's indifference to the wishes of protesters against *The Last Temptation of Christ* is in stark contrast to Hollywood responses to other concerns. For example, animal rights activists demanded that Disney studios delete a scene they felt was "an anti-wolf statement." Disney assented. In another case, the religious leader of one Hopi village determined that a script in an upcoming Robert Redford film was "sacrilegious." The script was promptly amended.[22] This certainly suggests that contemporary Christians lack the power to enforce their views, that Hollywood can be exceedingly insensitive to the concerns of many Christians, or both.

In the next section, I will examine four Hollywood movies, one of which provides a semi-nonfictional account of one small area in the Jewish-Gentile *kulturkampf* during the 1950s, two of which show the negative imagery of Gentiles which Hollywood — as a Jewish milieu — is capable of creating, and, finally, a film which sensitively explores the human costs and possibilities of extended Jewish-Gentile contact in modern America.

Quiz Show

This film reproduces the actual 1950s television quiz show scandal in which a prominent young WASP, a Columbia University professor, was unfairly given answers to questions before the show. The previous champion was an intelligent young Jew from New York, and his scripted loss to the WASP enraged him to the extent that he went to Washington to reveal the scandal to a Congressional subcommittee. The narrative in the film and in real life are broadly parallel: Jews, through hard work and intelligence, challenge WASP cultural hegemony in America, but since WASPs still have unfair advantages, they win at the expense of others, including Jews. With Ivy League quotas and a hundred other slights still fresh in their minds, Jews are ready to finally stand up for their rights. That is what *Quiz Show* represents.

In *Quiz Show,* "Jews are everywhere . . . as they were in the actual imbroglio that in 1959 was compared to the Black Sox scandal of 1919." For Brandeis historian Stephen Whitfield, *Quiz Show* is presented as "a morality tale in which Jews are perpetrators and victims of television fraud . . . Jews are shown wearing black hats and white hats, because they were indeed sucked into the vortex of a scandal that mixed duplicity with unchecked avarice and ambition." Lower middle-class resident of Queens, Herb Stempel (John Turturro), plays the Jewish "*schmuck*" who, for the sake of dramatic interest, "must be the fall guy. He must lose to a fresh face, a more interesting champion — someone who can appear not only smart enough to triumph on *Twenty-One* but suave enough to 'get a table at 21.'"[23]

Those behind the scenes who engineer the fall are also Jews — "cunning Jews," no less. Dan Enright (David Paymer) and Al Freed-

man (Hank Azaria) fix the show in order to boost ratings, thereby generating more profits for the sponsor of the show, "the company that sells Geritol." The head of this company, portrayed in *Quiz Show* by impeccably dressed Martin Scorsese, is, according to Stephen Whitfield, "probably drawn from Charles Revson, whose cosmetics company sponsored (and fixed) a rival program, *The $64,000 Question*, on CBS."[24]

While such unflattering public portrayals of Jewish characters might "generate concern at the Anti-Defamation League," it does not in this case because the negative characters are balanced by the appearance of the true hero of the story, a Jewish lawyer who has risen through the educational, political, and social ranks to rival the staid power of WASPs such as Charles Van Doren. Richard Goodwin (Rob Morrow) plays the Harvard-educated government lawyer who catches on to the goings on in the New York television game show world. Making his entrance in the movie's opening, Goodwin's ethnicity is hinted at by the car showroom salesman's slip of the tongue in saying Goodwin's name; he confuses it with "Goodman," which is plausibly Jewish enough. (Later, a receptionist makes a more blatant assumption when she mangles his name — "Goldwyn.")

As *Quiz Show* progresses and the tension between the Jewish and WASP cheater heats up, Goodwin reveals his ethnic origins to Stempel when he assures Stempel that he knows what a certain Jewish delicacy is. Later, in the rarified air of the Athenium Club, Goodwin has lunch with the Van Dorens — father and son. Ordering a Reuben sandwich, Goodwin caustically notes that while the sandwich he is eating might be named "Reuben," there are precious few "Rubins" in attendance at the club. At that time in the 1950s, successful Jews were knocking on the doors of the most prestigious clubs and corporations in America.

