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New Jews? Race and American Jewish Identity in 21st Century Film

Abstract

This is a book review of David. L. Reznik, *New Jews?: Race and American Jewish Identity in 21st Century Film*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013.

Author Notes

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David L. Reznik, *New Jews?: Race and American Jewish Identity in 21st Century Film*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013. 208pp. 38.95\$ (Paperback) 174.95\$ (Hardback)

In *New Jews?: Race and American Jewish Identity in 21st-Century Film*, David L. Reznik addresses the emerging question of potentially novel Jewish American racialized characterizations in 21st century Hollywood film. Reznik's investigation unfolds according to his qualitative content analysis of fifty-three American films exploring one hundred and twenty-five characters. The characters display varying degrees of four historically represented Jewish American stereotypes: "the meddling matriarch," "the neurotic nebbish," "the pampered princess," and "the scheming scumbag." Analyzing Hollywood (qualified as budgets exceeding ten million dollars) and Indie films that were released from 2001 to 2009, *New Jews?* examines film characters who self identify as being Jewish or whose appearance, behavior, and dialogue seem to fit one of these four racialized Jewish American identities.

Divided into seven chapters, Reznik immediately addresses in the Preface and Introduction the necessity of considering Jews as a racial minority in the United States. For the subsequent analyses found throughout *New Jews?*, the reader must be critical of common misconceptions that the contemporary United States is "postracial" and should also recognize that American Jews cannot be reduced to classifications as "White." Reznik suggests that race in film is analyzed through a "postracial lens" and this creates a "blindspot" in film studies. Also, Jewish American stereotypes have been a neglected area of concern in postmillennial film scholarship. *New Jews?* rejects the arguments that the postmodern Jew embraces her racialized identity and that racist Jewish character traits of "codependency, deceit, impotence, and materialism," no longer exist (2). The central argument of *New Jews?* is that instead of original Jewish

American racializations permeating 21st century American cinema, Jewish characterizations remain consistent with historical racist stereotypes. Yet, despite character stagnation, “the meddling matriarch,” “the neurotic nebbish,” “the pampered princess,” and “the scheming scumbag” are represented as fluid, and include alterations from previous stereotypes concerning age groups, gender, sexualities, and social classes.

In Chapter Two, Reznik grounds his research by providing the Anti-Semitic and assimilatory history of Jewish American racialization. Race has consistently contributed to the social construction of Jewish identity. Throughout European history, Jews suffered racialized anti-Semitic violence and this led to forced assimilation. Jews were deemed religiously and biologically inferior. With the Enlightenment came concerns about Jewish bodies and psyche. Political projects aspiring to answer the “Jewish question,” ultimately contributed to “mass ghetto-ization, expulsion, and extermination of Jews” (17). Reznik describes three waves of Jewish immigration into what would become New York City. Jews were considered infectious and untrustworthy. They were scapegoated, and were economically and politically crippled. Paradoxically, American Jews were othered, but were also to simultaneously assimilate. The contradictory process neutralized Jewish immigrants and contributed to their passivity. The racialization of American Jewish identity historically parallels Jewish representations in movies. Jewish families struggled to fit into WASP societies, and so did Jewish American filmmakers. The result was the cinematic representations of negative Jewish stereotypes, for example, the pawnbroker. Other cinematic efforts of assimilation strove to depict characters hiding their “Jewishness,” for instance, actors receiving rhinoplasties. 1970s film changed the latter process and characters embraced their Jewish identity, but with it also racist stereotypes.

Chapter Three examines “the meddling matriarch.” She is “loudmouthed, nitpicky, overbearing...and pushy” (40). Most of the examined “meddling matriarchs” identified as Jewish Americans. *Along Came Polly*’s (Universal, 2004) domineering Vivian Feffer (Michele Lee) exemplifies the stereotype. She overpowers and mutes her husband, meanwhile overbearing and overprotecting her son. The cinematically represented stereotype evolved since the 1960s as families changed: women in the workforce, older populations of baby boomers, etc. Socio-cultural and economic changes influenced differing “meddling matriarchs,” for example, being characterized through fathers. Representing families with two breadwinners, *Meet the Fockers* (Universal, 2004) presents both parents as “meddling matriarchs.” Roz Focker (Dustin Hoffman) is comically overly concerned, intimate, and affectionate with his son. The gender swapping of the “meddling matriarch” depiction represents not a New Jew, but alterations of the 21st century Jewish American family. *The Thing About my Folks* (Picturehouse, 2005) epitomizes aging Jewish parents, and how even children are “meddling matriarchs” caring for their parents. Analogous stereotyped characterizations are represented through characters that are romantic partners or even friends. For instance, Officer Michaels (Seth Rogen) in *Superbad* (Columbia, 2007) is hyperbolically invested in a high school student and is overinvolved/over-interested with the student’s sex life.

