Sects, Lies, and Videotape: Debunking deadly tropes about Jews and Israel in TV, film and media

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Abstract
The "Beyond Film" panel, "Sects, Lies, and Videotape: Debunking deadly tropes about Jews and Israel in TV, film and media" occurred at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival. This is a summary of the presentation.

Keywords
Antisemitism

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Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches "Religion and Film" at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.

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Beyond Film

Sects, Lies, and Videotape: Debunking deadly tropes about Jews and Israel in TV, film and media (Presented by Jew In The City)

Allison Josephs launched the Jew In The City (JITC) Hollywood Bureau for Jewish Representation in 2021 as a way for Jews, and particularly Orthodox Jews, to counter lazy, inaccurate, or harmful stereotypes promulgated by writers and producers in TV and film productions. This mission has become all the more critical after Hamas’s horrific terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli response in Gaza. JITC hosted a panel for Sundance’s Beyond Film series, focusing on the persistence and even rise of the worst antisemitic tropes in both on-screen narrative fiction and in the framing of news reporting in the wake of the Israel-Hamas War. The panel featured Josephs and Noa Tishby, former Israeli Special Envoy for Combating Antisemitism and Delegitimization, and was moderated by Malina Saval, author of “Too Jewish For Hollywood: As Antisemitism Soars, Hollywood Should Address Its Enduring Hypocrisy In Hyperbolic Caricatures of Jews” for Variety magazine (June 18, 2021). The panel introduced the topic by showing a series of clips from recent films and television shows, including You People (2023), The Lincoln Lawyer (2022-23), Law and Order: Organized Crime (2021-23), and Ramy (2019-21), arguably depicting modern versions of reliable anti-Jewish representations like greed and the murderous violence of blood libel, though now with a specific focus on Israeli characters, per se, as perpetrators. From these clips, the panel concludes, “When a Jew is too into religion or Israel, they are the most disliked.”

The crux of JITC’s position on representation is the declaration that Judaism is an ethnic identity, not (just) a religion; in fact, most accurately, it’s an ethno-religion, which bears the widely varying spiritual beliefs and practices of a specific, ethnically distinct group of people from a specific geographical region, namely the Middle East (which is, technically at least, Asia). Much
of the tension around Jewish representation in media—and harmful attitudes around such representation—is due to the fact that many Jews from (more precisely, exiled to) European countries are White passing. While Jewish oppression due to the Holocaust was a recognized fact through the 1960s, the civil rights movement, with its focus on Black, Hispanic, and other ethnic minorities, changed the rules and, with them, the meaning of terms like “oppressor” and “oppressed.” In some cases, this new reality meant that Jews were sidelined by institutional correctives like DEI initiatives (including the recent Academy Award requirement for diversity and inclusion for award-eligible films). In others, consistent and overt villainous representations of “too religious” and “too Israeli” Jews flew under the radar of the watchdogs of racial and religious insensitivity.

With the Israeli response to the October 7 massacres, sadly, those TV and film tropes are now being applied to actual Jewish people which has fueled a global wave of antisemitism unprecedented since the Holocaust, including in supposed Jewish safe havens like the United States. The panel identified four historical stages of antisemitism, to trace how we got to now: 1) attacks on Jewish peoplehood, documented as far back as Alexandria in the fifth century BCE; 2) attacks on the Jewish religion, specifically the Christian claims of Jews being “Christ-killers”; 3) attacks on Jews along racial lines, which of course was the Nazi motivation; and 4) anti-Zionism, which attacks the Jewish need for a homeland, made clear after the Holocaust. Notably, not only has the Israeli-Hamas conflict brought anti-Zionism to the fore, but as always happens with antisemitism, the others have flared up once again, like clockwork. The panel identified the accusations of genocide against the Israeli government as both a modern version of blood libel (the recurrent and long debunked claim that Jews kidnap, ritually murder, and eat Christian babies) and a tragic irony, that a word that was coined to describe the attempt to destroy the Jewish people is now being used against that people.
The panel concluded by giving an overview of the way that the Hollywood studio system itself was created by Jews as a kind of safe haven for other Jews who found that they were not accepted in the old money enclaves of East Coast America. Through movies, Jews created Americana, noted the panel, but they wrote themselves out of it as a way to hide, while giving themselves soft power amidst the politics of the country. The fact that Jews are overrepresented in Hollywood and other media is not the same as control; what it means, rather, is that as minorities, Jews over-contribute, in the creative media, in the sciences, in education, in all of the places where they have flourished for the betterment of the entire country and its culture. In light of this background, the panel observed, throughout history, Jews are a society’s canary in the coal mine: when Jews fare well, the country is doing well; when they are at risk, it’s a sign of a society in decline. The warning signs are flashing across the media landscape right now, both in the news and in our “entertainment.” We have seen this movie, and it doesn’t end well for anybody.