While some, such as Whitfield, argue that Goodwin is genuinely torn between the desire to do what is right and the desire to spare Van Doren in order to enter the very social class from which Van Doren hails, his real motives may have been more combative. Jewish Novelist Philip Roth, playing off the *Quiz Show* scandal, inserts a scene into *Portnoy's Complaint* that portrays a more naked anti-*goy* animus than is shown in the film:

> I was on the staff of the House subcommittee investigating the television scandals. . . . and then of course that extra bonus, Charlatan Van Doren. Such character, such brains and breeding, that candor and schoolboyish charm — the ur-WASP, wouldn't you say? And turns out he's a fake. Well, what do you know about that, Gentile America? Supergoy, a *gonif!* Steals money. Covets money. Wants money, will do anything for it. Goodness gracious me, almost as bad as Jews — you sanctimonious WASPs!
>
> Yes, I was one happy yiddel down there in Washington, a little Stern gang of my own, busily exploding Charlie's honor and integrity, while simultaneously becoming lover to that aristocratic Yankee beauty whose forebears arrived on these shores in the seventeenth century. Phenomenon known as Hating Your Goy and Eating One Too.[25]

Intriguingly, University of Chicago professor Sander Gilman has linked the "representation of Jewish superior intelligence in the mass media" in both *Quiz Show* and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. "These films and the texts that parallel them present the question of Jewish superior intelligence as a moral moment in cultural representation. Both films question whether being 'smart' is also being virtuous."[26] In fact, Gilman finds it fortuitous that the actor Ralph Fiennes

plays both the Nazi concentration camp commandant Amon Goeth in *Schindler's List* as well as the "upper-class Gentile academic," Charles Van Doren.[27] The Nazi and WASP, you see, are interchangeable.

This parable of Jewish-Gentile competition and struggle can be seen as an authentic portrayal of the fall of WASP hegemony in the late fifties or early sixties and the impending "rise of the Jews."[28] Just as the "ur-WASP" professor had been exposed as a fraud and the Jew vindicated, real life Jews after WWII broke out of the constraints imposed on them by WASP cultural hegemony and began building their own power base in intellectual, cultural, political, economic, and — as the Goodwin characters shows — moral spheres of modern American life.

Anti-Gentile Imagery

The sequel to the successful movie version of *The Addams Family* exhibits hostility toward American Gentile culture in a way that does little to advance the plot of the story, leaving the viewer to wonder what the point of all that contempt was. The sequel, *Addams Family Values*, features the quirky Addams family whose values are generally opposite those of normal American families, a device which provides the source of humor and irony in the movie.

When, early in the movie, a new Addams baby is born, the full-grown head of black hair and black mustache are funny since, obviously, babies are not born with mustaches. The crisis that develops surrounding the baby, however, hints at the later direction of the movie. One day something horrible happens to the baby — he gets sick . . . and his hair turns into soft blond curls and his cheeks turn rosy. The family is aghast.

When the two older children go to summer camp, we see how this image of "the blond" is to be employed. Upon arriving at the camp, the Addams family is meet by squads of squeaky-clean blondes, whose long wavy hair contrasts sharply with the black hair of Wednesday, the daughter, and the parents (the boy is portrayed as fat in this movie). In addition, the two counselors are portrayed as slightly dim-witted but overly enthusiastic middle Americans, possible escapees from the local Christian church.

We are next introduced to a sickly, unathletic, dark-haired Jewish boy whose mother fusses over him constantly. This boy will become —along with the Addams children—the quintessential outsider in this "American story." For example, he is banished to the "harmony hut" when he refuses to ride a horse or build a birdhouse. Instead, he wants to read. This scene recalls and reinforces the earlier stereotypes we have seen concerning Jewish intellectual superiority and Gentile dim-wittedness. In his hand he has Stephen Hawkins' *A Short History of Time*, not normally what an average adolescent would read at summer camp. In any case, the book is snatched away by the camp counselor, who replies to the boy's plea to read, "Not on my time, four eyes." Gentiles do not value reading. Next, the Jewish boy looks around the hut and screams when he sees a poster of Michael Jackson, who alleged sexually abused adolescent boys in California. Possibly even more suggestive, at least one of the boys who claimed to have been abused and successfully reached a settlement with Jackson, which was reputed to have reached a large sum of money, was a Jewish boy.[29]

The real hostility toward Gentiles begins when the Addams children and the Jewish boy attempt to break out of the confines of their "prison," the summer camp surrounded by tall chain-link fences. This is not summer camp; it is a concentration camp, and rather than being

staffed by blond, steely-eyed Nazis, it is staffed by blonde teenage girls and the two counselors, who come after the would be escapees in a rage. As in Arthur Miller's portrayal of vindictive New England Puritans, the angry campers chant "Punish punish." The punishment: the transgressors are forced to listen to the sappy Christian song "Kumbaya" — "Someone's here, my Lord, Kumbaya, someone's here, my Lord, Kumbaya."

