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THE HUMAN CHAMELEON HYBRID JEWS IN CINEMA

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,

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THE HUMAN CHAMELEON HYBRID JEWS IN CINEMA

Summary

This research explores the seditious potential of hybrid Jewish figures in cinema, based on certain thinkers of post WWII French philosophy, feminist and postcolonial theories, and traditional Jewish texts, which in different ways point to a reevaluation of the “chameleon Jew” in positive terms.

While the films discussed in this project come from various places and periods (from the 1920s to recent years), they all represent Jewish chameleon characters that are transformed into other identities. Each film discussed here relates to another face of the Jewish chameleon and to different theoretical questions that are raised by this figure.

The first chapter, “The Jewish Chameleon”, is dedicated to Zelig as the quintessential chameleon Jew, an incredibly multi-shaped Jewish figure which prefigures many of the Jewish characters that are discussed in the following chapters. The second chapter, “The Jewish Chameleon in Nazi Cinema”, deals with the appearance of the chameleon Jew in the Nazi propaganda films. The third chapter, “The Jewish Nazi”, explores the theme of Jewish figures who become (or pretend to become) Nazis. The fourth and fifth chapters, “Muscle Jews in Diaspora Denial” and “Hassidism in the Wild West”, explore the image of the traditional Jewish man of the diaspora as a subject of cultural hybridity, gender ambiguity and Jewish interbreeding with genre cinema. The final two chapters (six and seven), titled “Jewish Face, Black Mask” and “Jigga Jews”, are dedicated to Jewish chameleon figures that turned “black”.

DE MENSELIJKE KAMELEON

HYBRIDE JODEN IN FILM

Samenvatting

Het hier gepresenteerde onderzoek richt zich op de subversieve kwaliteiten van hybride Joodse karakters in film, gebaseerd op bepaald gedachtegoed uit de Franse filosofie van na de tweede wereldoorlog, feministische en postkoloniale theorieën en traditionele Joodse teksten, die op verschillende wijzen een positieve her-evaluatie van de ‘Kameleon Jood’ (de ‘veranderlijke’ of ‘verraderlijke’ Jood) voorstellen.

De behandelde films zijn afkomstig uit diverse landen en periodes (van de jaren twintig van de 20e eeuw tot nu), maar verbeelden alle Joodse ‘kameleon karakters’ die zich transformeren in andere identiteiten. Elke film die wordt besproken heeft betrekking op een ander gezicht van de ‘Joodse kameleon’ en op verschillende theoretische vraagstukken die deze figuur oproept.

Het eerste hoofdstuk, ‘de Joodse Kameleon’, is gewijd aan Woody Allens verbeelding van Zelig (in de gelijknamige film) als de typische Kameleon Jood, een ongelooflijk veelvormige? Joodse figuur die typerend is voor veel van de Joodse karakters die in de volgende hoofdstukken worden besproken.

Het tweede hoofdstuk, ‘De Joodse Kameleon in Nazi Films’, onderzoekt de verbeelding van de Kameleon Jood in Nazi propaganda films.

Het derde hoofdstuk, ‘De Joodse Nazi’, onderzoekt het thema van Joodse figuren die Nazi’s worden (of net doen alsof).

Het vierde en vijfde hoofdstuk, respectievelijk ‘Gespierde Joden in Ontkenning van de Diaspora’ en ‘Chassidisme in het Wilde Westen’, onderzoeken het imago van de traditionele Joodse man als subject van culturele hybriditeit, gender ambiguïteit, en Joodse endogamie in genre cinema.

De laatste twee hoofdstukken (zes en zeven) getiteld ‘Joods Gezicht, Zwart Masker’ en ‘Jigga Joden’, zijn gewijd aan Joodse Kameleon figuren die ‘zwart’ worden.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to three women whose support made this work possible: Professor Patricia Pisters, my teacher and friend, who guided this project with her wisdom and kindness. My dear wife, Everarde Berendsen, who supported me throughout my struggles with endless patience. And last but far from least: my beloved mother, Hana, who always supported me and to whom I owe everything.

Introduction

Hybrid Jews in Cinema

“The Jew is not an opposite type, but the very absence of type, a danger present in all bastardizations, which all are parasitic.” - Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy¹

“The more you break up self-identity, the more you are saying ‘My self-identity consists in not being identical to myself, in being foreign, the non-self-coincident one,’ etc., the more you are Jewish!” - Jacques Derrida²

In the film *Zelig*, directed by Woody Allen in 1983, Allen plays Leonard Zelig, a Jewish man known as “the human chameleon” for his capacity to transform himself to appear as other people he comes into contact with. Like a camouflaging lizard endowed with a protective device that enables it to change color and blend in with its immediate surroundings, Zelig too protects himself by becoming whoever is around him. Throughout the film, Zelig appears in various human shapes and colors, moving up and down the social scale, adopting different manners and languages, while literally changing his complexion and physical features (appearing for example as a Native American tribal man, a Chinese merchant, a black Jazz player, a bloated Italian opera singer and even as a Nazi in the Third Reich).

As a Jew who does not seem to have an identity of his own except what he borrows from others, Zelig is a barely disguised successor of the Wandering Jew, the stereotypical figure of the exiled, nomadic, rootless and parasitical Jew that has nothing of his own but what he takes from other nations. Yet in Allen’s film this ambiguous figure also holds an alluring, subversive power which corresponds to a larger philosophical, ideological and representational shift this figure underwent after the Second World War.

This research is set to explore the seditious potential of the chameleon Jew in cinema, based on certain thinkers of post WWII French philosophy, feminist and postcolonial theories, and traditional Jewish texts, which in different ways point to a reevaluation of the chameleon Jew in positive terms. In its older incarnation as the Wandering Jew, this figure was often portrayed by anti-Semites (as well as Enlightenment thinkers and Zionist Jews) in a negative

¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (translated by Brian Holms), *The Nazi Myth*, In: *Critical Inquiry* (The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1990): 307.

² Jacques Derrida, “A Testimony Given...”, In: Elisabeth Weber, *Questioning Judaism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004): 41.

way, representing Jewish hybridization or bastardization which threatens the integrity and purity of racial, national, cultural and sexual identities.

I do not intend to deny the transgressive features of this figure, but to reclaim them, following what Michel Foucault labelled as a “reverse discourse” which seeks to “demand that its legitimacy [...] be acknowledges, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was disqualified.”³ Stereotypical derogatory characteristics of the chameleon Jew are reclaimed in this research as positive traits. This tactic is in part feminist and in part derives from a post-colonial approach which considers, as Homi K. Bhabha formulated it, that the stereotype “may be read in a contradictory way, or indeed, be misread.”⁴

While this research is guided by philosophical and theoretical texts, cinema serves its focal point as it is today a central factor in the construction and deconstruction of identities. As Shohat and Stam argued, “since all political struggle in the postmodern era necessarily passes through the simulacral realm of a mass culture, the media are absolutely central to any discussion of multiculturalism. The contemporary media shape identity; indeed, many argue that they now exist close to the very core of identity production.”⁵

The Jewish chameleon figure is by definition a product of multicultural symbiosis with non-Jewish cultures, a figure of diaspora, represented here as non-Jewish or other-than-Jewish cinematic spaces, which can be situated at any locus that affirms difference and multicultural transformation. The film material that is discussed in this research is therefore the product of many places - Europe, America and even Israel – as any place can affirm diaspora politics alongside or under the well established politics of Jewish reterritorialization.

While the films discussed in this project come from various places and periods (from the 1920s to recent years), they all represent Jewish chameleon characters that are transformed into other identities. For example: Jews that become Nazis (chapter 3), Jews that become martial arts warriors (chapter 4), a Jew that becomes a cowboy in the Wild West (chapter 5) and Jews that become “black” (chapters 6 and 7). Zelig, with his many different borrowed identities, preceded these individual chameleon characters, and therefore his figure is presented here as the archetype of the chameleon Jew on screen (chapter 1).

³ Michel Foucault, *the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books / Random House, Inc., 1987): 101.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 100.

⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994): 6.

Many of the films discussed here not only blend a Jewish character with non Jewish identities, but are themselves products of hybridization, mixing Jewish themes with genres that usually do not involve Jews. For example: the Western, martial arts or the blaxploitation genres. With this respect, it is interesting to see not only how a typically non-Jewish genre influences a Jewish character, but also how these genres are reshaped and challenged by the introduction of a Jew.

Each film discussed here relates to another face of the Jewish chameleon and to different theoretical questions that are raised by this figure. By methodologically moving from film to theory and vice versa, I examine certain abstract ideas under the concrete conditions created by cinematic representations. In this sense, the films that are explored in this research offer different experimental fields which allow exploration of philosophical ideas in the more practical realms of identity politics and issues of gender, race, nationalism and religion.

The academic research of Jewish representations in cinema has dealt extensively with stereotypical images of the Jew.⁶ While many of the existing texts supply an important fieldwork, they do not tend to challenge the boundaries of Jewish identity. A refreshing critical approach came out in the recent book *The New Jew in Film* by Nathan Abrams (2012) which focused mainly on contemporary American representations and included feminist and postcolonial readings.⁷

While my research shares the endeavour of describing Jewish identity beyond the common binary opposition (of, for instance, victim/perpetrator), it differs in its theoretical position. Abrams' research is based on the assumption of "the end of diaspora" and offers "a reconstruction of identity", whereas this research offers a perspective from the diaspora which is motivated by a deconstruction of Jewish identity.⁸ The pertinent question of this research is therefore not how to reaffirm Jewish identity, but rather, how to question it.

This research is motivated by postmodern approaches which contributed greatly to the reevaluation of the figure of the Jew as part of a larger project of questioning identity at large. In her book *The Figural Jew*, Sarah Hammerschlag argued that before the Second World War, "the values with which the Jew was associated were negative by definition. The rootless Jew

⁶ For example: Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), and Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema - From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2005).

⁷ Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew* (London: I.B. Tauris & co., 2012)

⁸ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 9.

was unable to shed the stigma of race, to claim the positive value of heritage and tradition. The Jew was quintessentially an outsider. After the war the figure of the Jew retained its symbolic status. Yet, in some moment, it gained a positive moral and political significance.”⁹

The Wandering Jew as a nomadic and rootless character was taken by French thinkers as a subversive symbol of resistance in a post WWII Europe. The same set of anti-Semitic associations were being recycled “on a newly acquired positive value through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, then developed as a trope for disappropriation in the work of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida.”¹⁰ As the concept of difference itself was reevaluated positively in postmodern culture, the figure of the Wandering Jew appeared in the writings of post WWII French thinkers in positive terms, as the same attributes for which symbolic and real Jews were condemned throughout history, ironically marking the characteristics of postmodern heroes.

This research focuses first of all on the appearance of the Jew as a sort of chameleon figure in the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, where this figure supports key concepts and ideas of a new philosophy that denies the centrality, stability and unity of the subject. In different ways, the figure of the Jew appears in the writings of these thinkers as a chameleon figure which is always becoming-other than itself, as a difference at the heart of identity, or as an anti-type which threatens any philosophy or ideology which relies on the stable identity of the subject.

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe described a Jewish figure which the Nazis saw as the ultimate anti-type, the hybrid par excellence: “not an opposite type, but the very absence of type, a danger present in all bastardizations, which all are parasitic.”¹¹ Derrida’s concept of *différance* is a condition of any identity at all, a movement towards otherness at the heart of any “origin”, but it is nonetheless described by him as the specific attribute of Jewish identity. As Derrida claims: “The more you break up self-identity, the more you are saying ‘My self-identity consists in not being identical to myself, in being foreign, the non-self-coincident one,’ etc., the more you are Jewish!”¹² The concept of “becoming” is central in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari; a concept which in many ways comes to replace the philosophical dominance of the concept of “being” as a postulate for human experience. Deleuze and

⁹ Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew – Politics and Identity in Postwar France Thought* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2010): 7

¹⁰ Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*: 9.

¹¹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 307.

¹² Jacques Derrida, “A Testimony Given...”: 41.

