

INTRODUCTION



According to *Webster's*, an image is a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing. It is not the thing itself.

How close to reality is Hollywood's image of the Jewish people? How have Jewish images on screen evolved from the early days of film? What can we learn about almost a century of Jewish life in America from movies? Are films about Jews distinctly "Jewish"? How do filmmakers make their own statements about American Jewish life through their films? Do celluloid images have an impact beyond the screen?

From the silent era on, films have depicted aspects of the complicated story of American Jews' impact on society as well as American society's perception of the Jews within its midst. Jewish subject matter and Jewish characters can be found in films from primitive, flickering one-reelers such as *Levi and Cohen – The Irish Comedians* (1903), to the landmark *Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson (1927), to the influential *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), to contemporary movies such as *Schindler's List* (1995) and *School Ties* (1992). For Jewish audiences, these films may have provided pictures of themselves; for other moviegoers – who may never have met or even seen Jews in daily life – these films have provided encounters with Jews on their local movie screens.

This course focuses on American Jewish films (movies centering on Jewish issues rather than directed or produced by Jews) and American Jewish screen characters (figures defined as Jewish within the films rather than roles played by Jewish performers). The films presented, made between 1925 and 1991, record the triumphs and defeats of a people adjusting to a new environment, their children's struggle with American institutions, and the role of their descendants in the cultural melange that characterizes the United States. Through a chronological examination of films and trends in film, as well as political and social contexts, intriguing questions about Jewish life in America, past and present, will be explored.

A Tale of Assimilation

If the American Jewish cinema has an ongoing master theme, it is the issue of assimilation, a major theme in American Jewish life in general. The drive to become American has propelled many immigrants, Jews and others, to let go of their own culture and take on the new as best they can. Mary Antin, an American Jewish writer who was herself an immigrant, wrote in *The Promised Land* (1912): “I want to be of today. It is painful to be conscious of two worlds. The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness.”

The eagerness of immigrant Jews to fit into American life is understandable in view of the ideas embodied in the uniquely American concept of “the melting pot.” This idea first appears in print in J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), where he describes America as a place where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” In Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* (1908), an immigrant Jewish composer in love with a gentile girl speaks of his vision for his new land:

America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting where all races of Europe are melting and re-forming. . . . God is making the American. . . . The real American has not arrived. He is only in the Crucible, I tell you – he will be the fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman.

Thus, the American as a “fusion” of other cultures, as newly forged as the nation he inhabits, became an enduring theme. (In contemporary times, the concept of the “melting pot” tends to be eclipsed by the notion of “multiculturalism,” in which the differences that distinguish various groups from one another are honored and celebrated.)

Even as many – if not most – American Jews have eagerly sought to assimilate, others have fought to preserve traditional culture. Still others have looked for a middle ground, where they might combine Jewish and American cultures in a vital and meaningful way. Between the drives to uphold the values of the old country and to embrace those of the new, to honor tradition and seek modernity, there has been a great deal of friction, often manifested

in tensions between parents and children, between new immigrants and those long settled. Such conflicts are reflected in many of the films in this course. In addition, whatever their desires to blend (or not to blend) into the “melting pot,” the reception Jews have encountered has not always been welcoming, and the theme of antisemitism has been a recurrent one in literature and film.

Of Films and “Truth”

As a visual, mass-media art form, the movies in this course capture the spirit of their age; they are cultural documents that freeze moments in time. Woodrow Wilson described D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) as “history written in lightning,” and in a sense his comment describes all movies. This is not to say that films are factual. Clearly, they distort life, but it is often these very distortions that make them so significant; they testify to the anxieties and aspirations of a particular historical period. In addition, the ideas we receive from a given movie may not necessarily be what its creators intended or, for that matter, the same ideas received by the person sitting in the seat next to us.

As with any art form, good movies allow for a variety of interpretations, which inevitably change over the years. The films included here cannot tell the total story of one incident or historical period. Films present aspects of a situation, subjective views that highlight certain parts of the whole. The ideas they contain are filtered through filmmakers’ memories and opinions and through the prism of the time period in which they were made. These factors do not invalidate films as a means through which we can learn about the past. They only mean we must never confuse fact with creative fancy. Although some of the films might seem dated, they remain valuable as aesthetic objects as well as historical artifacts that help chart the history of Jews in America.

In watching these films and reading the accompanying material, it’s essential to remember that there are many ways to view and interpret film. In thinking about meaning, content, and context, there are no “right” answers – only subjective responses to the evocative images flickering on the screen before us.

The Films: A Historical Panorama

The organizing principle behind the sequence of films presented in this course is historical, with background pieces on each period setting the stage for the films. Although this is a convenient structure, it is somewhat arbitrary, as the defining lines between decades are not clear-cut: a film made in the 1980s, for example, might reflect the thinking and trends discussed in reference to films of the 1970s.

The Early Decades

His People (1925) presents the clash of values between the Old World and the New, between tradition and modernity, in one Jewish family.

The Jazz Singer (1927), starring Al Jolson, portrays the allure of assimilation.

Street Scene (1931), based on a play by Elmer Rice, presents issues and images of class, ethnic, and generational conflict.

The Forties and Fifties

The Purple Heart (1944) is a wartime drama with an ethnically mixed platoon.

Gentleman's Agreement (1947), the Gregory Peck classic, explores antisemitism in America.

Marjorie Morningstar (1958) is a young girl's coming-of-age story based on the novel by Herman Wouk.

Exodus (1960) tells the story of Israel's War of Independence, based on Leon Uris's book.

The Sixties and Seventies

The Producers (1968) uses humor in depicting the adventures and exploits of a Jewish duo producing a Broadway play.

Goodbye, Columbus (1969), based on the novella by Philip Roth, presents a lively and controversial view of upper-middle-class Jewish life.

Hester Street (1974) looks back at the immigrant experiences of Eastern European Jews on New York's

Lower East Side.

The Frisco Kid (1979) focuses on the comic adventures of a Polish-born rabbi in the Old West.

The Eighties and Nineties

The Chosen (1982), based on the Chaim Potok novel, examines the friendship between two Jewish boys from different Orthodox backgrounds – one Hasidic, one modern.

Enemies, A Love Story (1989) is a tale of the intricately connected lives of four Holocaust survivors in New York, based on an Isaac Bashevis Singer novel.

Crimes and Misdemeanors (1990) is Woody Allen's comedy/drama of modern values and ethics in conflict.

Homicide (1991) is David Mamet's story about a detective who discovers his Jewish identity.

These are a sampling of the hundreds of films of Jewish interest made since the 1920s. Many others, which participants in this course might want to screen on their own, will be mentioned and briefly described in the chapters that follow.

Some films are lamps that help illuminate the darkness of ignorance. Others simply mirror long-held prejudices. But whether they explain or exploit their Jewish characters, all these films either implicitly or explicitly show how Jews have affected American life and how American life has influenced Jews; this has been a two-way process inherent in the first American Jewish movie as well as in the latest.

From *His People* to *Homicide* is a long and not always straight road. Aside from enjoying the sheer pleasure of watching remarkable films, viewers will come to understand something about filmmaking, Jewish life, and, perhaps, themselves.

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These books include some of the best writing about issues that appear repeatedly in these films. In addition, they represent the ebb and flow of American Jewish culture, how life for Jews in the United States both ties and separates them from the Jewish past and the Jewish future.

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