Lest any viewer has not figured out the Jewish boy's ethnicity, a scene in which he wears a yarmulke makes it clear, after which the yarmulke becomes a signifier of the outsider, as it does in the "dramatic" climax of the movie. Here the campers stage a "Happy Turkey Day" recreation of the first American Thanksgiving, with "Amanda" in the starring role. Others chosen for lead roles are "Lily, Jennifer, Missy, Michele, and Melissa," though Wednesday — "our own little brunette outcast" — is also given a role.[30] As an afterthought, one counselor chimes, "Let's not forget our cheery little Chipawahs Mordechai (wearing a yarmulke and further "masked" as an outsider with his neck brace and arm sling), Chang, Ester (an obese girl), C-o-n-s-u-e-l-a (the counselors can hardly pronounce it), and "Jamal? . . . Jameil? . . . whatever," an African-looking boy.

In practicing for the pilgrim play, one counselor praises blonde Amanda, while the other counselor drags a fat camper off the stage. The counselor then scolds that some campers "haven't quite latched on to the Chipawah spirit" — and the camera pans to those who have not — two Jewish boys wearing yarmulkes, an African American boy, an Asian American boy, a young Hispanic woman . . . The play, however, will not unfold as scripted, thanks to Wednesday's revision of the script. She leads a group of outcast campers — all dressed as Native Americans — and dramatically slays the invading white pilgrims. Thus,

the "multicultural" morality tale is complete, with Jewish characters prominently featured among the victims of the pilgrims and their descendants, though the reality of being an outsider in America (at least as an other-ascribed condition) has not been true for at least two generations in America.

Other more subtle scenes concerning Jewish issues are present in the movie. For example, a fear more typical of Jewish American girls than of WASP ones concerns operations on the nose. In the movie, Wednesday is challenged to tell a ghost story to her uniformly blonde cabin mates, the punch line of which is " . . . and when the girls at the camp woke up the next morning, all of their old noses had grown back." In America, prevailing wisdom is not that WASP girls need nose jobs to fit beauty norms but that Jewish girls do. In another scene, the Jewish boy recounts his allergies — no dairy products, no wool, no fluoride — which, of course, suggests Jewish laws on diet and clothing.

What might account for the conceit in this movie that Jews are part of the historically aggrieved in America, so much so that they must symbolically slay the Pilgrim settlers in America? Scholar David Biale suggests that identification with victims accounts for it: "When Jews came to America, they assumed both that America was different and that their 'privileged' status as the emblematic minority would continue." This represents a paradox concerning the ambiguous boundaries Jew create and encounter. After all, Jews became white in America but continued to insist on minority status. Yet their insider power and status were proved by the fact that they could build the Holocaust Museum on Mall in Washington, transferring a European catastrophe to the New World, thereby assuring their minority status, "while the home-grown mass sufferings of African and Native Americans could not."[31] This conflation of an old European status with a

contemporary American one drives the gags in the camp scenes of *Addams Family Values* but it shows no fealty to the reality of the Jewish experience in America. What it does do, however, is reify the Jewish narrative of eternal Jewish suffering and victimhood.

Fargo

Fargo must be considered a mean-spirited film. Written and produced by two Jewish brothers who grew up in the Minneapolis area, it is full of traditional Jewish stereotypes of Gentiles: Gentiles are crude, animalistic, prone to violence — murderous, senseless violence.[32] Most of all, however, Gentiles are stupid. This is the central message of this bleak movie.

The worldview that gives life to such productions is interrogated in a film documentary *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream*.[33] In the opening scene, an Indian attack on helpless settlers is meant to show how Jews in Hollywood adopted a familiar American parable to fit their own view of the world: Jews were the virtuous residents of the land but they were vulnerable to the semi-savages who lived around them. Whether it was the marauding Indians shown in *Hollywoodism*, or the blood-thirsty cats in Steven Spielberg's animated *An American Tail*, Jews were depicting the centuries of pogroms experienced at the hands of Russian Cossacks and illiterate Eastern European peasants. In other words, they were updating a narrative of Jewish victimhood.

With respect to *Fargo*, we have the case of two brothers — Joel and Ethan Coen — who, like the Hollywood moguls of old, are most likely revealing their own feelings about their Gentile neighbors, this time in the upper Midwest. An interviewer writes of Ethan Coen that

"He added that he grew up feeling very much a part of the Twin Cities' Jewish community, rather than being preoccupied with being an outsider in the flat-voweled Scandinavian-American Minnesota that is sent up in 'Fargo.'"[34] If the interviewer feels that the Coen brothers merely "sent up" the "flat-voweled Scandinavian-Americans" in Minnesota, then perhaps he also feels that D.W. Griffith's 1915 "classic," *The Birth of a Nation*, merely "sent up" Civil War-era Blacks.