Guattari describe many processes of becoming (becoming-child, becoming-woman, becoming-animal etc.), among them “becoming-Jewish” stands for deterritorial, “minoritarian” stream of Jewishness which triggers a becoming-other among Jews and non-Jews alike.¹³

In various ways, the chameleon Jew in the writings of these thinkers reflects the stereotype of the Jew as a hybrid figure which threatens (and can potentially be used as a weapon against) any philosophy or ideology which relies on the stable identify of the subject. Mikhail Bakhtin used the concept of hybridity to suggest the disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal language situations and narratives. This idea is implied also in Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque as “a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture”.¹⁴ Robert Young stressed that hybridity is a term which was rooted in a set of racist assumptions that at the turn of the century became part of the colonialist discourse of suppression.¹⁵ Yet Young also acknowledged the political motivation in conscious accounts which deliberately use the term as disruption of homogeneity. Postcolonial theories see the hybrid as a potential of resistance. The hybrid serves a counter-discursive term implicit in the colonial ambivalence itself and so undermines the very basis on which imperialist and colonialist discourses raise their claims of superiority.¹⁶

Therefore, a second set of theoretical influences that inform this research is formed by feminist and postcolonial positions which reclaim the image of the Jew as a hybrid race and a queer gender figure. According to Daniel Boyarin,¹⁷ Paul Breins,¹⁸ Sander L. Gilman¹⁹ and others, the Jew was historically conceived as the “mulatto” product of racial interbreeding – “white, but not quite”, as Homi K. Bhabha’s formulation goes for other colonial subjects.²⁰ Furthermore, they argue, the Jewish man appeared as “a sort of a woman”, a queer or hybrid

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (translated by Brian Massumi), *A Thousand Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Continuum, 2007): 321.

¹⁴ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984): 4.

¹⁵ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995)

¹⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge 2007): 108-111.

¹⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (London: University of California Press, 1997)

¹⁸ Paul Breines, *Tough Jews* (Basic Books, 1990)

¹⁹ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of Jews* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990)

²⁰ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 262.

gender.²¹ Boyarin's work was groundbreaking in adopting this stereotype from a traditional Jewish view point. While this image projected a negative perception of femininity and queerness, Boyarin showed how to reclaim it in positive terms and possibly as a form of resistance to Roman/European phallic values. As he argued, "There is something correct – although seriously misvalued – in the persistent European representation of the Jewish man as a sort of woman. More than just an anti-Semitic stereotype, the Jewish ideal male as countertype to "manliness" is an assertive historical product of Jewish culture."²²

Thirdly, my research incorporates Jewish traditional texts into its film analyses, while suggesting possible points of contact between pre-modern Jewish thought and postmodern thinkers. Boyarin mainly delved into Talmudic sources, whereas in this research I mainly evoke Hassidic sources (but also biblical, Talmudic and other texts) in order to show positive approaches to the "feminine", queer or hybrid Jew within the Jewish tradition itself.

The image of the Jew as a "sissy" seems to belong to the diasporic past. Nowadays, spectators are more accustomed to the image of the territorial Jew – the tough, fighting Jew that is sovereign in his own land, in which he forms a majority. By now this image has become dominant in news coverage of Israel's military conflicts in the Middle-East, as in many films which depict hard, muscular and physically active and aggressive Jewish men.²³

According to Paul Breines, "there is now emerging a generation for whom the phrase 'weak Jews' will be as odd and oxymoronic as the phrase 'tough Jews' would have been to previous generations of American Jews, indeed, to many Jews virtually everywhere for nearly two thousand years."²⁴ According to Breines, this shift signifies a process of normalization in which Jews - as in Theodor Herzl's vision - will become accepted as a nation like any other, yet as Breines writes, "normalized Jewry" is realized in part by the "Israeli brutality toward Palestinians, for in the framework of civilized nations, brutality is the very essence of normalcy."²⁵

By focusing on the figure of the chameleon Jew this research offers a political and ethical alternative to "the cult of the tough Jew" and its territorial Jewish identity which relies on "the ideals of 'masculine beauty,' health, and normalcy that are conceived and articulated

²¹ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 3.

²² Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 3.

²³ There are many examples for films in various genres which feature 'tough Jews'. For examples see note 5, chapter 4.

²⁴ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 4.

²⁵ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 50.

as if their validity were obvious and natural.”²⁶ What is forgotten here, as Breines reminds us, is that “far from being self-evident cultural universals, those ideals are predicated on a series of exclusions and erasures – of effeminate men, pacifism, Arabs, gentleness, women, homosexuals, and, far from least, Jews.”²⁷

The chameleon Jew appears in this research as a European or American Jewish male. Of course, I did not wish to exclude women and *Sefaradi* (Arab descent) Jews, but it was simply the case that all representations of the chameleon Jew in cinema (at least those that I could find) strictly deal with male characters from *Ashkenazi* (European) descent. I can only speculate that the reason for this surprising discovery is that the chameleon Jew is a figure of alterity, and since women (and Arabs) are already perceived as the other in dominantly patriarchal (and white) cultures, the process of becoming-other is more palpable when taken by Ashkenazi men. In Deleuzian terms, men constitute the majority, but more precisely, the standard upon which the majority is based. Therefore, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, “there is no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellence...”²⁸ While women figures are unfortunately absent from this research, in many instances the male figures explored here are subjects of what Deleuze and Guattari described as a “becoming-woman”, or what Kaja Silverman called “non-phallic masculinities [...] which open in a variety of ways onto to the domain of femininity [...] those which not only acknowledge but embrace castration, alterity, and specularity.”²⁹ Confronted with the absence of female characters, I find a little consolation in that, at least, this research attempts to reclaim the femininity of the Jewish man.

I find it also important to note that the transformation of real Jews into metaphorical figures is a highly problematic issue. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin addressed the appearance of the figure of the “Jew” in the writings of Jean-Francois Lyotard³⁰ and other contemporary French thinkers which this research evokes, arguing that “although well intended, any such allegorization of the *Jew* is problematic in the extreme for the way that it deprives those who have historically grounded identities in those material signifiers of the power to speak for

²⁶ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 167.

²⁷ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 167.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: 322. However, it is important to note that according to Deleuze and Guattari, also women can, should and must (!) “become-woman”, yet then they enter a “becoming-imperceptible” which can no longer be perceived in relation to the majority.

²⁹ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 3.

³⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). In the opening paragraph of his book Lyotard clarifies his use of the term “the jews” as such – between quotation marks and in lower case, in order “to avoid confusing these ‘jews’ with real Jews.” (p. 3)

themselves and remain different.”³¹ Keeping in mind these reservations, it is also arguable that “real Jews” who speak for themselves are not necessarily always bound by “material signifiers”, but can do so as belonging to what Benedict Anderson termed as an “imaginary community”, that is, a community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that community.³² As Shaye J. D. Cohen wrote (referring to the concept of Jewishness in antiquity): “Jewishness, like most – perhaps all – other identities, is imagined; it has no empirical, objective, verifiable reality to which we can point and over which we can exclaim, ‘this is it!’ Jewishness is in the mind.”³³ In this research I do not presume to argue who or what is a “real Jew”, but only to investigate the appearance of imaginary Jews on film. That been said, I do believe that representations of Jews can have tremendous powers over the lives of real Jews, whoever or whatever they are.

The structure of this work is as follows: The first chapter, “The Jewish Chameleon”, is dedicated to Zelig as the quintessential chameleon Jew, an incredibly multi-shaped Jewish figure who prefigures many of the Jewish characters that are discussed in the following chapters. Woody Allen’s film *Zelig* crystallizes central questions this research is concerned with. First of all, how to theoretically define the chameleon Jew? Is there some “Jewish core” to the many identities Zelig assumes, and if so, what is it? If the chameleon Jew can assume any form, what is still “Jewish” about it? How can we define, in other words, a figure which in principle is different from itself? I examine Zelig as a figure which represents the so-called “Jewish question” as it was formulated by the Enlightenment’s project of Jewish emancipation. Zelig is an extreme presentation of Jewish assimilation, one that both fulfills the promise of emancipation and threatens it as a figure which assimilates too much and too far and into any identity whatsoever. In this regard, Zelig himself is addressed as the embodiment of question.

The second chapter, “The Jewish Chameleon in Nazi Cinema”, deals with the appearance of the chameleon Jew in the Nazi propaganda films *The Eternal Jew* (Fritz Hippler, 1940) and *Jew Süss* (Veit Harlan, 1940). Both films targeted Jewish masquerade and infiltration into non-Jewish/Aryan identities as a most dire threat, and claimed to expose the

³¹ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity”, In: *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 19, no. 4), (The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 697.

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991)

³³ Shaye, J. D., Cohen, *The Beginning of Jewishness – Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Barkley: University of California Press, 1990): 5.

“real” despicable figure behind the “civilized” (Western European) mask of the assimilated Jew. While these films strive to present this “essential Jew” as a specifically appalling type, I introduce Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s concept of the Jewish “anti-type” and offer an interpretation according to which the underlining threat which these films constantly imply is actually that the “real” Jew is something which transgresses the notion of type altogether.

The third chapter, “The Jewish Nazi”, explores the theme of Jewish figures who become (or impersonate) Nazis. The anti-Semitic image of the chameleon Jew as a figure of masquerade and infiltration finds a most ironic and troubling twist in the figure of the “Jewish-Nazi”, which surprisingly appears in quite a few films. This unsettling figure made its first appearance in Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), and then was shaped and reshaped in later films such as *Europa Europa* (Agnieszka Holland, 1990), *Train of Life* (Radu Mihaileanu, 1998) and *The Believer* (Henry Bean, 2001). These films take the theme of Jewish masquerade and infiltration to its radical end, turning this image against Nazi ideology itself, as they insert a Jewish character into the heart of the single identity which was supposed to protect from such infiltration.

However, the negation here is a double-edged sword, since both identities cancel each other by definition. The question is, then, not just how much (and what kind) of a threat to Nazi ideology these figures pose, but also conversely, how much of a destruction of Jewish identity is involved in the process as well? Following Derrida, I intend to propose another trail, a certain paradoxical claim according to which the negation of Jewish identity is actually the most Jewish act of all. In addition, the third chapter concerns questions which relate to gender. As we shall see, some of the “Jewish-Nazi” characters presented in this chapter find in their assumed Nazi identity a disturbing and somewhat satirical solution for the Jewish man’s “femininity”, which in itself is a stereotype that originated (at least in its negative context) in anti-Semitic discourse and imagery. Specifically concerning the films *Europa Europa* and *The Believer*, I turn to Derrida’s writings about circumcision as a topic which relates both to the Jewish male’s gender trouble and to Jewish identity at large.

The fourth and fifth chapters explore the image of the traditional Jewish man of the diaspora as a subject of cultural hybridity, gender ambiguity and, in the films discussed in these chapters, a product of Jewish interbreeding with genre cinema. The two films discussed in these chapters insert a diaspora religious Jew in “manly” genres which usually do not depict Jews at all. Fishke the lame and Rabbi Avram, the heroes of these films, are chameleon

Jews who respond in different ways to the stereotypical image of the traditional Jewish man of the diaspora as a sort of a “woman” - a weak, castrated and even menstruating man.³⁴ As both heroes are forced to confront the masculine codes of the genres they find themselves in, they move back and forth between the diaspora image of the Jew as a “sissy” and the Zionist image of the “tough Jew”.

The fourth chapter, “Muscle Jews in Diaspora Denial”, focuses on *King of Beggars* (Uri Paster, 2007), an Israeli production of an action-packed, martial arts epic set in and around a Jewish *shtetl* on the Russian-Polish border in the 16th century. Although the story takes place in the Eastern-European diaspora, as an Israeli production, the film takes a Zionist perspective which denies the diaspora as a locus which produces Jewish “femininity”, representing it as a place where Jews can only become victims.

The fifth chapter, “Hassidism in the Wild West”, takes another perspective on the same subject. The chapter focuses on *The Frisco Kid* (Robert Aldrich, 1979), an American Western-comedy that tells the story of a Hassid from Poland who finds himself in the Wild West. Rabbi Avram follows the footsteps of the real historical figure of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who advocated the dismantling of the self, accompanied by a deterritorialization of Zion.