Chapter Four explores the study’s most abundant Jewish American racialization: “the neurotic nebbish.” He is racialization “of the American Jewish male as effeminate, emasculated, insecure, passive, unsure of his sexual identity, and/or romantically obsessed with Gentile women” (64). “The neurotic nebbish” is easily identifiable by appearance: scrawny, short, dark haired, and bespectacled. Often physically and behaviourly contrasting to Gentile opposites who are bigger, stronger,

and bullying, “the neurotic nebbish” supports stereotyping Jewish passivity. With such emphases on appearance, well-known actors, for example Woody Allen and Adam Sandler, are used to portray “neurotic nebbishes.” Working, wage-earning women contribute to “neurotic nebbishes” also being represented as female characters. Likewise presented as unattractive and romantically unsuccessful, these women are larger than their Gentile rivals, unfashionable, and bullied. Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) in *The Devil Wears Prada* (20th Century Fox, 2006) is consistently ridiculed for her clothes and weight. “The neurotic nebbish” suffers from low self-esteem, is codependent, and commonly possesses mental health issues. Concerning male “neurotic nebbishes,” their low self-worth often derives from inadequate penis size. Male “neurotic nebbishes” are portrayed as effeminate and/or gay.

Chapter five describes “the pampered Princesses.” She is a “young, nonmaternal American Jewish female who is racialized as whining, materialistic, small-minded, averse to sex, and obsessed with shopping.” (92). Reflecting a change in post 1970’s American economy, Middle Class values favored consumerism. Parents express love and affection through the purchases they make for their children. Heavily dependent on their fathers and husbands, “pampered princesses” are hypermaterialistic. They are uninterested in sex and commonly throw tantrums. Reznik describes Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) in *Sex and the City* (Newline, 2008) as being a representation of “the pampered princess.” Her “everyday life revolves around three mutually reinforcing, stereotypical ‘pampered princess’ motifs: her relationship with Mr. Big [romantic partner], fixation with material possessions, and self-obsession” (95). The stereotype extends not only to rich women, but children and the working class. For example, Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher) in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

(Touchstone, 2009), inspired by her family's low economic standing, dreams of one day owning expensive, fashionable commodities.

Chapter six explores the fourth and last characterization, “the scheming scumbag.” The second most prominent of the four Jewish American racializations, “the scheming scumbag” is often male, “conniving, excessively stubborn, cheating, win-at-all costs competitive, overly hard-bargain-driving, garish, and unmannerly” (114). Like the other stereotypes, the scheming scumbags are also female due to the increase of Jewish women in the workforce. The spread of neoliberalism has also had an impact on the popularity of the racial characterization. Often small time crooks and money-seekers, “the scheming scumbag” is additionally pursuing nonmonetary gain, like Gentile women. Not only scheming, they are also scumbags that are insulting and insensitive towards races, cultures, and opposite genders. Les Grossman (Tom Cruise) in *Tropic Thunder* (Paramount, 2008) represents the stereotype. Les actually wears a dollar sign around his neck and is relentless in his hunt for money. More than a symbol of greed, he is misogynistic and tyrannical throughout his conquests.

In Chapter Seven, Reznik identifies certain areas of concern while exploring all four stereotypes, addressing once again the question of new Jews in 21st century movies. *New Jews?* demonstrates that Jewish American racializations evolve over time, however, they remain consistent with historical media representations of Jews. A question emerges from this finding: why are Jews *still* racialized on screen? Reznik proposes varying answers and suggests that self-identified American Jews creating the majority of the studied films cannot be ignored. Perhaps filmmakers cater to the financial incentives that Hollywood moviemaking provides. Characters' Jewishness can be packaged and sold for White audiences. Ultimately this process results in the “‘commodity of racism’ (Hall) [that] is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which American

Jewish filmmakers participate in the stereotyping and racialization of their own identity” (142). Or, it is continuing the history of masochistic, self-deprecating Jewish humor. An alternative speculation is that Jewish American filmmakers are attempting to maintain their status quo in 21st century American racial politics. Representing stereotypes, they ensure non-Whiteness, yet they establish not being Black (considered an inferior socio-economical, political standing). Lastly, Jewish artists may be “structurally conditioned” to represent Jewish racialized identities (148). Reznik concludes by suggesting that attention must not only be paid to altering identities, but on “the historical continuities that exist in the racialization of American Jewish identity in 21st-century film” (159).

