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Silver Screen, Hasidic Jews: The Story of An Image

Abstract

This is a book review of Shaina Hammerman, *Silver Screen, Hasidic Jews: The Story of An Image* (Indiana University Press, 2018).

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Author Notes

Eric Michael Mazur is the Gloria & David Furman Professor of Judaic Studies at Virginia Wesleyan University, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion & Film* (2011), and co-editor of *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (2001; 2010) and the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015).

Hammerman, Shaina, *Silver Screen, Hasidic Jews: The Story of An Image* (Indiana University Press, 2018).

The cover of Samuel Hielman's 1995 volume *Portrait of American Jews* bears a self-portrait of artist Max Ferguson. The work—titled “Ralph Lauren's Worst Nightmare (Self-Portrait)” —is actually two self-portraits of Ferguson, one in which he is dressed in late-twentieth century style (clean-shaven, in a T-shirt and jacket), the other in which he is dressed in a style familiar among Orthodox Jews (bearded, in a long-sleeved white collared shirt with no tie, dark suit jacket, hat, and *tallis*, and holding a bound book that one can reasonably presume from the context is a prayerbook). Under the image of stylish Ferguson (but still part of the work) there is a caption that reads: “A Jew and a hunchback are walking down the street. They go by a synagogue. The Jew says to the hunchback, ‘I used to be a Jew.’ And the hunchback says, ‘I used to be a hunchback.’” Under the image of Ferguson in stereotypically traditional Jewish dress the caption is repeated, only this time it's in Yiddish.

The dilemma animating Ferguson's work—of having to choose between being “the Jew” or “the Jew passing as a non-Jew”—has been a preoccupation of Jews-in-life as well as Jewish artists and writers since the emancipation of European Judaism in the early 19th century. In *Silver Screen, Hasidic Jews*, Shaina Hammerman takes up this “Jewish Question” anew, examining the messages communicated about Jews and Judaism through their presentation in contemporary film. Her work fits into a rich tradition of scholarship on the issue, from Lester Friedman's *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (1982) and Patricia Erens's *The Jew in American Cinema* (1984), which tended to focus on Jews in general, to later works like Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* (1996), Harley Erdman's *Staging the Jew* (1997), Henry Bial's *Acting Jewish* (2005), Andrea Most's *Theatrical Liberalism* (2013), and Joshua Moss's *Why Harry Met Sally* (2017), which brought

greater attention not just to issues of “Jewishness” and Americanization, but also to the performative nature of being or (as Bial titles his book) “acting” Jewish in a Christian world.

Hammerman examines five films produced initially for either American or French audiences, using each to illustrate her argument about how the donning and doffing of stereotypically “Jewish” or “secular” clothing exposes or masks “the Jew” in society. As she writes, the removability of clothing makes it like a mask of Jewish identity, a “superficial, surface quality” that as a symbol of identity is “both full and empty, deep and superficial,” contributing to its “complexity” and its “enduring power” (58).

Her first example, *The Frisco Kid* (1979), examines the symbolism of clothing worn by Rabbi Avram Belinski, a traditional rabbi sent in the 1850s by a yeshiva in Poland to serve a congregation in San Francisco. Over the course of the film, Belinski goes from wearing clothing that clearly mark him as a traditional Polish Jew to clothing more akin to those worn by his bank-robbing friend, paralleling his transformation from a naïve outsider to an authentic American, climaxing in a dramatic “reveal” that he is in fact a rabbi, schmaltzy Yiddish accent and all—but only because he wears the clothes to prove it. For Hammerman, *The Frisco Kid* is an innovative examination of “Jewface”—the performance of Judaism, akin to the minstrelsy practice of “Blackface”—because it is not just Judaism that is presented but Hasidism, a form of Judaism that stands out as atypical not only in the Christian dominant culture, but also among the Jewish actors, writers, and directors who are involved in the presentation of this image, as well as the audience members who view it.