In both chapters I ask not only what happens to stereotypically “feminine” Jewish men of the diaspora when they encounter “phallic” violence, but also what happens to dominant structures of gender in cinema when a religious Jewish man enters the frame, especially in what are considered to be predominantly masculine genres. *King of Beggars* and *The Frisco Kid* are especially interesting because they deal with Jewish gender trouble in the context of religion. Abrams noted that “cinema tended to define Jewishness in secular rather than religious terms,”³⁵ and “where Judaism was represented on-screen, Jews mainly tended to be non-Orthodox.”³⁶ The study of Jews in cinema was therefore mainly confined to Jewishness as racial, ethnic, political and cultural identity, and not into Judaism as a religion. The fourth and fifth chapters partially serve as an attempt to answer this challenge by incorporating a religious perspective into the film analysis.

³⁴ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 210.

³⁵ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 135.

³⁶ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 139.

The last two chapters (6 and 7) are dedicated to Jewish chameleon figures that turned “black”. Rarely appearing on screen, the Jewish-black chameleon figure gained popularity in the late 1920s when the American Jewish actor and singer Al Jolson performed in blackface in the cinematic millstone *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927). Chapter six “Jewish Face, Black Mask” explores this film and Jolson’s figure as an archetype model of the Jewish-black chameleon, while chapter seven “Jigga Jews” explores contemporary development of this figure in the film *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2013) and the television and film character Ali G, performed by the Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Since becoming-black only increases the otherness of the Jew, I ask what motivates these Jewish characters to become-black, while pondering if such a racial cross-over is even possible beyond mere imitation.

Different chapters of this work present different chameleon Jews who take different shapes and colors. In each case I ask what are the conditions that form each specific representation of the chameleon Jew, and what are the political advantages and limitations each case entails? With regard to the figures presented here, I seek to find whether the chameleon Jew can be turned from a degraded figure to become a positive, empowering trope.

With regard to the past persecutions of Jews and the current politics of Jewish reterritorialization, I explore whether the figure of the chameleon Jew can offer a new path for a Jewish “non-identity” beyond the realms of Anti-Semitism, Enlightenment and Zionism, which all – in different ways – rejected Jewish difference. How to reclaim and maintain difference as the heart of identity is perhaps the deepest secret of the chameleon Jew. Today more than ever, understanding of this paradox is crucial for the survival of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Chapter 1

The Jewish Chameleon

Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) is a mockumentary³⁷ film which follows Leonard Zelig, a Jewish man (played by Allen himself) who is called the "human chameleon" for his capacity to transform into various identities. Like a camouflaging lizard endowed with a protective device that enables it to change color and blend in with its immediate surroundings, Zelig too protects himself by becoming whoever is around him. Throughout the film Zelig appears in various shapes and colors, moving up and down the social scale, adopting different mannerisms and languages, while literally changing the complexion of his skin and physical features (appearing, for example, as a Native American tribal man, a Chinese merchant, a black Jazz player, a bloated Italian opera singer and more).



Figure 1 Zelig's various identities.

Like Zelig, who imitates other people, the film about him is an imitation of a documentary movie which pretends to track down a real figure, thereby undermining the authority of representation and blurring the borders between real and false. Alongside cinematographic style which incorporates "real" documentary footage, the film mentions and shows many real life historical figures (such as Calvin Coolidge, Charles Lindbergh, Al Capone, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Babe Ruth, Eugene O'Neill, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Pope

³⁷ A portmanteau of the words "mock" and "documentary", the mockumentary is a type of film or television show in which fictional events are presented in a documentary style.

Pius XI, Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and many others); and it presents contemporary writers such as Saul Bellow and Susan Sontag who appear as themselves and offer their commentary on Zelig's story, as if discussing a factual person. Many of Woody Allen's films (most notably his 1985 film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*), are films about cinema which offer a reflection on the limits of the medium. In *Zelig*, this meta-cinematic reflection corresponds to the complexity of representing a chameleon character which by definition is always other-than-itself. The ambiguity which appears in the film on the representational level can be understood as a product of the subject matter itself – the figure of the chameleon Jew, which is characterized by the inability to determine a stable identity as it constantly shifts between different, if not contradictory, subject positions. As Zelig's character plays with identities in a way which de-centers the subject, it points to contradictions and ambivalences inherent to the cinematic representation itself.

Mimicking a documentary film which investigates the life of a real figure, the film revolves around the question, “who really is Leonard Zelig?” Zelig is a man of many identities, yet biographical details attest to Zelig's Jewish origin and background. We learn that he is the son of a Yiddish orthodox theater actor; that as a boy at the turn of the century he lived with his neurotic family at the Lower East Side in New York, and that he was frequently bullied by anti-Semites.

However trivial these biographical facts may seem, I argue that Zelig's Jewishness is the underlining factor of his chameleon character. Mimicry and camouflage are stereotypical characteristic of the Wandering Jew, which is stereotypically portrayed as a rootless, universal nomad, without a soil or culture of his own, only borrowed identities which he lends from his hosting societies.

Diaspora Jews often kept to their unique Jewish customs, yet they always adopted the language and some cultural aspects of their hosts. Like Zelig, they even assumed similar physical features. Shimshon Dovid Pincus, an American-Israeli ultra-orthodox Rabbi, therefore suggested that Jews are indeed a sort of human chameleons: “Each nation has its own unique character. It has a distinct look, a certain way of thinking, its own way of life, way of dressing, mentality, etc. But the Jewish nation does not have any unique character! It is rather like a mirror: it reflects whatever stands in front of it. There is no such thing as a ‘Jewish face’ [...] A Jew who lives in Russia has a Russian face, and also a Russian way of thinking. A Jew in Italy looks Italian and thinks Italian. [...] A Jew is like a mirror of his

surroundings. Therefore, he can empty himself of all Jewish content, and blend in completely with whatever surroundings he finds himself in.”³⁸ What defines Jewishness in this description is paradoxically its lack of definition and the Zelig-like ability to become something else.

The Chameleon Jew as a Metaphor

Zelig is clearly a metaphor for Jewish assimilation in the United States.³⁹ Irving Howe (appearing as himself) explicitly provides this interpretation while contemplating Zelig’s story: “When I think about it, it seems that his story reflected a lot of the Jewish experience in America – the great urge to push in and to find one’s place and then to assimilate into the culture. I mean, he wanted to assimilate like crazy!” According to this interpretation Zelig’s bizarre chameleon feature is triggered by a Jewish survival mechanism. Like the chameleon which changes its colors in order to protect itself, Zelig changes his identity to whoever is around him in order to feel protected. The film’s narrator supports this interpretation on a psychological level, claiming that Zelig is ultimately motivated by a deep wish to belong. In a conversation with his psychoanalyst, Zelig indeed confesses that he assumes the characteristics of the other person because “It’s safe... to be like the others... I want to be liked.”

Zelig is a metaphor for the assimilating Jew, yet as a chameleon which assumes many different identities he appears in the film also as “a symbol for everything.” Zelig’s story is a Jewish story, but at the same time it is also presented as a universal tale which “reflects the nature of our civilization, the character of our times.” Zelig’s chameleon feature indeed appears as the product of a specifically Jewish situation, but it also stands as a symbol for a general modern social condition which increasingly demands of its subjects to be split between different subject-positions; what might be called (after Frederic Jameson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) “schizophrenia of late capitalism.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Dovid Shimshon Pincus, *Nefesh Chaya* (Feldheim, 2011): 190.

³⁹ While the term “assimilation” is used in the film itself, a distinction must be made between the concepts of “assimilation” and “integration”. While assimilation suggests the complete absorption of a minority culture by a larger dominant one, integration allows a minority culture to adapt or join another culture while keeping some or most of its elements.

⁴⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1991); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)

In this kind of society, everyone must become a chameleon in order to survive. The ability to adapt quickly comes in handy in such a society, and indeed, when Zelig becomes known to the public he immediately turns into a popular icon: “Doin’ the Chameleon” - a popular Zelig song and dance - sweeps across the nation; no social gathering is without its Leonard Zelig joke; and everywhere there are Zelig pens, Zelig lucky charms, Zelig clocks and Zelig toys.

Yet Zelig also becomes the villain of his time, a scapegoat for society, just as “the Jew” became a symbol for every modern malady: for the communists, Zelig is “the capitalist man” who “takes many forms to achieve his ends, the exploitation of the workers by deception”; while for the Ku Klux Klan, as “a Jew who was able to transform himself into a Negro or Indian” he posed “a triple threat.” Zelig is eventually accused of bigamy and polygamy. The charge has its ground, since Zelig had indeed married different women under different identities he assumed; yet his indictment conforms to the classic anti-Semitic conspiracy story which frames the Jews as involved in all the crimes while violating all the women. In the words of one vilification lady, the anti-Semitic tone is clearly expressed: “We don’t condone scandals. Scandals of fraud, and polygamy. In keeping with pure society, I say, lynch the little hebe.”

Represented as both a hero and a villain, Zelig is the target of what Zygmunt Bauman calls “allosemitism”, which “does not unambiguously determine either hatred or love of Jews, but contains seeds of both, and assures that whichever of the two appears, is intense and extreme.”⁴¹ “Alos” in Greek means “other”. Allo-Semitism, as Bauman explains, is “the practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all the others.”⁴² Bauman in a way justifies this attitude, claiming that in the modern, mobile world Jews were indeed “the most mobile of all; in the world of boundary-breaking, they broke most boundaries; in the world of melting solids, they made everything, including themselves, into a formless plasma in which any form could be born, only to dissolve again.”⁴³

Zelig exemplifies Bauman’s claim that the Jew is “ambivalence incarnate”⁴⁴ as he breaks the boundaries of every identity, literally acting like a formless plasma that takes any form. As a metaphor Zelig can be therefore taken for every use. Thus, the doctors who

⁴¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern”, In: Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (editors), *Modernity, Culture, and ‘the Jew’* (Stanford University Press, 1998): 143

⁴² Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism”: 143.

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism”: 150.

⁴⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism”: 150.

examined Zelig could not agree on one diagnosis, while the Freudians - as the narrator tells us – “had a ball. They could interpret him in any way they pleased. It was all symbolism - but there were no two intellectuals who agreed about what it meant.”

On the level of representation, the film itself seems to be infected by the ambiguity of its main character and therefore seems unable to determine the meaning of the story it tells. As a mockumentary which blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, the film further undermines its own authority to access the truth. The question who is really Leonard Zelig remains essentially open.

The Jewish Question

The mystery of Zelig’s story relates to the larger issue of Jewish assimilation and the so-called “Jewish question”, which according to Hannah Arendt⁴⁵ reemerged in modern times with the Enlightenment and its project of Jewish emancipation.⁴⁶ According to Adam Sutcliff, the Enlightenment characterized itself as “a commitment to the unity and power of critical reason.”⁴⁷ Judaism, in this context, signified the defining “Other”, a system (or non-system) of thought marked by irrationality, tradition and superstition.⁴⁸

The Enlightenment’s vision of universal reason, tolerance, and emancipation of minorities, stood uneasily alongside the identification of Judaism “as so atavistically contrary to all emancipator values and modes of thought.”⁴⁹ Yet Sutcliff’s account of the Jewish question at the age of Enlightenment does not settle for a simple opposition between Jewish particularism and the Enlightenment’s universalism, but rather points to the paradoxical stand the Enlightenment took with regard to the Jews. For the Enlightenment, he argues, the denial of Jewish difference was a guarantee of emancipation. The assumption was that Jews could shed the distinctive features of their culture and religion, and become equal citizens. Yet emancipation at once “also fixed Jewish difference as a problem. Jews were now to be accorded respect as citizens, but not necessarily as Jews. Despite the energetic attempts of many nineteenth-century Western European Jews, particularly the most successful and

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 3.

⁴⁶ The term “emancipation” is generally used to designate a legal process which started in Europe with the French Revolution, of granting the Jews equal civic rights. Some historians use the term to describe the whole cultural and social movement which promoted Jewish integration. This term, however, is somewhat anachronistic, as it first appeared with regard to the struggle for Jewish civic rights only in 1828. For more see: Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 1995): 112.

⁴⁷ Adam Sutcliff, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 2005): 12.

⁴⁸ Sutcliff, *Judaism and Enlightenment*: 5.