In the beginning of the movie, car dealer Jerry Lundegaard (William Macy), because of his own incompetence, needs money. He devises a scheme to get money from his tight-fisted but rich father-in-law by staging a kidnapping of his wife. To accomplish this, he hires two goons, Carl and Gaear (Steven Buscemi and Peter Stormare), who complete the abduction but casually kill three by-standers on their way to the hideout. This killing introduces the only character in the film with any possible good qualities, Police Chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand). The Coens give her a backhanded compliment regarding her "intelligence," for, while she may be smarter than the truly dimwitted Jerry and his hired killers (not to mention her nearly lobotomized lunk of a husband), she is still a very, very slow thinker. Just as in the valley of the blind, the one-eyed man will be king, in the desolate Midwest of the moronic, the merely slow-witted will be police chief.

The Coens add those small touches to drive home the stupidity of the Gentiles — and they are sure to let us know they are discussing Gentiles by giving us the scene of two empty-headed blonde part-time hookers, one of whom cannot remember what her recent client looks like but can at least offer that he was not circumcised. Further, the two kidnappers turned remorseless killers are from a town outside Minneapolis called "Brainerd," which could conceivably be read as

"brain-nerd," an appropriate choice for the three ill-matched characters who will soon be spending time together in a small house in the wintry woods.

Killers Carl and Gaear take Jerry's bound and hooded wife to the cabin while awaiting the ransom money. Getting out of the kidnappers car, she runs around the yard much like a chicken with its head cut off, which is really not much different from her pre-captivity character in this movie. In any case, she is a mere prop and is disposed of without a second thought when she interrupts the TV dinner of the criminally insane Gaear. Carl, meanwhile, is off in Minneapolis, predictably botching his attempt to get the ransom money. Atop a deserted airport parking garage, he survives a shootout with the clever but heartless father of the kidnap victim but he sustains a very unattractive gunshot wound to the jaw. Not to worry; he will not suffer long. Upon his return to the hideout, he berates the nearly mute Gaear, only to have Gaear blindside him with a blow to the head, which kills him. In such a brutish setting as flat-voweled Scandinavian-American Minnesota, the obvious choice for disposal of the body is out back in the woodchipper. Nature red in tooth and claw — as is the effluent of a Minnesota woodchipper.

Such viciously anti-Gentile imagery is mocked by that Jewish informer to the *goyim* Philip Roth. In one passage of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth mocks both the barbarity of the Gentiles as well as his Jewish family's view of that barbarity:

> Let the *goyim* sink *their* teeth into whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, we will not contaminate our humanity thus. Let *them* (if you know who I mean) gorge themselves upon anything and everything that

> moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or *shmutzig* or dumb the creature in question happens to be. Let them eat eels and frogs and pigs and crabs and lobsters; let them eat vulture, let them eat ape-meat and skunk if they like — a diet of abominable creatures well befits a breed of mankind so hopelessly shallow and empty-headed as to drink, to divorce, and to fight with their fists. All they know, these imbecilic eaters of the execrable, is to swagger, to insult, to sneer, and sooner or later to hit. Oh, also they know how to go out into the woods with a gun, these geniuses, and kill innocent wild deer, deer who themselves *nosh* quietly on berries and grasses and then go on their way, bothering no one. You stupid *goyim!* Reeking of beer and empty of ammunition, home you head, a dead animal (formerly *alive*) strapped to each fender . . . and then, in your houses, you take these deer . . . cut them up into pieces, and cook them in a pot. There isn't enough to eat in this world, they have to eat up the *deer* as well! They will eat *anything*, anything they can get their big *goy* hands on! And the terrifying corollary, *they will do anything as well.*[35]

Though they have presumably lived among Minnesota Gentiles unmolested for their entire lives, the Coen brothers' portrayal of those Gentiles is akin to that of Roth. The worldview of Joel and Ethan Coen highlights the strong cleavage in the Jewish worldview that has existed for thousands of years, namely, Jewish and Gentile, or Esau (the hairy animal, the *goy*) and Jacob (the clever younger brother, the Jew). John Murray Cuddihy describes how Jews modified this worldview to fit the uncomfortable new realities of the modern world, what Jews do when

> ghetto walls crumble and the *shtetlach* begin to dissolve, Jewry — like some wide-eyed anthropologist — enters upon a strange world, to explore a strange people observing a strange *halakah* (code). They examine this world in dismay, with wonder, anger, and punitive objectivity. This wonder, this anger, and the vindictive objectivity of the marginal nonmember are recidivist; they continue unabated into our own time because Jewish Emancipation continues into our own time.[36]

Indeed they do: "This wonder, this anger, and the vindictive objectivity" of some Jews is manifest. *Fargo* certainly shows an abundance of these latter two qualities. Rather than being honored for their "creative talents," perhaps the Coen brothers should be castigated for their misanthropic view of a large segment of humanity. The images created in *Fargo* are nothing to be celebrated, no more than the vicious images of rape-prone Negroes are to be celebrated in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation.*

Richard Dreyfuss

Perhaps it is fitting that I close this essay with reflections on a movie that shows the more tender, more humane side of the Jewish-Gentile encounter. To do so, I turn to one of those quintessentially Jewish actors, Richard Dreyfuss.