Reznik’s aim is to present opposition to the contemporary understanding of America as postracial. The argument runs throughout the entirety of *New Jews?* and it is well emphasized and delivered. It is made clear by his intentionally straightforward language. Reznik’s writing is accessible and appropriate for a wide range of readers. Moreover, the clear argumentation, repetition of key themes/findings, and suggested readings will be mutually beneficial for nonacademics, as well as religion and/or film scholars. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter would be useful for any reader who is interested in Jewish American racializations in contemporary American movies. It can also be used as a teaching tool for those who wish to incorporate content surrounding Jewish American identities in contemporary cinema in their course syllabi. Even for those less interested in religion and/or film, Reznik’s second chapter provides an excellent and succinct summation of the Euro-American history of Jewish racialization, and could serve as a valuable introduction.

The Appendix that includes Reznik’s theoretical and methodological framework could be of interest and usefulness concerning ways to approach

religious/race politics in regard to film. *New Jews?* draws “inspiration” from works of bell hooks, David McNally, and Slavoj Žižek. It uses both theoretical approaches of idealism and materialism in “a dialectical synthesis” to conceptualize race (163-4). Reznik justifies placing his theoretical and methodological discussions in the Appendix so as not to disinterest the readership less inclined towards “formal academic elements of the text” (ix). However, the accommodation has an adverse effect on those who are critically interested in Reznik’s theoretical and methodical approaches. Reznik’s decision results in this section standing out and being somewhat separate from the rest of the book. As a consequence, one must repeatedly flip to the end of *New Jews?* to understand how Reznik approaches his in-depth character analyses.

The film selections and character analyses themselves are reason enough that *New Jews?* belongs on the bookshelves of those who are concerned with contemporary American race politics, racialized religious identities, and Judaism in film. The bulk of movies and characters analyzed suggest that Reznik’s work could be used as a reference text for a vast amount of future studies concerning Jewish identity in 21st century American cinema. The focused cataloguing and examinations found within leaves ample potential for scholars to build from. Reznik states that there is a gap in contemporary scholarship on Jewish identities and representations in post-2000 American cinema and *New Jews?* is a commendable starting point.

One of the many areas to expand on this research would perhaps be attention paid to the genre of films. Of the fifty-three movies that are included in Reznik’s study, the majority could be comfortably labeled as comedies. Despite some exceptions, like *Requiem for a Dream* (Artisan, 2000) and *Reign over Me* (Columbia, 2007), *New Jews?* exposes a connection between representation of Jewish identities and humor. As Reznik appropriately remarks, most of the filmmakers identify as being American Jewish, as

do their characters. Perhaps as a defense mechanism, are contemporary American Jewish filmmakers poking fun or making light of their victimized history of anti-Semitic stereotyping? As an effort of self-assimilation, is perhaps humor used to lessen their racial threat? The answer to this question would be interesting and offer insight on the consistent fear of Jews taking-over Hollywood. Reznik explains how this phobia derives from the historical racial stereotyping of Jews scheming for world domination. Or perhaps, as Reznik mentions in Chapter Seven, Jewish filmmakers are “structurally conditioned” to represent their racial stereotypes. Does laughter then reinforce their ridicule? What role does American Jewish racial identity play within other specific genres? For example, how does it relate to the American horror film, where race has consistently played an integral role? With attention to genre specificity, these are but a few questions that could serve as a platform to build further study.

Reznik positions himself within the research (admitting how impactful film has been on his racial identity) and is quick to admit potential research bias. For example, possible bias is admitted in Chapter Six while addressing the interpretation of “the scheming scumbag” in independent films. With such a research project that analyzes and interprets an immense array of films and their characters, there are likely to be readers who disagree with some of Reznik’s character interpretations. That said, the sheer bulk of qualitative content analyses, as well as the plethora of examples, will make up for instances of incongruent character interpretation.

Where there may not be completely original Jewish American identities represented on 21st century silver screens, Reznik in *New Jews?* sheds new light on the historical continuation of Jewish racialization and makes clear that identity politics in the United States are far from “postracial.”