⁴⁹ Sutcliff, *Judaism and Enlightenment*: 6.

prosperous, to assimilate into mainstream, secular society, Jewish difference became an increasingly intense popular preoccupation, leading to the emergence of anti-Semitism as an explicit political creed in late nineteenth-century Germany.”⁵⁰

In its modern, secular form, the Jewish question appears as a problem of modern discourses of knowledge. Zelig is therefore admitted to a mental hospital where different specialists try to understand and “cure” his condition. The specialists ponder whether Zelig’s problem is biological, mental or environmental; a product of a brain tumor or of perverse psychology. They conduct various experiments, yet everything fails until Dr. Fletcher (Mia Farrow) enters the picture. Zelig’s therapist (and wife to be), represents the Enlightenment’s approach to the Jewish question. She determines that Zelig’s condition is not a result of physiological disorder but a psychological one: “It is Zelig’s unstable makeup”, she suggests, “that accounts for his metamorphoses” and declares - echoing the discourse of Jewish emancipation – that she will “return him to society as a useful, self possessed citizen.”

Dr. Fletcher’s approach stands in opposition to modern racism, which describes Jewish difference as essential, inherent to the Jewish character, and therefore sees it as a problem which cannot be changed by cultural assimilation. According to this view, there is a natural, biological determination which will never allow the Jews to really assimilate in Western, white society. The only solution possible for the Jewish problem is therefore separation, expulsion or, in the extreme case - which indeed became a political agenda in Nazi Germany - extermination. The Enlightenment’s approach to the Jewish question, in contrast, sees Jewish difference as contingent, a historical or social condition, and not an essential or biological issue. However, both approaches basically defined Jewishness as a question or a problem that needed a solution. Indeed, in much of the Enlightenment thought, the Jewish difference is described in derogatory terms, while the only dispute with the racist approach was how to eliminate it.

A prominent example of this discourse can be found in the essay “Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews”, a key text in the movement for Jewish emancipation, written by the German scholar Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (1751-1820).⁵¹

⁵⁰ Sutcliff, *Judaism and Enlightenment*: 2.

⁵¹ In: Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (editors), *The Jew in the Modern World - A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, second edition, 1995). Dohm was active in the Enlightenment circles of Berlin, where he befriended Moses Mendelssohn. In 1799 he assumed a position in the Prussian Government, and two years later published his essay, which to these days is considered to be a main document in the history of Jewish emancipation. Dohm’s plea for admitting the Jews to citizenship, which he wrote at the request of his

Dohm claimed that the “degraded” state of the Jews was a result of the loss of political independence, and not of some inherent characteristic Jewish defect: “Everything the Jews are blamed for is caused by the political conditions under which they have now lived, and any other group of man, under such conditions, would be guilty of identical errors.”⁵² The Jews, explains Dohm, are not to be blamed for their economic and moral “corruption”, because their degraded condition is a result of the marginal social position they were forced to take; indeed, it is the “natural consequence of the oppressed condition in which they have been living for so many centuries.”⁵³ In contrast to anti-Semitic ideas which claim that the Jews are necessarily inclined to evil due to their racial characteristics, Dohm’s argument states clearly that the Jewish condition is the effect of oppression and economic restrictions, a product of nurture and not of nature. Therefore, he concludes, the removal of the negative conditions would render the Jews less “harmful” and will prepare them for a gradual increase of rights and improved social conditions.

While Dohm’s cause was undoubtedly just, there is a certain patronizing undertone in his text, which treats the Jews in a somewhat demeaning way. For instance, Dohm takes for granted the Jewish “corruption”, “harmfulness” and “degradation”, even if he sees it as a product of sociological and historical oppression.⁵⁴ On the one hand - as the title of the essay suggests - Dohm sought to improve the conditions of the Jews in civil society; and indeed, his text had a major contribution in the granting of equal rights to Jews in central Europe. On the other hand, Dohm’s essay asks not only to improve the condition of the Jews, but to improve the Jews themselves.⁵⁵ More precisely, the first statement is linked with the second: once the conditions of the Jews would be improved, the Jews themselves will subsequently improve, leaving behind their “corrupt” ways.

Dohm expected that with the advent of Enlightenment, Jews will eventually abandon their religion as out of step with citizenship in the modern state (as was indeed the case in

friend Mendelssohn, coincided with the reform of Joseph II, the emperor of Austria, and thus helped to give focus on the ensuing debate throughout Europe on the issue of Jewish civil equality.

⁵² Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 30.

⁵³ Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 29.

⁵⁴ Mendelssohn, which was in the beginning one of Dohm’s most prominent Jewish supporters, was perturbed by Dohm’s endorsement of the view of Judaism as commercially and morally corrupt, and asked to re-term civil “improvement” as civil “admission”. See: Moses Mendelssohn, “Response to Dohm” (1782), In: Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 44-47.

⁵⁵ This interpretation is suggested by Dohm himself. See: Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 33.

Central and West Europe where Jews became largely secularized).⁵⁶ He therefore suggested “a useful new regulation”, which was already introduced in various states, “to obligate the Jews to keep their books in the language of the land and not in Hebrew.”⁵⁷ Thus, Jewish “emancipation” served a colonial enterprise directed within in order to “improve” the Jews by erasing Jewish specificity, or that which makes Jews different, namely, their religion and language.

In this respect, Dohm’s discourse was akin to the European colonial discourse and its patronizing and self-proclaimed narrative of a “civilizing mission.”⁵⁸ According to Edward Said, the discourse of the civilizing mission was “at work within a purportedly liberal culture, one full of concern for its vaunted norms of catholicity, plurality, and open-mindedness.” However, the hard reality of colonialism exposed the very opposite, that “liberality was no more than a form of oppression and mentalistic prejudice.”⁵⁹ According to Said, the Orient was constructed by the colonial discourse as an external otherness: “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority,” the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, “is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as amoral fact.”⁶⁰

The Jews however were perceived in Europe as an internal otherness which required the civilizing mission to be carried within. The Jews as an internal otherness triggered European anti-Semitic paranoia in the 20th century, which not so much feared the other’s otherness, as much as the otherness of that which seems the same – just as Zelig triggers anxiety precisely for his ability to become like everybody else. In either case, what made European culture hegemonic both in and outside of Europe was according to Said ‘the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.’⁶¹

It is not accidental that among the different identities Zelig assumes, he is found at a certain moment in a newsreel footage dressed as a Catholic priest, standing right next to the Pope. This episode serves a reminder that the Jewish assimilation was first a form of religious conversion. Nevertheless, the newsreel announcer quickly notices that “somebody doesn’t

⁵⁶ Bruce Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond* (Fordham University Press, 2009): 31.

⁵⁷ Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*: 31.

⁵⁸ Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*: 27

⁵⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979): 254.

⁶⁰ Said, *Orientalism*: 21.

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*: 7.

belong up there.” Zelig’s “conversion” into Christianity fails and as many other Jewish converts he is still identified as a Jew, an outsider, the one who does not belong. At the age of Enlightenment Jewish assimilation did not involve religious conversion, since a separation of state from religion was advocated in the creation of a secular society. The Jewish question concerned then the ability (or disability) of Jews to assimilate into the modern nation state.⁶²

However, both the Christian and the modern-secular forms of the Jewish question rejected Jewish difference in favor of a universal model of humanity. Daniel Boyarin addressed this issue in reference to Paul’s project of conversion to Christianity. According to Boyarin this project was “motivated by Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy.”⁶³ Thus, while supposedly breaking free of Christianity and religion at large, the Enlightenment’s quest for a universal human model was a direct consequence of Christian thought.

Yet as Boyarin argues, “there is no such thing as cultural unspecificity, merging of all people into one common culture means ultimately (as it has meant in the history of European cultural imperialism) merging of all people into the dominant culture.”⁶⁴ The erasure of ethnic/cultural/religious differences in favor of the “universal man” culminated in positing Christian culture as the norm for Jews to aspire to, just as in the context of gender differences, “the erasure of gender seems always to have ended up positing maleness as the norm to which woman can ‘aspire’.”⁶⁵

In his call for Jewish emancipation in the name of universal reason, Dohm was not aware that he was asking to liberate Jews from the Jewish tradition while sustaining a Christian model of universalism (after all, Dohm was the son of a Lutheran pastor). Jewish emancipation, in this format, is paradoxically a direct product of the rejection of Judaism. As Ronald Schechter writes, “There is a good deal of evidence that Jews posed a problem to ‘enlightened’ thinkers simply because they were different, particular, or ‘other’. Yet it must be remembered that this discomfort is precisely what made the elimination of discriminatory

⁶² Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 8.

⁶³ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 7.

⁶⁴ Boyarin, *Radical Jew*: 12.

⁶⁵ Boyarin, *Radical Jew*: 12.

laws possible [...] The denial of Jewish specificity was a crucial strategy in the struggle of civic and political equality.”⁶⁶

Dohm’s tolerance for the Jews was based on the premise that the “Jew is even more man than a Jew.”⁶⁷ This notion implies that whatever constitutes the Jew as a Jew is accidental to what is essential in the Jew, which is, being a man. Moreover, it implies that the “man” in the Jew can prevail over his Jewishness. Hannah Arendt aptly wrote that this kind of “emancipation” means “that the Jew might only become a man when he ceased to be a Jew.”⁶⁸ The imaginary split between the human part of the Jew and his/her Jewish part is a split between the universal and the specific, what makes the Jew the same as all men, and what makes him/her different. According to Dohm, for the Jews to be emancipated, the universal human part must overcome the part of Jewish specificity and difference. In other words, as Arendt argued, Jewish freedom was actually construed as the freedom from being Jewish.

On the one hand, Zelig sets a radical example of Dohm’s supposition that Jews can be assimilated and become like other citizens of the state. On the other hand, Zelig demonstrates the failure of this premise, for despite his perfect capacity to assimilate (or exactly because of it) he is still marked as different and becomes an outcast of society. Zelig exposes the ambivalence that is inherent to the discourse of Jewish emancipation and its discontent: a “chameleon man” who completely blends in on the one hand, but who finds himself as a constant reminder of difference on the other; representing the wish for assimilation on the one hand, and the split or schizophrenic subject on the other. This tension characterizes the complexity of the Jewish question in modern Europe and everywhere else in the Western world where Jews have demonstrated perfect ability to assimilate, while at the same time triggering anxiety of Jewish infiltration which threatens to deracinate and disintegrate white, Western society.

Zelig exposes the ambivalence inherent in colonial mimicry as a “blurred copy” or a false reproduction of the colonizer’s culture and values. The paradox at the heart of Zelig’s story is that the more he assimilates and becomes similar to everybody else, the more his difference is showing and the more he is condemned. Zelig, the “human chameleon”, is a perfect assimilator, but he is too perfect. Assimilation was promised as the solution for the

⁶⁶ Ronald Schechter, “Rationalizing the Enlightenment”, In: Daniel Gordon (editor), *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 99

⁶⁷ Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 28.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*: 238.

Jewish question, but assimilation itself becomes a problem for Zelig as he assimilates too-well and too-much and into everybody whatsoever. Zelig's extreme mimicry thus turns into a form of mockery. His assimilation reaches the most extreme degree, and instead of confirming the dominant culture and its established hierarchy, Zelig is destroying the boundaries between identities, threatening the stability of the subject on which cultural hierarchy is dependent.

Instead of joining civilized men, Zelig eventually becomes something which cannot be even recognized as human anymore. As Scott Fitzgerald (falsely quoted in the film) said, "Wanting only to be liked, he distorted himself beyond measure". The man who wanted only to belong and to be like everybody else, finds himself completely alone, differentiated from everybody else. While we watch Zelig isolated in a mental hospital, the narrator comments: "Zelig's own existence is a non-existence. Devoid of personality, his human qualities long since lost in the shuffle of life, he sits alone quietly staring into space, a cipher, a non-person, a performing freak. He who wanted only to fit in – to belong, to go unseen by his enemies and be loved – neither fits in nor belongs, is supervised by enemies, and remains uncared for." The sad conclusion of this chapter in Zelig's life was surely not anticipated in Dohm's vision of Jewish emancipation.

From Chameleon to Man

The film questions Dohm's supposition about a human essence which can surmount Jewish difference, as it seems there is no core at all behind the many different identities Zelig assumes. Zelig is indeed a perfect model of assimilation, but his assimilation is so radical, it appears to erase any distinct individuality or a definable subject. When Dr. Fletcher takes Zelig under hypnosis and asks him what his real identity is, Zelig answers, "I don't know." – "Are you Leonard Zelig?" she asks. "No, I'm nobody, I'm nothing," he replies. Zelig seems to lack any sense of a distinguishable self apart from the other identities he takes; just a "formless plasma" (to use Bauman's description) which identifies completely with anybody it happens to reflect in its mirror face. Yet at the end, the film accepts the premise of Jewish emancipation, and Zelig seems to be cured from his chameleon condition.