Hammerman then moves to the French film *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (distributed in the United States as *The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*, 1973), a “mistaken identity” film in which an anti-Semitic industrialist Victor Pivert is kidnapped by Mohamed Larbi Slimane, the

leader of a group of “Arab revolutionaries,” who, hoping to evade police, disguises Pivert and himself as Hasidim and gets mistaken for an American rabbi visiting Paris. As in *The Frisco Kid*, the “adventures” of these “drag” rabbis end in a wedding; Pivert’s daughter jilts her fiancé at the church altar to marry Slimane. Pivert reconciles with his Jewish chauffeur Salomon, and all—the Frenchman and seemingly not-quite authentic Frenchmen—come together in true (if moderately laicized) friendship.

Hammerman returns to the United States with her examination of Woody Allen’s 1997 film *Deconstructing Harry*. Admitting to the controversies that have circulated around the filmmaker—not just the various allegations about his personal life, but also the labels thrown at him by members of the American Jewish community who have taken offence at some of his presentations of Judaism—Hammerman focuses on the way Allen transforms the argument about clothing masking or revealing identity by diverting attention to traditional Jewish women. If Jewish men are marked as “the Jew” by their clothing, Jewish women (who, in traditional Jewish communities, dress in a stylized manner that is less obvious to most Jews, and invisible to non-Jews) are marked as “the Jew” by more personal attributes (like their hair). This makes traditional Jewish women better concealed from (if I may) the Christian “gaze” and therefore more complex—even empowered—in ways that “the [male] Jew” is not. As Hammerman notes, “[R]eligious garb in film produces heavily gendered outcomes for the characters who wear it and the spectators who view it” (85).

Hammerman continues in this vein for the remainder of her work. After a brief investigation of two French comedies—*Mauvaise foi* (*Bad Faith*, 2006); *Le nom des gens* (*The Names of Love*, 2010)—she turns her attention to *Le petite Jérusalem* (*Little Jerusalem*, 2005), a love story involving two sisters: Laura, who finds herself in love with a non-Jewish man, and

Mathilde, who has discovered that her husband is cheating on her and seeks advice on how to save the marriage. While the lesson of *Deconstructing Harry* (in the previous chapter) is that, as presented on film, traditional Jewish women can be more complex and even more empowered than traditional Jewish men, Hammerman notes that these two sisters find that empowerment through sexual activity; Mathilde by being told that traditional Judaism affirms sexual behavior within the confines of marriage, meaning that she is “free” to satisfy her husband’s fairly specific sexual desires, Laura by challenging the strict standards of her traditional Jewish community, not only by engaging in sexual activity with a non-Jew, but also by doing so outside the confines of marriage. According to Hammerman, although both women are examined and presented as sexual beings, “the two relationships at the center of *Le petite Jérusalem* impart to viewers that religion suppresses and (French) sex liberates” (88).

The epitome of the liberation of the traditional Jewish woman to be traditional (rather than secularized) is the subject of the final film under consideration, Joan Miklin Silver’s 1975 film *Hester Street*. The film was based on *Yekl*, a novel written by Abraham Cahan—a novelist and playwright who was also one of the founders of *Forverts* (*The Forward*, a Yiddish daily newspaper) in 1897—as seen through the words and direction of Silver (who also wrote the screenplay). That, argues Hammerman, makes the film much more complex, not just in terms of “the Jewish Question,” but also in terms of how that issue relates to feminism, historicism, and revisionism. In it, Gitl comes to America to be reunited with her husband Yekl, who has adopted the more Americanized name “Jake” and sought to shed every aspect of his European Jewish background: most notably, the clothes and the beard. He has also strayed from the marriage, a point that—combined with his shame over Gitl’s seeming inability to conform to American fashion—leads to their divorce. Jake is emasculated, relying on his lover to pay the divorce

settlement. Gitl, whose nod toward Americanization is her willingness to not wear a *sheitl* (a head covering—usually a wig—meant to conceal a woman’s beauty from all but her own husband), is the clear “winner”: she gets a large financial settlement from her unfaithful ex-husband, and she marries the religious Mr. Bernstein, a former tenant in their apartment. Hammerman identifies Silver’s use of a number of elements to make *Hester Street* seem authentic; for example, it is filmed in black and white—often with a hand-held camera—so that it feels, notes Hammerman, “almost like a documentary.” And while Cahan—ostensibly writing for an American audience (Jewish or not)—used odd spellings and italics to indicate changes in dialogue, Silver has her actors speak most of their dialogue in Yiddish (accompanied by English subtitles). But as Hammerman points out, the film version is less feminist than one might expect; Gitl “wins” by freeing herself of the Americanized Jake and marrying the religious Mr. Bernstein. In other words, her agency permits her to move no farther than from one man to another, and (in a move that might be seen as anti-feminist) from the modern to the traditional. The moral seems to be that only by becoming a more Americanized Jew can Gitl find love, happiness, security, and (as strange as it might seem) traditional Judaism.