Richard Dreyfuss is one of those actors who essentially plays the same role in every movie in which he appears because he inevitably plays himself. Since he is so full of *Yiddishkeit*, so bursting with its richness, his movie roles are also full of unadulterated *Yiddishkeit*, whether the character he is playing is specifically Jewish or not. As film critic Kathryn Bernheimer writes, Dreyfuss is an actor "who has

consistently applied his distinctly Jewish persona to a wide variety of roles . . . "[37] In one sense, it is not surprising that he has such a strong Jewish persona, since his "thespian career had begun in a Chanukah play."[38] Since that play, he has gone on to play a long line of Jewish characters (as well as other non-Jewish characters full of "Jewishness"). For example, he played a "sleazy entrepreneur" in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), an Israeli soldier in *Victory at Entebbe* (1976), a Jewish private eye named Moses Wine in *The Big Fix* (1978), and a lawyer named Levinsky in *Nuts* (1987). In 1993 Dreyfuss starred in Neil Simon's semi-autobiographical *Lost in Yonkers*, playing the role of Uncle Louie, a crook on the run, and, most recently, the Jewish gangster Meyer Lansky in Home Box Office's *Lansky* (1999).

In other movies, Dreyfuss's characters may not be specifically Jewish or they may be veiled to varying degrees. In *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), for example, he seems to be playing (together with Bette Midler) a Jewish Hollywood type in the Paul Mazurksy-directed and produced satire of the neurotic lives of the Hollywood rich and famous.[39] In *What About Bob?* (1991), is his character, psychiatrist Leo Marvin, Jewish? One could argue that he is. In his much more famous roles in *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, his high-energy persona can easily be seen as an extension of his *Yiddishkeit*. "In a sense," Dreyfuss admits, "everything I do has to do with my being Jewish."[40]

Once Around

One of the best roles Dreyfuss has played — and one of the most Jewishly veiled ones — comes in the love story/comedy of manners *Once Around* (dir. Lasse Hallstrom; prod. Amy Robinson and Grif-

fin Dunne, 1991), in which he plays the role of an outsider who has married into a tight-knit Italian/WASP American family living in Boston. Though he loves his wife and she him, his different sensibilities create an ongoing tension between himself and his wife's family. Try as he might to mold himself into something more acceptable, he cannot; he is always "himself."

The movie begins with a wedding and a breakup. One of the Bella sisters is getting married, while the other, Renata (Holly Hunter), can only dream about her own wedding. Unfortunately, her boyfriend breaks up with her the night of the wedding, so she goes to the Caribbean for job training and to get her mind off her ex-boyfriend. There in Bermuda she meets a much older but wonderfully outgoing and generous salesman, Sam Sharp (Richard Dreyfuss). It is such a mismatch that Renata is amazed that she is attracted to him. A whirlwind romance develops and they return to the chilly Northeast.

Once back home, Renata has a chance to introduce Sam to her parents; the problem is that Sam is cut from very different cloth than the Bellas, who are a mixture of Italian (the father) and Northern European (the mother). Sam is pure *Yiddishkeit*, and it leaves the Bellas speechless at first. For example, when Sam first meets Renata's father (Danny Aiello), he leaps out of his limousine, strides up to the father and says, "Let me shake the hand of the first man my little rosebud ever loved." Then, when Renata's brother Tony arrives in his working class Trans Am, Sam gives him a too-familiar shoulder knock when they meet.

This kind of overfamiliarity and coarseness continues. For example, he invites a belly dancer to Mr. Bella's birthday party, something this staid family would never have imagined. When the newlyweds return from their honeymoon, Sam imparts a blessing upon them: "I

hope you both have a lifetime of great sex and joy." As in his role in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* ("Dreyfuss gives a fabulously shaded performance as the likable loser. His Duddy is charming and annoying, vulnerable and arrogant, nervy and nervous"), Dreyfuss plays a character in *Once Around* that elicits strongly mixed feelings.[41]

Because Sam Sharp is so sincerely generous and good-willed toward Renata and her family, they overlook his "difference," though an undercurrent of unease grows. It nearly erupts when the family holds a memorial service for Grandmother Bella. Mr. Bella, clearly moved by the solemnity of the occasion, sings a heartfelt tribute to his mother, and the audience sits in silence. Sam, however, jumps out of his seat, grabs the microphone, and prepares to sing his own more upbeat tribute. Mrs. Bella realizes that this would destroy the sacredness of the memorial, so she practically commands him to sit back down, uttering what will become the mantra for the remainder of the film: "Sam, you're tearing us apart." Even then, Sam is too insensitive to appreciate what she and the others feel, too thick-skinned to take Mrs. Bella's rare command as anything more than the normal give and take of life. These different cultures do not mix well.