Zelig's reaches the lowest point of his journey towards the end of the film. Just when his condition appears to improve (he is treated successfully by Dr. Fletcher and the two are about to get married), he is accused of bigamy, and then escapes to Europe. Dr. Fletcher almost loses hope, when suddenly she finds Zelig in a newsreel footage from Germany, depicting a Nazi parade in Berlin. To her surprise, she spots Zelig among the brown-shirts,

standing right behind Hitler, who raves in a frantic speech. Dr. Fletcher immediately travels to Germany to look for Zelig, and finds him in a similar scene, dressed in Nazi uniforms, among a Nazi crowd. The Nazis realize there is an impostor among their ranks. Dr. Fletcher and Zelig make a daring escape on an airplane, commandeered by Zelig - who suddenly becomes a pilot – and eventually land safely in America.

Back home the American public forgives Zelig his past mischief and again he is crowned as a hero. Dr. Fletcher completes her treatment successfully and the narrator of the film declares that “Zelig is no longer a chameleon. He is at last his own man. His point of view on politics, art, life, and love is honest and direct. Though his taste is described by many as lowbrow, he is finally an individual – a human being. He no longer gives up his own identity to be a safe and invisible part of his surroundings.” The promise of Enlightenment, that the Jew will become a man, is fulfilled. The film’s end holds true to this narrative, depicting Zelig’s progress from chameleon to man, from hybrid to a unified subject, as a story of successful integration into American society. Zelig is eventually trained by Dr. Fletcher to become one, whole, unified person and learns to be “himself”.

The film ends with an interview made with Zelig for the news. Zelig addresses the children in the audience and declares: “Kids, you gotta be yourself. Ya know you can’t act like anybody else just because you think that they have all the answers and you don’t. You have to be your own man and learn to speak up and say what’s on your mind. Now maybe they’re not free to do that in foreign countries but that’s the American way. You can take it from me because I used to be a member of the reptile family, but I’m not anymore.”

Zelig is not a chameleon anymore, but a proud member of the human race, yet at certain occasions it seemed that his “problem” had some advantages that proved helpful for Jewish survival. Zelig’s breakout from Nazi Germany flying a plane (without ever learning how), was according to Saul Bellow (who appears in the film as himself) such an example: “The thing was paradoxical because what enabled him to perform this astounding feat was his ability to transform himself. Therefore his sickness was also at the root of his salvation... I think it’s interesting to view the thing that way, that it was his very disorder that made a hero out of him.”

According to Bellow’s theory it was Zelig’s chameleon feature, his ability to become other than himself, that allowed him to fly a plane. In other words, it was Zelig’s “sickness” that allowed for a literal version of what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘a line of flight’ (a

becoming which frees itself from the formal unification of the subject in favor of a heterogenic multiplicity). But as Deleuze and Guattari warn, becoming might also lead to social marginalization, isolation, mental sickness and even death.⁶⁹ Like the case of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, becoming often takes the shape of a monster "because it is accompanied, at its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established."⁷⁰ As a "cured" subject Zelig appears finally as a man and not a chameleon, yet his last words still mock the rational order in which he was casted to: "I've never flown before in my life, and it shows exactly what you can do if you're total psychotic."

Zelig showed that Jewish emancipation was not only a starting point for the emergence of the Jewish question in its modern form, but also for the appearance of the assimilated Jew as a question – a chameleon figure which questions the identity of the self. The chameleon Jew appears as a figure which represents difference itself, precisely because it can so perfectly assimilate to other identities.

The main philosophical question which the film raised was how to treat this Jewish difference. For anti-Semites and thinkers of the Enlightenment alike, Jewish difference is a negative aspect which should be disavowed. Indeed, the film eventually tells a successful story of Jewish emancipation according to the spirit of Enlightenment: Zelig the chameleon Jew becomes a man as his threatening ambiguous multiplicity is reduced to a fixed subject. However, the film also opened a way to represent the figure of the chameleon Jew not just as a debased character (which should be treated and "cured"), but also as a potential force of subversion, maintaining the possibility that there is no essential human or original face behind the chameleon masks.

The following chapters deal with different characters which in many ways follow Zelig's lead in taking other, non-Jewish appearances. Dealing with the chameleon Jew in Nazi ideology and imagery (chapters 2 and 3), in Zionist discourse (chapters 4 and 5) and as a postcolonial, racially mixed entity (chapters 6 and 7), the following chapters go beyond the premises of Enlightenment to explore further the negative and positive politics of the chameleon Jew.

⁶⁹ 'So much caution is needed to prevent the plane of consistency from becoming a pure plane of abolition or death, to prevent the involution from turning into a regression to the undifferentiated.' Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*: 270.

⁷⁰ Deleuze and Guattari: *Thousand Plateaus*: 272.

Chapter 2

The Chameleon Jew in Nazi Cinema

An eternal wanderer exiled from its land, the figure of the Jew often represented the pariah par excellence. In Europe, according to Sarah Hammerschlag, the Jew “had developed its own significance as a symbol of the improper: what does not belong and to which nothing properly belongs.”⁷¹ As Paul Celan wrote: “the Jew, you know, what does he have that properly belongs to him, that wasn’t borrowed, lent, and never returned.”⁷² Without a soil and disconnected from nationality, the Jews were seen - in modern national terms - as cut off from history itself, one of the “wandering people who will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse.”⁷³

Hammerschlag quoted a number of prominent German writers who addressed the subject - from Herder, who described the Jews as “parasitical plants on the trunks of other nations” and accused them for “never been inspired with an ardent passion for their own honor, for a habitation, for a country, of their own”,- to Hegel, who wrote in *The Spirit of Christianity* that Abraham (a metonym for the Wandering Jew) is “a stranger on earth, a stranger to the soil and to man alike. Among men he always was and remained a foreigner.”⁷⁴

Yet in modern Europe, precisely because they were perceived as fundamentally rootless, the Jews were considered to be ideal candidates for assimilation into European culture. Indeed, with the advance of the Enlightenment’s project of Jewish emancipation and the *Haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment) during the 18th and 19th centuries, Jews (mainly in Germany and West Europe) have demonstrated perfect ability to assimilate into their hosting cultures. However, that was precisely what triggered an even greater anti-Semitic anxiety of Jewish infiltration which was seen as threatening to deracinate and disintegrate Europe with nomadic diffusion of otherness and difference.

No longer merely a pariah, the post-emancipation, western European Jew was imagined as a chameleon figure that changed its appearance in order to destroy Europe from

⁷¹ Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*: 6.

⁷² Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*: 7.

⁷³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*: 164.

⁷⁴ Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*: 27-28.

within. In Nazi Germany, where the hatred of the Jews reached the most horrendous scale, the figure of the chameleon Jew triggered an anxiety of an abject kind: not only as a threat to national, social, cultural and even sexual boundaries, but to the very borders of the self.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarth, the Jew was not conceived in Nazi Germany simply as a flawed type, but as a hybrid entity which threatens the very possibility of differentiating between types. In their article “The Nazi Myth”, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarth claim that 20th century ideologies at large found their guarantee in modern philosophy and its metaphysics of the subject, “in the thought of being ... defined as a subjectivity present to itself, as the support, the source, and the finality of representation, certitude, and will.”⁷⁵ Fascist ideology, they argue, represents the crystallized ideology of the subject.

In Nazi Germany this ideology created a myth which served to produce an identificatory mechanism. The power of the Nazi myth, in other words, is that of mimetism. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarth define the Nazi myth as a fashioning of fiction “whose role is to propose, if not to impose, models or types.”⁷⁶ The myth exploits identification by imposing types or models through which individual, or an entire people, can grasp themselves and identify themselves (something which historically-divided Germany eagerly sought). The myth incarnates itself in the type through a singular identity. The type casts the myth as a figure that is plastically limited and formed.

According to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarth, “This principle of the type as an absolute, concrete, singular identity, as the fulfillment of the myth in reality, is what Hitler justifies laboriously and yet very rapidly, because ultimately he scorns any veritable, positive justification with the example of animal species who only couple within the same type, compared to bastards who are ‘degenerate’.”⁷⁷ In this respect, they argued, it's essential to point out that the Jew was not simply conceived as a flawed race or a defective type, but as “the antitype, the bastard par excellence.”⁷⁸ The Jew, they continue, appears as “the man of the universal abstract, as opposed to the man of singular, concrete identity. Thus Rosenberg takes care to point out that the Jew is not

⁷⁵ Lacoue-Labarth and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 264.

⁷⁶ Lacoue-Labarth and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 297.

⁷⁷ Lacoue-Labarth and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 307.

⁷⁸ Lacoue-Labarth and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 307.

the ‘antipode’ of the German, but his ‘contradiction,’ by which he no doubt very clumsily means to say that the Jew is not an opposite type, but the very absence of type, a danger present in all bastardizations, which all are parasitic.”⁷⁹

In the following pages I examine the image of the Jew in Nazi cinema, focusing on two notorious Nazi film productions from 1940 - *Jew Suss* (original German title: *Jud Süß*) and *The Eternal Jew* (original German title: *Der ewige Jude*). Both films present the Jew as a dangerous chameleon figure, a parasitic entity which masks itself in order to infiltrate the bodies of healthy nations, and destroy them from within. While both films pretend to “unmask” the Jew and show the “real” Jewish type, I intend to show that the underlying threat which these films imply is actually that the “real” Jew is an “antitype” who transgresses the notion of type altogether. Instead of simply denouncing this chameleon figure, I intend to address the subversive power it potentially holds against the Nazi myth.

The Eternal Jew

The alleged documentary film *The Eternal Jew* was directed in 1940 by Fritz Hippler, high-ranking member of the Nazi Party and head of the film department in the Propaganda Ministry of the Third Reich. Despite Goebbels great expectations, the film failed at the box office. It was viewed mainly by the politically active part of the population and less by the general public, which was largely averted by the film’s gruesome images of animal slaughter or (when those images were censored) probably just bored by its monotonous narration and didactic approach.

The film is composed mainly of documented material and presentations which are accompanied by an off-frame narrator (Eberhard Taubert) who provides the anti-Semitic commentary. It was mostly shot in the Jewish ghettos of Poland by Nazi troops during the German military campaign, which gave the opportunity - as the narrator explains - to “really get to know the Jewish people”. The horrid condition of these ghettos supplied a most suitable shooting location for the film’s purpose of degrading the Jews, yet the film omits to mention it

⁷⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 307. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe refer here to Alfred Rosenberg’s *Myth of the Twentieth Century* (published in 1930) – the second most central text of Nazi theory next to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

was the Nazis themselves who were responsible for the filthy and cramped conditions in these ghettos.⁸⁰

The film's opening titles state that "The civilized Jews such as those we know in Germany provide an incomplete picture of their racial characteristics. This film shows original material shot in the Polish ghettos, shows us the Jews as they really looked before they concealed themselves behind the mask of civilized Europeans." The film's pretence to expose the "real Jews" was based on the assumption that German Jews of that time did not look and behave like real Jews, and were hiding their true Jewish character behind the mask of civilized Western Europeans. Polish Jews were chosen to represent "real Jews" since these Eastern European Jews were not yet emancipated and secularized as their German brethren, and continued to live a religious, traditional life. However, the film conveys that behind their different masks, all Jews are basically the same despicable type.

The film opens with images of Jews living their "daily lives" in the ghetto, yet it is clear that groups of Jewish men were especially gathered to pose for many of the shots. Some of them smile directly to the camera or just curiously gaze at it, and although appearing quite naive, the narrator describes them as "a plague that threatens the health of the Aryan people." This evokes the saying attributed to Richard Wagner's that "the Jew is the demon behind the corruption of mankind." Shots of rather ordinary activities in the crowded ghetto are accompanied by dramatic music which adds tension to the images, as the narrator explains the hidden harm these seemingly innocent Jews really conceal. Children appear, and the narrator determines that they are as malicious as their parents, lacking the inherent idealism of German youth.