There is little point disputing Hammerman’s “read” of the films she selects; one may or may not be persuaded by her analysis, but one can hardly argue that her interpretation is wrong. So, too, her selection of films. Hammerman argues that each of the ones she has chosen “betrays its particular context in ways I find compelling and revelatory,” their “popularity and critical reception, as well as their longevity decades after production” (xv). While the author argues that the selection of films from France and the United States is based on the “indisputably central role that cinema plays in popular French and American cultures: as art, entertainment, and capitalist enterprise,” she also admits that the decision rested in part on a “long-standing personal interest in

the cultures of filmmaking in Paris and Hollywood” (xv). This is, of course, the author’s right, and given that the specific films selected were so chosen because they illuminate her argument, who really could argue? But one wonders about the selection of films from these two countries specifically, and also their chronology. The differences between predominantly Catholic French culture and predominantly Protestant American culture—and the related nature of being Jewish in these two countries—makes moving between these two countries a bit awkward. Is Judaism so universal that one’s analysis of it can transition smoothly back and forth from one form of a so-called “secular” Christian culture to the other? Some readers might take issue with Hammerman’s use of the term “Hasid” for this reason; the Jews represented in the French films are more traditionally Hasidic than are the Jews in the American films (who are, for the most part, merely more traditional) in part because of the development in the United States of a greater diversity in the ways to be Jewish, but also because of the differences between a Catholic and a Protestant dominant culture. But by taking the films out of historical order, Hammerman seems to suggest that there has been no significant difference in the presentation of Hasidim—in France or in the United States—over the thirty-seven years between the earliest film discussed and the most recent. To be fair, all of the forms of Judaism emerged as a result of the kind of dilemma Hammerman explores—in both Catholic and Protestant dominant cultures—but the differences between the American Jewish and the European Jewish experiences, from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, may be sufficient to expect a bit more exploration if one is to draw from both French and American films.

As it turns out, over the past two decades there has been a marked increase in visual presentations of traditional Jews, from the United States but also, increasingly (and importantly), from elsewhere. Films like *Menashe* (US, 2017) and *Disobedience* (UK, 2017), multi-season series

like *Shtisel* (Israel, 2013), and limited streaming series like *Unorthodox* (Germany, 2020) have brought Hasidim into the homes of viewers world-wide. (This reviewer would also include a personal favorite, the action-packed Guy Ritchie “heist” film *Snatch* [UK, 2000]—with Jewish diamond thieves dressed as Hasidim and twin sisters [who may or may not actually be Jewish] dressed and tressed in traditional Jewish fashion.) Each of these productions presents Hasidim (and Orthodox Jews) in ways that no doubt build on Hammerman’s analysis, particularly in their portrayal of Hasidim engaging (or disengaging) from the “secular” world—but because there is no historical trajectory presented in Hammerman’s work, we are left with insufficient method to contextualize the more recently portrayed explorations of women’s relationships, to men but also to other women.

These issues notwithstanding, Hammerman’s work is a useful examination of the ways in which being Jewish, acting Jewish, and seeming Jewish are expressed in late 20th and early 21st century film. In this reviewer’s opinion Hammerman’s most persuasive moment begins with her discussion of *Deconstructing Harry*, when she expands the argument to include women; shame on me for expecting a volume about Hasidim to be only about men. But throughout, Hammerman digs deep into each film, and works ably (if, at times, in a rhythm that is a bit rhetorically awkward) with various theories including feminism, performance theory, and queer theory. As such, it is a work that should be part of any conversation of “the Jewish Question” in contemporary film.