Still, the tug of love is powerful. Sam and Renata get married and neither has ever been happier. Soon, a child arrives. But the issue of the baby's baptism ignites the most destructive fight the extended family has ever experienced. Because of his "different" religion, Sam insists that the baptism must be on a specific date, but other family members have planned a well-earned holiday beginning on that day. Around the family table, they try to reach a compromise, but Sam's deafness to the others drives them to rage. Finally, Mr. Bella, almost broken by the sadness of it, sends some of the couples home, then sends Sam to wait in his car. To his daughter he says in a near whisper,

"Sam's a wonderful man. He's a generous and kind man, but he's killing us. He's killing us." Never before has Renata been forced to chose between the men in her life this way.

What really establishes the character of Sam Sharp as Jewish? After all, he claims to have descended from a "long line of Lithuanian generals," and he insists on a very special Lithuanian version of a Christian baptism for his child. But these conceits function as masks, for it is much more likely that Dreyfuss's real ancestors were *chased* out of Lithuania by Gentile generals than it is for Dreyfuss to be descended from such military men. And the unique variant of Christianity may be seen as a signifier of that forever marginal character in the human drama — the Jew. This story at one level is about the contact and collision of cultures in modern America, almost a modern adaptation of the Jewish founding myth of Esau and Jacob, Gentile and Jew:

> And the Lord said unto [Rebecca], "Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger." And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled . . . the first came out all red, all over like a hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took ahold of Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob. (Gen. 25, 23-26)

Sam never really understands why he does not fit in, but symbolicly he must pay for his transgressions. At the baptism of his son, he suffers a heart attack, and from here on he must keep his exuberance in check. Dreyfuss succeeds brilliantly in creating a believable tension between living the life of the old Sam and recognizing the limits the

world puts on him. From the time of his heart attack, Dreyfuss's character deepens into a much fuller humanity full of more nuance and certainly more irony. Because he has grown in this way, he is able to re-assume a place at the large family table of the Bella family. Some tensions still exist, but a mature love and respect has been established between Sam, his wife, and her family.

Might we be taking it too far, then, to conclude this analysis — and this essay — with a comparison to the denouement of the biblical story of Esau and Jacob: "Contrary to what might seem the logic of the story (that Jacob and Esau would live in ever-lasting enmity), after the passage of twenty-two years, Esau, in meeting his now penitent brother, put aside his resentment, and the two were reconciled."[42] Yes, there are conflicts between Jews and Gentiles in America, often severe ones, but might this not be inevitable when civilizations come into contact? Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, for one, believes it is:

> We understand why Jews have preferred explanations of anti-Semitism that focus on the moral imperfections of non-Jewish majorities. It is more comforting to believe that the Jew-haters, in all their wickedness, have no shred of a reason — even a bad one — for their angers. It is far more difficult for Jews to accept the idea that anti-Semitism may be, fundamentally, the heat of a cultural clash.[43]

The films created in the Jewish milieu that is Hollywood may simply be portraying the battles, the truces, and the compromises that are part of this cultural class. What we the viewer must keep in mind, however, is that often these cultural products are presented from Jewish points of view.

Notes

1 "Pluralism and Its Discontents: The Case of Blacks and Jews," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 60.

2 *American Space Jewish Time: Essays in Modern Culture and Politics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996), 151.

3 "Jews in Hollywood," *Moment*, Aug. 1996, 37.

4 Ernest van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 129.

5 See "Jacob at the Country Club: Hollywood Images of the WASP," Hokkai Gakuen University *Jinbun Ronshu*, No. 13 (July 1999), and "The Jew in Modern American Cinema: The Masks of Dustin Hoffman," Journal of Hokkai Gakuen University, No. 103 (March 2000).

6 Charles Silberman notes the irony that the original moguls did not have to change their names, but those appearing on the screen did because

> sensitive to attacks on Jewish control of the movies, they [the moguls] were determined to avoid any hint of Jewishness in the films they created, and they insisted that Jewish actors and actresses assume Anglo-Saxon names... Thus Bernard Schwartz became Tony Curtis, Issur Danielovich became Kirk Douglas, Julius Garfinkle became John Garfield, Laszlo Lowenstein became Peter Lorre, Jill Oppenheim became Jill St. John, Betty Joan Perske became Lauren Bacall, Muni Weisenfreund became Paul Muni, Theodosia Goodman turned into Theda Bara, and Samile Diane Friessen was reborn as Dyan Cannon.
>
> Moreover, comedians such as Jack Benny (ne Benjamin Kubelsky), Eddie Cantor (Israel Iskowitz), George Burns (Natihan Birnbaum), and Ed Wynn (Isaiah Leopold) created a public personae with no Jewish — indeed, no ethnic — identity whatsoever. There were exceptions, of course, such as Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker, but for the most part, Jewish entertainers of that era acknowledged their Jewishness only in subtle way, evident to other Jews but invisible to Gentiles (*A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*

[New York: Summit Books, 1985], 60-61).