The film moves on to show a Jewish domestic scene of a family gathered at a table. A cut leads to an image of a wall infested with insects – suggesting that Jews are filthy and squalid. The cut is frequently used in the film as a prime cinematographic technique of comparison, which allows for instance to connect Jews with filth or parasites, but also to make analogies and resemblances between different Jews in order to convey them as one entity. Although the settings of this scene are meager and the family seems poor, the narrator assures the viewers that this is just a façade, and that they are in fact wealthy after decades of

⁸⁰ Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, (New York : Collier Books, 1974) : 85.

lucrative trade. Here, as in many other instances, Nazi anti-Semitic ideology speaks in a double discourse which basically claims that the Jews are a lower race on the one hand, but all powerful on the other. Jewish masquerade, then, is found layered with multiple masks: the mask of the rich Western Jew that hides a poor Eastern Jew; the clean, civilized mask that hides the filthy religious Jew, and the filth, poverty and weakness that are in themselves a mask that hides power and wealth.

The film proceeds to show Jews bargaining in the market as the narrator comments that here Jews are in their element. Unlike the Aryan race, Jews are not accustomed to taking useful jobs and they do not like real labor. Despite the historical fact that Jews were forced into trade as one of the only occupation that was allowed for them, the narrator claims that this is not the result of a social situation imposed on them, but simply a trait that suits their character and natural inclination. Their religion thus “makes cheating and usury a duty.”

Jews are associated in the film with abstract market forces that threaten to manipulate real Aryan labor. This image is contrasted with much brighter low-angle medium shots of Aryan men building and creating objects of social value (an expression of the socialist part of National Socialism). The Aryan men appear in muscular bare torsos - they are phallic men that are digging, operating big machines and hitting iron clogs with big hammers, while the Jewish men look small, over-dressed and sickly. These are not men of action, but feminized men who mastered language and abstract thought as substitute for their unproductive and inept physique. As the narrator explains, “For the Jew there's but one thing of value: Money. What creative Aryan people find of value has been reduced by the Jew to mere merchandise. He buys and sells but produces nothing. The production he leaves to the workers and farmers of the host nation.” The Jews, he concludes, are “a race of parasites”.

The film goes on to examine world Jewry. Jewish rootlessness and homelessness, the narrator claims, “is a matter of choice, and in keeping with their entire history.” Shots of Jews in Palestine are then shown to clarify that there is no difference between them and Jews in Poland. As the title of the film suggests, there is but one Jewish type which eternally runs through all the different masks Jews might take. Whatever the cultural, social and historical circumstances – the Jew always stays the same. A map of the world appears, as dots and lines spread on it, depicting how the Jews spread out from Asia to the West, as if it was the expansion of a virus. The narrator then describes the origins of the Jewish race as the hybrid

admixture of various “lower” races: from the “oriental, far eastern racial mixtures with Negroid admixture, the ultimate mongrelized Jews developed.”



Figure 2 *The Eternal Jew* (Fritz Hippler, 1940)

Back to the map of the world, and again dots and lines are spreading out from East to West, but this time the image describes the expansion of another parasite. Cut to images of rats, and the narrator describes how these hideous animals came to plague the world from Asia towards the west, carrying with them destruction wherever they go, destroying goods and spreading diseases and plagues. Rats “have followed man like parasites from the very beginning... They are cunning, cowardly and cruel, and usually appear in massive hordes... They represent the elements of sneakiness and subterranean destruction among animals... [the film cuts back to images of the Jewish ghetto] just as the Jews do among mankind.”

Shots of religious Jews with beards and traditional attire make a clear example that “they differ from us in body”. “But this difference”, the narrator adds, is “above all, in soul.” Race is then perceived first of all as a metaphysical issue, which indeed manifests in the body, but ultimately allows to structuralize all Jewish divergent physical appearances (for instance Palestinian and Polish Jews, which look completely different) as the same type. However, the Jewish “type” appears as a human chameleon that is characterized by its ability to masquerade and change appearances. As the face of a religious-looking Jew appears in a close up, the narrator explains that “the Jews alter their outward appearance.” The image then dissolves to a close up of the same young man, now without his beard and yarmulke, wearing a suit with a tie instead of his Hasidic caftan. The sequence repeats with another religious-looking Jewish

man. “The hair, beard, skull cap and caftan make the eastern Jew recognizable to everyone,” says the narrator as the image dissolves to the same man, now shaven and wearing a suit. “Should he remove them - only sharp-eyed people can spot his racial origins.”

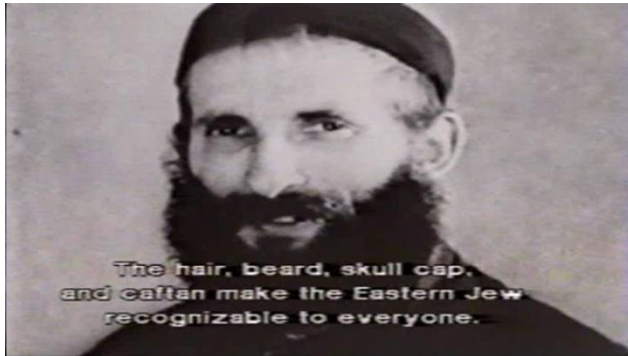


Figure 3 The transformation of the Jew.

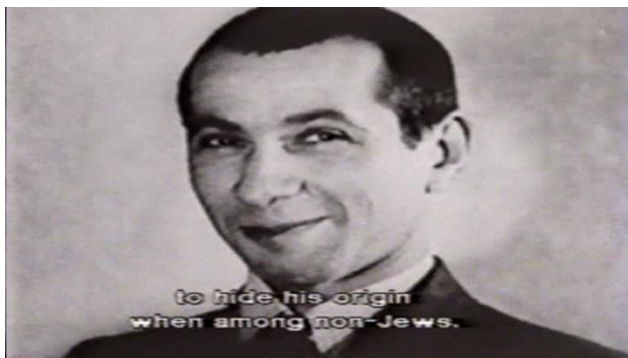


Figure 4 The Jew in “civilized” mask.

In addition to the cut, dissolve shots are often used in the film to reveal the “real” Jew by literally dissolving his Eastern European appearance. The film repeats this sequence repeatedly: one after the other, orthodox Jews with beards and traditional attire transform with a dissolve shot to shaven “Western” looking men. The dissolve shot is used to create a visual effect of transformation which transmits the image of the Jew as a sort of chameleon that – as the narrator explains- “always tries to hide his origin when among non-Jews.” The real problem that the film asks to overcome, as this insistent repetition reveals, is that the Jew, with its chameleon trait, became unrecognizable (especially in Germany and West Europe). Indeed the narrator immediately detects that these Polish Jews are not yet well accustomed to the Western cloths (imposed on them) and that “somewhat more adept are the Jews of Berlin.” Shots of high-society German Jews appear with the explanation that these are second and third generation of assimilated Jews that have become less detectable. “Outwardly, they try to act just like the host peoples. People without good instincts let themselves be deceived by this mimicry.”

The assimilated Jew is targeted as the most threatening precisely because he/she became so similar to its German “host”. As the narrator puts it, “Therein lies the enormous danger. These assimilated Jews remain forever foreign bodies in the organisms of their host peoples, regardless of appearance.” Since the Jew is portrayed as a chameleon that can alter its appearance, the Nazi racial discourse cannot rely solely on physiognomy to detect him/her. The Jewish race therefore appears foremost as an ideal which reflects in the soul of the Jew. The main function of the Nazi propaganda image is to make this hidden truth visible again. In this respect Nazi cinema is part of what Linda Williams called the “frenzy of the visible” – i.e., pornography and early pseudo-scientific cinematographic attempts to capture the invisible “truth” of the body.⁸¹

The film does not skip the more common allegations, describing Jewish corruption in business, politics, science, culture, sexuality and more. The world map appears again with lines of expansion – this time depicting the Rothschilds, who are spreading their financial influence over the globe. As is common to racist discourses, the film uses the logic of induction, moving from specific and individual cases to describe “all Jews”. It is therefore no longer just the Rothschilds or another specific name, but “The Jews” that sit at all crossroads of international finance and power. Similarly, after a sequence of shots of demonstrations in Germany, Karl Marx and Rosa Luxembour are shown as examples of famous dissident Jews, followed by the notion that ‘The Jews’ incite civil unrest, class warfare and terrorism.

Thereafter the narrator explains that “Jews are most dangerous when permitted to meddle in a people's culture.” Roman statues of naked men appear as the narrator muses that “the concept of beauty of Nordic man is incomprehensible to the Jew by nature.” The music of Bach is played on the background accompanied by images of classical paintings by Michelangelo and others. Jewish culture, in contrast, is described as corrupt, perverse and rotten, while paintings of “decadent art” (works by George Grosz and others) appear on the screen.

⁸¹ With “the frenzy of the visible” Williams refers mainly to pornography’s attempt to expose the “truth” of the body, for instance through the capturing of involuntary spasms of pleasure. However, she finds this impetus already in the early cinema of Muybridge, Edison’s photography and other examples. As she wrote, ‘in the scientific impulse to record the “truth” of the body quickly became a powerful fantasy that drove cinema’s first rudimentary achievements of narrative diegesis and mise-en-scene.’ Linda Williams, *Hard Core – Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Barkley: University of California Press, 1989): 41.

The film then shows black jazz musicians, as the narrator exclaims that “German cultural life was niggerized and bastardized” by the Jews.⁸² Furthermore, the Jews are blamed for promoting homosexuality and perversion, transgressions of sexual borders. From the individual body the film moves to abstract physics, and here as well, everything about the Jew is relative. Albert Einstein appears as the narrator describes him as “The relativity Jew who masked his hatred of Germans behind his obscure pseudo sciences.”

Being itself a film, the movie does not forget to mention the Jewish ‘control’ of cinema and “decadent” and “perverse” filmmakers such as Peter Lorre, Ernst Lubitsch and Charlie Chaplin. Eventually, after all these different names and faces, the film returns to its basic premise - that the Jew is but one single type. The “real Jew” is “revealed” again as an orthodox Jew from East Europe, this time during a Purim festival, which according to the narrator is “a celebration of the murder of 75,000 anti-Semitic Persians.” While Purim appears as an example of the Israelites “murderous nature”, the film fails to recognize Purim’s relevance to its own theme of Jewish masquerade, as this celebration is traditionally accompanied by masks, costumes and borrowed identities.⁸³

The film’s end is composed of shots of animal slaughter, as the narrator talks about the cruelty of Jewish ritual slaughter. The filmmakers probably asked to conclude their film with a strong visceral effect of repulsive Jewry, but the result was that many viewers were averted by the film itself. These gruesome scenes were therefore deleted from some copies of the film, while in the original version the following warning appears before they are shown: “We show them despite objections about poor taste. It’s more important that our people will know the truth about Jewry. Sensitive citizens are advised not to watch.” The film ends with a speech by Hitler, who appears as the savior that will redeem the nation from the eternal Jew. The final words are his, insinuating the coming extermination: “should the international Jews inside and outside Europe push people into another world war, the result will not be a victory of Jewry, but the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe.”

⁸² I discuss the Jewish-black chameleon in more detail in chapters 6 and 7.

⁸³ *Purim* (as a Jewish celebration of masquerade) is not accidentally referred to in many of the films discussed here.

The Eternal Jew declares very explicitly its mission to unmask the Jew and expose the “real” Jew behind the mask. However, while the film depicts the Jew as a very specific type that eternally returns throughout different historical and social masks, it simultaneously offers an image of the Jew as a hybrid mixture of races and cultures, a nomad and a parasitic bastard who ultimately remains an imperceptible figure. As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe suggested, the Jew posed a danger for the Nazi myth, not as a lower debased type, but as the anti-type that threatens the stability of the subject with its transgression of boundaries - whether it’s the boundaries of the individual body (existing in-between races and sexes) or the geographical and cultural boundaries of the “body of the nation”. The often-used metaphors of parasites and plagues to describe the Jews, the maps that show Jewish expansion as the spread of an abstract virus and the reference to rats - all suggest a flowing undercurrent of Jewish difference that is far more threatening to the Nazi myth than the Jewish type, debased and degenerate as it might be.

