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## Movie-Made Jews: An American Tradition

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## Movie-Made Jews: An American Tradition

### Abstract

This is a book review of Helene Meyers, *Movie-Made Jews: An American Tradition* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

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### Author Notes

Jennifer Caplan is The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati Chair in Judaic Studies at The University of Cincinnati. Her research focuses on religion and popular culture, with an emphasis on American Judaism. She has published widely on humor, film, television, comics and graphic novels, and other popular media. Her book *Funny, You Don't Look Funny: Judaism and Humor from The Silent Generation to Millennials* will be published by Wayne State University Press in early 2023.

**Meyers, Helene, *Movie-Made Jews: An American Tradition* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).**

Helene Meyers' *Movie-Made Jews* is at once an extremely useful entry into the critical discussion of Jewish identity in film and a book that leaves you wanting more. On the one hand, Meyers is to be commended for pushing our understanding of "the canon" and ensuring that we continue to seek new sites for analysis. Of the thirty-two films she profiles at length, nineteen of them are from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and five of them were fewer than ten years old when the book was published. This is an important reminder that film is a constantly evolving medium, and new examples of old concepts are forever coming out. At the same time, this means a lot of "classic" films did not make the cut.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Meyers chose the films she felt best articulated the seven primary groupings into which she divided her analysis. Because she has such a clear vision for why these films form the right pattern those "but what about..." questions evaporate and her vision is made manifest.

Her introduction does most of the heavy lifting in terms of setting up her approach to the project and her methodology. Meyers says that "while it's a truism that Jews make movies, this book brings into focus the diverse ways movies make Jews" (2). This places Meyers' work in conversation with several recent and forthcoming works on American Jewish identity and culture, including Rachel B. Gross' *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (2021) and my own *Funny, You Don't Look Funny: Judaism and Humor from the Silent Generation to Millennials* (2023) both of which engage this same dynamic of culture influencing Jewish identity at least as much as Jewishness has influenced culture. The introduction makes clear that while Meyers sees her project as having great breadth, she plans to approach explicating it through

specificity and depth. She mentions a flurry of films in the introduction but then uses a small handful as deeper case studies which will be grouped together thematically.

Following the introduction Meyers has seven categories into which she has divided her study: “Looking at Antisemitism and Jews,” “Looking at the Shoah from a Distance,” “Focusing on Assimilation and Its Discontents,” “Assertively Jewish Onscreen,” “Queering the Jewish Gaze,” “Cinematic Alliances,” and a short epilogue, “Cinematic Continuity and Change through a Feminist Lens.” Within the first two groupings Meyers consciously pairs more “classic” films such as *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), or *The Pawnbroker* (1964) with much more contemporary examples such as *Protocols of Zion* (2005) or *A Serious Man* (2009). Meyers says that her “goal is to chart a useable tradition of continuity and change rather than a narrative of progress” (13). In the first two units on antisemitism and the Shoah this strategy is extremely effective as it shows not only the way Jews and Jewish themes have been depicted, but the change across time in the way certain topics are covered. Antisemitism, for example, moves from rather oblique in *Gentleman’s Agreement* (in the sense that actual Jews are largely absent and there is little to no specific violence against Jews) to bold and visceral in the documentary *Protocols of Zion*. The Shoah section moves in the opposite direction, from the harsh emotional immediacy of *The Pawnbroker* to the symbolic, often inscrutable symbolism of *A Serious Man*.

That very effective chronological movement does not, unfortunately, carry through as the subsequent sections are all much more tightly grouped. Chapter four, “Focusing on Assimilation and Its Discontents,” may be the weakest in that sense as there are no films in that section from the 21<sup>st</sup> century (it is the only section that lacks any) so there is a sense of datedness to the concept of assimilation. If assimilation is no longer a 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish concern, then perhaps this section is not needed. If, however, assimilation is still a topic for film (and I think many people would

argue that it is) then at least one contemporary example would have been a great help in telling the story Meyers is telling. Problematic as the films may be (and their very problems could make them good for an analysis like this) something like 2003's *The Hebrew Hammer* (which Meyers does discuss briefly in the Introduction) or 2017's *Disobedience* would have made that section feel slightly more immediate in its importance.

The final four sections offer more of a commentary on the state of the art as they contain almost entirely contemporary selections. That does mean that the analysis loses that evolutionary quality of the first two sections, but in favor of a sense of the new and the now, which does not feel like as much of a lacuna as the lack of recent films about assimilation. Chapter five, "Assertively Jewish Onscreen," contains some of the most interesting moments for further analysis. In this section Meyers has grouped together films that depict situations in which Jews are very much Jewish as a major element of the story, not just a point of character development. These are films, she says, in which "cultural and religious Jews are unapologetically represented, often in close proximity" (14). The concepts of "cultural" or "religious" Jews *and* the idea that they are different or oppositional to each other is exactly the problem that works like Meyers' should be helping to undermine, so it would have been nice to see her unpack that language a bit more, but the point remains that this section highlights some recent films that should become staples of courses that use Jewish films, such as the 2006 comedy *Keeping Up with the Steins*.