7 See, for example, Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996); and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

8 Whitfield, 154-155. Film critic Patricia Erens agrees that this period "is particularly sparse in terms of Jewish portrayals. Those Jews who do appear do so generally in minor roles" (*The Jew in American Cinema* [Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984], 198).

9 Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, 198. There are parallels in literature and the theatrical world. Because of the often hostile reception given Jewish literature in the prewar period, it was "perhaps in response to so unwelcoming a cultural climate that a playwright like Arthur Miller took to pretending, by giving the characters in his plays Waspy names like Biff or ethnically ambiguous ones like Loman, that these people, whose Jewishness was obvious to anyone with eyes to see, were undifferentiated Americans. (When Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was staged in a Yiddish translation, the review of the production in *Commentary* was wickedly entitled '*Death of a Salesman* in the Original.') Similarly, another famous Jewish playwright, Lillian Hellman (who in *The Little Foxes*, which was actually based on her own family, had set a model for Miller's way of washing the ethnic taint out of his characters) thought that the Jewishness of *The Diary of Anne Frank* would limit its appeal on Broadway. Consequently, Hellman advised the playwrights she proposed for the job of dramatizing the diary that they in effect de-Judaize it as much as they possibly could" (Norman Podhoretz, "The Adventures of Philip Roth," *Commentary*, October 1998, 26-27).

10 Whitfield, American Space, 156.

11 Whitfield, American Space, 162. Patricia Erens details other movies with Jewish themes, characters, etc. in chapter VI of *The Jew in American Cinema*.

12 Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, 257. Erens argues that public

Jewishness was part of the "reawakening of ethnic identity during the 1960s [that] was felt by almost all national, racial, and religious groups" (255-256). As prime evidence, she cites Glazer and Moynihan's widely recognized *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), along with Michael Novick's 1971 *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic* (New York: Macmillan). The problem with this view, however, is that among white ethnics, there was a straight-line move in the direction of assimilation and homogenization throughout the period in question, so much so that Herbert Gans could talk convincingly of "symbolic ethnicity ("Symbolic Ethnicity in America" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 [1979], 1-20) and Mary Waters of "ethnic options" (*Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* [Berkeley, 1990]). See also David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), especially chapter 2.

13 Whitfield, *American Space*, 164-165.

14 Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, 256.

15 "Beginning in April 1934, the Legion [of Decency] distributed pledge forms throughout Catholic dioceses calling upon the signers to observe the boycott; it was claimed that within ten weeks eleven million people signed, including many Protestants and Jews whose organizations rallied behind the Legion effort. What could the studios do? Having lost millions of dollars in 1933, with attendance dropping to a five-year low, they found themselves in no position to ignore so massive a threat of box-office desertion. Quickly they communicated their willingness to sue for peace" (Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* [New York: Vintage Books, 1994], 173).

16 Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 241-242.

17 van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique*, 141-142.

18 Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: Harperperennial Library, 1993), 50.

19 Martin Scorsese, while not Jewish, still operates under the reigning ideology of Hollywood, and that is highly Jewish. Thus, non-Jews can also participate in the reigning ideology as "experts in legitimation." In addition, many who protested the production of *The Last Temptation of*

Christ noted that the powers behind MCA/Universal — such as Lew Wasserman and Sidney Sheinberg — were Jewish, though the studio was now owned by Matsushita.

20 Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 38-9.

21 Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 41.

22 Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 42.

23 Stephen Whitfield, "*Quiz Show*: A Film Review," *American Jewish History*, 19??, 131.

24 Whitfield, "*Quiz Show*: A Film Review," 131.

25 Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), 232-233. In a telling confession to his psychiatrist, Portnoy reveals more about his motives not only for skewering quiz show cheat Van Doren, but for bedding his WASP of the moment: "What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds — as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer* American — maybe that's more like it" (235). Roth mined this incident more thoroughly in his 1981 novel, *Zuckerman Unbound* (New York), 33-40.