Unlike the pure type which is a singular, defined subject, the Jewish chameleon appears as a multiplicity with vague boundaries. *The Eternal Jew* therefore compared Jews to rats, as these are animals which exist as a pack or a horde rather than individual entities. Deleuze and Guattari distinguished between three kinds of animals: Individuated animals – “family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals...”; Animals with characteristics or attributes which are taken up into myths – “genus, classification, or state animals”; and demonic animals: “Pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population.”⁸⁴

In *The Eternal Jew* the rat is meant as a metaphor of the second kind – a classification of a hideous Jewish type - but simultaneously it appears as the third threatening demonic kind – an animal that is a multiplicity and men that are becoming-animal. While the second kind belongs to the mimetic order of the myth (the rat as a metaphor for despised, abhorred and a disgusting type of men), the third kind – according to Deleuze and Guattari – is not a matter of imitation or identification, but a becoming which “lacks a subject distinct from itself.”⁸⁵

Even racially, the Jew is not considered in *The Eternal Jew* as a specific singular race but as a multiplicity and mix of races. Like the rat, the Jew appears in a pack, a band or a population that proceeds by modes of expansion, propagation, occupation and contagion. As

⁸⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: 265.

⁸⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: 262.

the film narrator explains, rats – like Jews - “spread diseases and plagues” and “usually appear in massive hordes.” This is a mode of a Jewish becoming-animal that despite the film’s attempt to control and contain in a singular type, cannot be reduced to a subject, origin, or ancestral unity.

In fact, then, there are two Jewish regimes which appear in *The Eternal Jew*: on ground level, which belongs to the mimetic order of myth, the Jew appears as a concrete type, a defined, debased character with a fixed vile nature; but underground, the Jew is more akin to rats which (as the narrator proclaims) “represent the elements of sneakiness and subterranean destruction among animals.” While the first regime above-ground is demarcated, striated and controlled so that every type is clearly visible within its own boundaries and separated from the others, the second regime underground is the realm of rats which is unstriated, desubjectified and dehumanized. This underground realm belongs to the pack which can cover more ground than the individuals above, precisely because it is beyond or beneath the structure and its rules of filiation, heredity and reproduction. Becoming-animal or becoming-rat proceeds through contagion, epidemics or peopling, which do not care for the boundaries above-ground.

The rat metaphor in *The Eternal Jew* was used primarily as a means to dehumanize the Jews, to make their expulsion and extermination easier (to reduce empathy for Jews as fellow men and women). Yet the becoming-rat of the Jew simultaneously threatens the Nazi myth itself with a multiplicity and bastardization that shatters the subject on which this myth relies, thereby threatening the possibility to postulate any type at all. Moreover, it can be argued that the dehumanization of Jews as rats runs the “risk” of actually opening a greater possibility of empathy beyond the human boundaries and the limitations imposed by identification with the human form. Infected by the “Jewish virus” of multiplicity and becoming, one necessarily comes to share a mutual existence with the others, be they human or not.

Jew Süß

Joseph Süß Oppenheimer was a “court Jew”, a term used to describe Jewish merchants and financiers who acted in the service of the German courts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Süß was the financial adviser to the Duke of Württemberg, and was issuing unpopular policies on his behalf. When in 1737 the Duke suddenly and unexpectedly died, Süß was tried, convicted and sentenced to death. Süß’ life and death became the subject of literature and film. The most famous and successful literary depiction was written by the German-Jewish author Lion Feuchtwanger in 1925, in which Süß appears as a tragic figure destroyed by his own ambition and greed.

Two films were made that were based on this version of the story. The less known is a British version directed by Lothar Mendes in 1934 (titled *Jew Süß* in Britain and *Power* in the United States), which was closer to Feuchtwanger’s novel, but was not as successful. Unlike the British version, the 1940 German film was a success at the box office. Although based also on Feuchtwanger’s novel, this version twisted the author’s original intention to depict Süß as an anti-Semitic caricature. Only a few visual elements from the final execution scene in the British version appear also in the German adaptation. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who was virtually the film’s chief producer did not appreciate Süß’ positive role in the British version, which he called a “Judenfilm” (the Jews’ film).⁸⁶ In his approved version the Jew was, of course, a villain.

The German film version of *Jud Süß* is an example of Goebbels’ idea that the “best propaganda works so-to-speak invisibly ... without the public having any knowledge that it is at the initiative of the propaganda [ministry].”⁸⁷ The extent to which *Jud Süß* was successfully used as a political tool is well documented. In Poland the film was often screened prior to the deportations or dissolutions of the ghettos to prepare the non-Jewish inhabitants.⁸⁸ Erwin Leiser described how the film “was repeatedly shown to SS units before they were sent into action against Jews. It was shown to the non-Jewish population when the Jews were about to be deported. Concentration camp guards saw it. And at the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt former SS Rottenführer Stefan Baretzki admitted that the effect of showing the film

⁸⁶ Susan Tegel, *Jew Süß – Life, Legend, Fiction, Film* (London: Continuum, 2011): 154.

⁸⁷ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 182.

⁸⁸ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 186.

was to instigate maltreatment of prisoners.”⁸⁹ Leiser further cites a report of the Strasburg Security Police which attests to the film’s reception by the public:

“The film presents a once and for all picture of the ‘Wandering Jew’ and his parasitic existence as the essence of evil. The film’s effect is correspondingly powerful. The events on the screen are so realistic that audiences are constantly provoked to comment and shouting – an indication that the Party’s educational work on the Jewish question is taking effect. “Dirty pig Jew!”, “You Jewish swine!”, “Filthy Jewboy!” are comments often heard, particularly from women; and the rape scene, linked as it is with the only just bearable torture scene, really outrages people. While the expulsion of the Jews and the execution of Süss, when the full extent of his cowardice is revealed, is greeted with great satisfaction and relief (“Serves him right, dirty Jew”, “They should all be hanged!”). Heated discussion of the film continues outside on the street, and rarely has a film been talked about so much and so widely. The performances are almost always sold out, and there is only one verdict: *Jud Süß* is the best film in a long time.”⁹⁰

Goebbels himself was very pleased with the film after its premiere on the 24th of September 1940 in Berlin, and recorded in his diary: “A very large audience with almost the entire Reich Cabinet in attendance. The film was an incredible success. You hear nothing but praise. People rave. This is what I wanted.”⁹¹ One week after the Berlin screening Himmler made the film compulsory viewing for all members of the SS and Police.⁹² *Jew Süß* (in contrast to *The Eternal Jew*) was widely screened and was one of the Third Reich’s box office successes.⁹³ The film received the highest distinctions and was even deemed valuable for youth (though this resulted in complaints from concerned parents and teachers, given that it included a rape sequence). In 1941 it even became part of an anti-smoking campaign with posters that showed a grinning devil offering a cigarette with the caption: “May I offer you a Jud Süß?”⁹⁴ Director Veit Harlan eventually paid the price of the film’s success, as after the war he was the only

⁸⁹ Leiser, *Nazi Cinema* : 84.

⁹⁰ Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*: 153.

⁹¹ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 183.

⁹² Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 181.

⁹³ Of the thirty most successful films screened during the period 1940–1942, *Jud Süß* ranked sixth at the box office, and of those films especially commissioned by the state (*Staatsauftrag*), it ranked third. The film also did quite well in other territories under German control. See: Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 185-6.

⁹⁴ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 183.

German film director to be tried for crimes against humanity. To this day the film remains banned in Germany.

The plot of *Jew Süß* takes place in Stuttgart, 1733. The story begins with the coronation scene of Carl Alexander, the fat and hedonistic Duke of Württemberg. Next, we are introduced to a romantic young couple playing and singing at the harpsichord: Dorothea (played by Kristina Söderbaum, Veit Harlan's wife) and her fiancé, Faber (played by Malte Jaeger), who is also her father's legal assistant. The next scene shows a family gathering in which the father, Strum (Eugen Klöpfer), proposes a toast to the new ruler Carl Alexander. From this bright and happy scene we move to the darkness of the Jewish ghetto with its filthy and dreadful inhabitants. Carl Alexander's courier arrives to meet Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, the rich Jewish merchant, seeking financial support for the Duke's dwindling treasury funds.

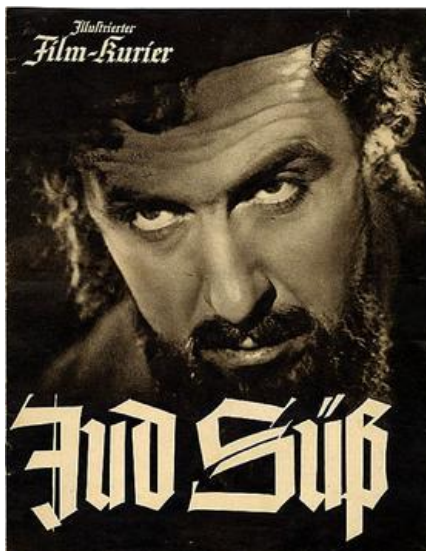


Figure 5 Ferdinand Marian as Jew Süß.

Ferdinand Marian's portrayal of Süß is intense and effective. Glancing narrowly from one eye while gesturing excessively with his hands, Süß appears as the caricatured scheming Jew. Süß tempts the courier with his jewelry and tries to convince him to lift the Jewish ban that forbids Jews from entering Stuttgart. If the Duke will allow him to enter the city and will agree to meet him in person, Süß will gladly provide for the Duke's needs. The astonished courier replies that the guards will never allow a Jew to enter, and even if he could find a way – the courier gestures to Süß' beard – "everyone would see...". Süß reassures the courier that as a chameleon Jew he can easily shed his Jewish markings - "So beard, hair, makes a Jew? Don't worry, your Excellency. You arrange the pass, I shall assume my appearance." The

courier finally agrees and leaves. Süß' servant, Levi (played by Werner Krauss), is shocked. "Are you insane, Josef? Cut your hair and beard? Caftan?! Turning your back on Israel? Aren't you afraid of the rabbi?" Calmly Süß replies: "I open the door for all of us."

The film's main theme is already expressed in this exposition – the Jew is a chameleon that can and will alter his appearance in order to penetrate Aryan society. Indeed, the next scene depicts Süß in an entirely different appearance: shaven, without dreadlocks and his traditional Jewish attire, now looking like an elegant gentleman in eighteenth-century dress. On his way to Stuttgart, Süß' carriage topples over, and Dorothea, who happens to pass there, offers a ride. Unable to recognize Süß as a Jew (his Jewish accent and manners disappear as well), she unknowingly assists him to pass through the city gates; although on their journey, impressed by his world travels, she accidentally exposes the rootless Jewish wanderer by asking Süß about his homeland. "Homeland?" says Süß, "Everywhere." – "Don't you have a home?" asks Dorothea. "Of course," says Süß, "the world."

Once inside Stuttgart, Süß arrives at Dorothea's house to look for accommodation. From across the room, Dorothea's fiancée Faber immediately recognizes that Süß is a Jew and asks him to leave. Süß compliments her on her "understanding of people" and goes. Faber, who represents the Nazi prototype, can instantly and from afar detect a Jew through the mask, something which his naïve fiancée fails to do even in close contact. The assumption is, then, that a "good German" like Faber would not be fooled by the Jewish mask, whereas the film itself serves to testify just the contrary: that the fear of misrecognizing a Jew is of high concern.

Despite his first bumpy encounter, Süß manages to scheme his way into the court and eventually he becomes a minister and Carl Alexander's right hand man. The Duke demands from his ruling assembly funds for an opera, a ballet and a personal guard, but they cannot provide his whims since the cost of these luxuries exceed by far the province's available means. Süß volunteers to provide the funds, thus strengthening his grip on the Duke.

The Jewish corruption appears as both financial and sexual, as Süß is not only funding the Duke's pleasures, but also personally conducts the Duke's "ballet" performances which are actually a cover for a meat market that allows the Duke to pick young women for sex. In return, Süß obtains the ownership of all the roads in the Duke's domain. He then

raises the tax on the roads and as result all the prices of goods increase (representing the Jew as a capitalist exploiter). The people are revolting, and in order to instill fear Süß orders to destroy the house of the blacksmith which is located on one of his roads. As unrest grows, Süß organizes a masked ball for the Duke. At the ball Süß tries again to charm and seduce Dorothea, but her fiancée and her father come to her rescue.