The strength of chapter five is balanced a bit by the weaknesses of chapter seven, "Cultural Alliances." This is a grouping of "Jews and" films, and it may have helped for this chapter to be either more diverse, or less so. Meyers discussed five films in this chapter, three about interactions between Jews and Blacks (*Heart of Stone* (2009), *Crime after Crime* (2011), and *Zebrahead* (1992)) and two that are about Jews and Muslims (*Arranged* (2007) and *David* (2011)). While

these are the two sites of intercultural contact that are most prevalent in the United States, the inclusion of two and only two feels thin. Additionally, Meyers is very careful (in a good way!) with her language in this section and describes these as films depicting Black Gentiles and white Jews, which is an excellent way to avoid the false Black/Jewish dichotomy. She does not, however, go into much of a discussion about the liminal space Jews of color often occupy. A documentary such as *Little White Lies* (2014) might have been a nice addition, to give readers the opportunity to think through cultural conjunction and not just cultural disjunction.

These quibbles aside, the book is an extremely good analytical vehicle, and Meyers has done a wonderful job of mixing some of the “usual suspects,” such as *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) with films that do not get as much scholarly attention. The one chapter that seemed to be missing was a chapter on gender constructions. Meyers does some of that work in chapter six, “Queering the Jewish Gaze” and some of it in the epilogue on feminist film, but there isn’t a place in the story as Meyers has laid it out for *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958), or *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), or *Dirty Dancing* (1987), or *Marci X* (2003) (which is a terrible movie and also could have gone into the “Cultural Alliances” chapter). There is so much to be said about the construction of both Jewish womanhood and Jewish manhood, particularly when you approach it with Meyers’ “how film made Jews” methodology.

Both researchers and teachers will find this book to be very useful. Researchers can find a lot of new ways of thinking about some older films which create new theoretical linkages. The opening move, from 1947’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* to 1992’s *School Ties*, established immediately that this is a book that is going to think about film differently than many books that have come before it. *School Ties* more often gets put together with other films of the era like *Dead Poets Society* (1989) as a story about adolescent boyhood, class, education, etc. The antisemitism

in the film is often treated as a side note, the same way the possible homophobia in *Dead Poet's Society* is a side note. Centering the antisemitism refocuses the narrative of the film in ways that I think will be generative for many scholars. Throughout the book Meyers offers these sorts of readings (and in some cases re-readings) of films, as well as offering incisive treatments of films that do not often get scholarly attention such as *Wish I Was Here* (2014) or *Keeping up with The Steins* (2006).

The classroom applications of the films are equally exciting. I am, in fact, using the book as the primary textbook for a new course on Jewish film in part because it contains such an excellent curation of titles, but also because it puts those titles together in interesting thematic ways that I expect will give students a lot to think (and I hope talk) about. Any of the chapters could be excerpted and taught along with a shorter unit on an individual film, and either chapter two (antisemitism) or chapter three (Shoah) would work on their own as a lone foray into film for a course on Jewish culture or American Jewish history. Having a critical text available will allow for the introduction of film into courses that would not otherwise use it, which is almost always a positive outcome for both students and teachers. The classroom use of the book is also, of course, where the “I would have written a different book” element comes in, as there are titles that Meyers chose not to include that a professor may need or want to include in a course. Some of these Meyers mentions, notably *Hester Street* and *The Chosen* (1981). Others she does not, like *Exodus* or *The Ten Commandments* (1956). If, however, you were to teach a course using solely the films Meyers chose, you would still have a well-rounded course that would present students with an excellent introduction to Jewish identity on film.

Overall, it cannot be overstated how difficult a task Meyers set for herself, and what a wonderful job she did in completing it. The book is deceptively simple, at 169 text pages, but

within that tight structure Meyers has packed a universe of new and exciting analysis. Even had Meyers written a 600-page book she could not have included every film and there would still be things that would cause some readers to ask “but what about...” By focusing on very clear, specific, and discrete thematic groupings, Meyers has written a book that speaks volumes in a small package. Through the choices she made, the way she arranged them, and the fascinating analysis and commentary she layers on top, Meyers has produced a book that is a must-have for scholars of film, Jewish studies, cultural studies, and a range of other disciplines. She has created a roadmap text that anyone could use to construct a new course on Jewish American film or revamp an existing course. Jews may make films and films may make Jews, but Meyers has made both into something special.

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<sup>1</sup> “Classic” is in the eye of the beholder, but many if not most discussions of Jewish film would include, for example, *Hester Street* (1975), *Exodus* (1960), *Shoah* (1985), *Schindler’s List* (1993) and other well-known films of that type.