26 Sander Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 191.

27 Gilman, *Smart Jews*, 198.

28 Albert Lindemann, *Esau's Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

29 In his album *HIStory Past, Present and Future — Book 1*, Jackson sings these lyrics in the song "They Don't Care About Us": "Jew me, sue me, everybody do me, kick me, kike me, don't you black and white me." Reports claim that Jackson resented what he perceived as unfounded allegations and blamed the Jews involved. Jack Newfield of *The New York Post* suggests that this resentment is the genesis for Jackson's subsequent lyrics "kick me, kike me" (June 20, 1995).

30 Such WASPy names apparently bother some Jews. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Philip Roth's protagonist complains of the friends of the

WASP he is bedding, "Then there were the nicknames of her friends; there were the friends themselves! Poody and Pip and Pebble, Shrimp and Brute and Tug, Squeek, Bumpo, Baba — it sounded, I said, as though she had gone to Vassar with Donald Duck's nephews . . . " (New York: Random House, 1969), 233.

31 David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity, in *Insider/Outsider*, 27-28.

32 Such a negative view of American Gentiles among Jewish academics is explored by historian Peter Novick in his book on historical objectivity, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge, 1988, 337-341). In a fascinating analysis, Novick connects the works on Populists by Richard Hofstadter and others, with Jewishness. "Rather than a democratic movement against exploitation, whose program prefigured subsequent reforms, the Populists came to be portrayed as a backward-looking band of nativist book burners obsessed with imaginary grievances." As "the principal historian involved in the attack on the Populists," Hofstadter translated Populism within the context of McCarthyism (which had its own aspect of Gentile-Jewish conflict). "The most controversial of Hofstadter's assertions about the Populists," writes Novick, "was the charge that anti-Semitism was central to their world view; indeed, that the Populists had 'activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States.'"

The problem, in Novick's view, was that Hofstadter's description was not quite right; in fact, Hofstadter admitted as much. Citing Hofstadter's personal correspondence, Novick shows that privately, "Hofstadter acknowledged that he had exaggerated Populist anti-Semitism, and that his treatment would 'mislead anyone who had never heard of Populism from any other source,' but he thought his overstatement justified in order to redress the balance, since previous historians had omitted any mention of Populist anti-Semitism." Exposing Hofstadter's activism — which appears to be in stark opposition to Novick's "Noble Dream" — Novick refers to Hofstadter's "long-held view" that "if a new or heterodox idea is worth anything at all it is worth a forceful overstatement." This was in conscious contrast to those historians who "approach their work as

though they were engaged in the final death grapple with error."

Novick traces the influence of Hofstadter's interpretations of Populism, "or variants of it," to "the work of Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Oscar Handlin, Seymour Martin Lipset, Talcott Parsons, David Riesman, and Edward Shils, among others." "With minor exceptions (Parsons in the one camp, Pollack in the other), those critical of the Populists were Jews and from the Northeast; those defending them were gentiles, and from the South or Midwest." What could explain this divide? Novick offers a novel view: "None, so far as I can tell, ever advanced what seems to me the most compelling reason why a group of the background of Hofstadter, Bell, Lipset, and their friends should have taken such a uniformly and exaggeratedly bleak view of the Populists: they were all only one generation removed from the Eastern European *shtetl*, where insurgent gentile peasants spelled pogrom."

Novick footnotes this observation with a reference to a conversation Daniel Bell had with Hofstadter in the early 1940s. As Bell recalls:

> What arose in our conversations has, I think, shaped a lot of subsequent work. I mean a fear of mass action, a fear of passions let loose. A lot of this goes back in many ways to a particularly Jewish fear. In traditional Jewish life, going back particularly to the Assyrian and Babylonian episodes, the first creativity, there's a fear of what happens when man is let loose. When man doesn't have halacha, the law, he becomes chia, an animal.

33 An Elliott Halpern/Jacobovici Production, 1997.

34 Blake Eskin, "The Lessons Ethan Coen Learned in Hebrew School, *Forward*, October 30, 1998, 11. Coen further added that "We kept kosher, all of that sort of thing, went to shul, went to Hebrew school. I'm not at all observant, but I don't regret at all that I grew up in a family that was."

35 Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 81.

36 Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 68.

37 Kathryn Bernheimer, *The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies: A Critic's Ranking of the Very Best* (Secaucus, NJ: Birch Lane Press, 1998), 67.

38 Whitfield, *American Space*, 115.

39 Director of *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, Paul Mazursky, makes films that "almost always deal with Jewish themes and characters" (Kathryn Bernheimer, *The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies*, 67).

40 Quoted in Whitfield, *American Space*, 165.

41 Kathryn Bernheimer, *The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies*, 74.

42 Lindemann, *Esau's Tears*, 6.

43 Arthur Hertzberg (and Aron Hirt-Manheimer), *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People* (Harper: San Francisco April 1998), 6.