Later during the ball, Faber puts on a mask and says the truth about Süß in public (while Süß uses the mask to hide the truth, Faber uses it to expose it). The blacksmith joins in to the accusations against Süß, and the latter, enraged by the insults, demands the Duke execute the blacksmith. The Duke agrees, and the blacksmith is hanged in public from a large iron cage. Süß increases his hold on the province and now collects taxes virtually from every product (depicting the idea that the Jew gets abstract wealth out of the real work of the people).

Meanwhile the Duke concedes to lift the Jewish ban, and scores of Jews are entering Stuttgart, arriving like a horde of rats, filthy and repulsive, while singing an “oriental” tune.⁹⁵ The Jews who flock the city are compared by Aryan characters to a disease which plagues the land. One assembly man cries that the Jews are “descending upon us like locusts!”, while Dorothea’s father warns that the Jews will “corrupt our blood”. Süß’ entry to the city therefore signals the entry of the entire Jewish collective, as one cell of this virus-like organism equals the rest; and one individual is enough to infect and corrupt the entire body.

Discontent with Süß’ exploits reach the ruling class. One of the Duke’s former comrades-in-arms begs him to expel the Jews, but the Duke refuses.⁹⁶ The assembly members secretly meet to discuss a course of action, whilst reading anti-Semitic material by Martin Luther: “remember Christian: next to the devil you have no more dangerous foe than the Jew.

⁹⁵ While the song was supposed to be a typical eastern European Hassidic song, it was in fact a Zionist song composed by Yedidya (Gideon) Admon-Gorochoy (1897–1982), a fervent Zionist who emigrated to Palestine from Ukraine, and who was keen to throw off diaspora influences. The melody is influenced by Bedouin music, and the words are about a camel (‘Shir Hagamal’, better known as ‘Gamal, Gemali’). See: Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 176.

⁹⁶ When the film was released the official Nazi program was still to expel the Jews, but the film’s ending insinuates the next stage of extermination.

First set fire to their schools and synagogues. Secondly, destroy their prayer books and Talmud's which spread idolatry. Third, ban their usury."⁹⁷

Süss, aware of the impending rebellion against him, advises the Duke to dissolve the assembly and jail its leaders. The Duke is alarmed at such a drastic move, but Süss calms him by offering to bring a rabbi-astrologer who will read the stars and decipher whether the coup will succeed or not. The rabbi (also played by Krauss) is reluctant to cooperate at first, telling Süss that "The Lord wants his people to walk in sackcloth and ashes, to be scattered throughout the earth, so they may rule in secret over the peoples of the earth." Süss in reply argues, "How can I rule if I do not show myself? Rule over the pockets of the goyim, but keep away from the affairs of princes. By ruling princes I rule the people."

As Süss explains it to the rabbi, he is not just acting for his own pleasure and thirst of power but for the sake of his people. Süss is perceived (and he perceives himself) not just as an individual culprit but a representative of the entire Jewish people, and is therefore mentioned by other characters in the film simply as "the Jew". The rabbi finally consents to play along and assures the Duke that fortune is in his favor. Confident in his victory, Süss demands the hand of Dorothea from her father, Sturm. The father refuses, telling Süss that his daughter "will bring no Jewish children to the world," and despite Süss' threats, he quickly and secretly marries Dorothea to Faber. Enraged, Süss orders the arrest of Sturm as a conspirator against the Duke.

During the trial, Sturm does not accept the authority of the court, for Levi the Jew sits in it as judge. During the trial, Levi is using a "Talmudic" tactic of interpretation, bending common sense to his needs, in order to frame Sturm with absurd accusations. Meanwhile, a big crowd, led by Faber, is gathered outside the palace and demands justice. Süss is trying to convince the Duke that he needs to import soldiers in order to defend himself. When the Duke's wife sides with Süss, the Duke, in a moment of sobriety, realizes the truth about his "servant" Süss, grabs him by the collar and barks in his face: "Nothing is sacred to you, not even the wife of your Duke. Only your interests, your profits." Nonetheless, Süss convinces him to call for external military support against his own people.

⁹⁷ This is a short paragraph from Luther's full text which indeed calls for these extreme measures against Jews. See Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies", In: *Luther's Works*, Volume 47 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971)

In the meantime Faber attempts to get out of the city and call for help but he is caught and arrested. Süß has him locked in the torture chamber. Dorothea goes to Süß and pleads with him to release her husband. Süß draws her to his bedroom and tries to seduce her. When she pushes him away he signals to the men at the torture chamber, and immediately Faber is heard screaming. Süß tells horrified Dorothea that she can stop the suffering of her husband if she will succumb to him. Dorothea is calling for God to help her. “What? Praying to your God? Go ahead, ” says Süß, “Christians aren’t the only ones with a God. We Jews have one as well. The God of vengeance. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Süß then rapes Dorothea and afterwards orders to release Faber. Dorothea, who was just defiled by a Jew, runs to the river and drowns herself. Injured Faber looks for his newly wedded wife until he finally finds her corpse at the river bank. Faber takes the body of his wife to the palace, joined by other men and women, who call for vengeance.

Meanwhile at the palace, the Duke is having a grandiose party. Drunk, he demands that Süß take off his mask, although Süß wears none (though the film shows that his “civilized” face is indeed a mask). Representatives of the people lead by Faber burst into the palace and call on the Duke to give up the Jew. The Duke is infuriated and starts shouting threats, but then he suddenly gets a heart attack and dies. Süß is immediately arrested. A dissolve shot brings back Süß’ traditional Jewish cloths and beard (as in *The Eternal Jew*, the dissolve shot exposes the truth, although here it brings back Süß’ traditional Jewish appearance while in *The Eternal Jew* it dissolves it).

Süß is put in an iron cage just as the one in which the blacksmith was hanged (ironically, the film takes the Hebrew morals of “an eye for an eye” as a form of poetic justice). Süß is judged and found guilty of “blackmail, usury, immorality and high treason. Even greater is the guilt of the Jew when we measured it by the shame, the pain, the suffering he has brought upon our people in body and soul.” Finally, Dorothea’s father reads the most severe accusation and declares the verdict: “Where a Jew has carnal knowledge of a Christian woman he will be hanged by the neck until dead.”

As snow starts falling (just as in the ending of the British version of the film), the once confident Süß now begs for his life. “I’m just a poor Jew! Spare my life!” he cries with Yiddish intonation, but the trap door opens under his feet and Süß is hanged. Subsequently

all Jews are ordered to leave Wurttemberg, and no Jew is ever allowed back in. The film concludes with a warning to the ‘future generations’ that they observe this law “So that they may be spared great suffering in their lives and property, and in the blood of their children and children's children.” This is what director Veit Harlan described in 1942 as a “happy end.”⁹⁸

Jew Süß asks to warn its viewers of Jewish infiltration, while stressing it is dealing with an evasive enemy with chameleon traits. Like *The Eternal Jew*, which showed how orthodox-looking Jews can take non-Jewish appearance, *Jew Süß* shows Süß before and after his transformation, in order to alert the viewer that Jews in Germany do not look Jewish anymore. Therefore, in order to “clean” Aryan society from the Jewish infiltration that “infected” it, the Jew has to become visible again. Yet the production of *Jew Süß* started four years after the German film industry had been purged of Jews, and Jews were disappearing from many other Aryan spaces.⁹⁹ There was, then, a direct relation between the growing invisibility of Jews (the difficulty of recognizing modern Jews as Jewish by appearance) and their ultimate disappearance, and the need to make them visible again. The films which took this mission effected a double silencing: not only that real Jews were being expelled and exterminated, but those who were now speaking in their names were anti-Semitic Germans. Even prior to their expulsion and extermination, the growing invisibility of Jews in Germany correlated to the increasing efforts to make them visible.

Not only that anti-Semitism could no longer have a clear image of its enemy, it was literally vanishing from sight. Instead of reassuring, the invisibility of Jews lead to even greater paranoid visions of the Jews as some sort of body-snatchers that can be potentially everywhere and assume any shape, an alien entity that may look the same as “us”, while in fact harboring a malicious difference that threatens to destroy society and the individual from within.¹⁰⁰ This was the logic behind Hitler’s attributed statement that “We have to kill the Jew within us”, on which Slavoj Žižek commented, “In this sense, Jews are effectively the object petit a of the Gentiles: what is ‘in Gentiles more than Gentiles themselves,’ not another subject who I encounter in front of me but a foreign intruder within me, what

⁹⁸ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 180.

⁹⁹ According to Tegel (*Jew Süß*: 151), work was then only available to members of the Film Chamber (*Reichsfilmkammer*), part of the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichkulturkammer*), and denied to those of “non-Aryan” descent.

¹⁰⁰ *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was directed by Don Siegel in 1956 and had many remakes since.

Lacan called lamella, the amorphous intruder of infinite plasticity, an undead ‘alien’ monster who can never be pinned down to a determinate form.”¹⁰¹ The Jew was perceived by this rational not simply as otherness that threatens the familiar, but a threat to the possibility of making a distinction between the two at all, as the amorphous Jewish alien/chameleon can now take over from within (as *Jew Süß* shows).

The main motivation of *Jew Süß* is therefore to unmask the Jew and restore the image of a Jewish type that can be identified and separated from the Aryan type. Indeed, publicity for *Jew Süß* mentioned that Süß was to be “unmasked before the camera,” that it would be “a film without a mask”; and that Süß was a “typical example of the Jew who poses real danger to his host country, not through the external characters of his race but because he conceals his Jewishness through assimilation.”¹⁰²

Furthermore, like *The Eternal Jew*, *Jew Süß* also attempts to demonstrate that there is but one single, despicable Jewish type behind various possible masks the Jew can take. One of the means to portray this idea in *Jew Süß* was to give a single actor - Werner Krauss - four different roles of Jewish characters thereby signaling to the viewer that even if different Jewish characters appear as different personalities, they are ultimately the same type. As Veit Harlan commented, “it is by no means my intention here merely to draw attention to a bravura performance by a great actor; the casting, which incidentally was suggested by Krauss himself, has a much deeper significance. It is meant to show how all these different temperaments and characters – the pious Patriarch, the wily swindler, the penny-pinching merchant and so on – are ultimately derived from the same roots.”¹⁰³

Ferdinand Marian only played the character of Süß, yet Süß is a chameleon Jew which in itself has many faces – a dirty ghetto Jew, a cunning salesman, an elegant eighteenth-century gentleman, a cruel powerful minister, and eventually - a pitiful Jew. Yet in whatever form he takes, Süß is of course eventually a fabrication of a Jew, a representation of a Jew played by the non-Jewish Ferdinand Marian, as many of the other “authentic” Jewish characters are played by the non-Jewish actor Werner Krauss. While this fact states the obvious and should not be a cause for a problem in the context of any other film industry, in

¹⁰¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (Verso, 2011): 134.

¹⁰² Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 157.

¹⁰³ Tegel, *Jew Süß*: 152.

the context of Nazi cinema it implies a contradiction in terms, as this cinema stressed the assumption that Jews and Aryans are essentially two different, diametrically opposed identities that could not be exchanged. Yet *Jew Süss* in fact demonstrated that such an exchange is possible. While Jews were supposed to have a unique physiognomy that is radically different from Aryans (which essentially relates to a metaphysical difference), Krauss made it a point of pride that he could rely on his acting skills alone to create a Jewish character and refused to wear a false nose. He and Ferdinand Marian were in fact so convincing in their roles that Goebbels issued a disclaimer that none of the actors were tainted with Jewish blood.¹⁰⁴ While the Jew is presented as the master of masquerade, *Jew Süss* ironically demonstrated the masking mastery of Germans, who by masking as Jews paradoxically claim to expose the ‘real’ Jew behind the ‘German’ mask.

Harlan, in fact, was keen to implicate real Jews in the making of his film and planned to bring Jewish extras from Poland, where he believed ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ Jews could be found. This plan actually got the government’s approval, and so, at the same time when the expulsion of Jews was already in motion, there was a plan to import Jews from a Polish ghetto into the Reich especially for his film.¹⁰⁵ For some reason, however, these extras did not arrive. Harlan had to find his extras elsewhere, and eventually found them in Prague. These Jews were supposed to be “authentic” Jews, yet as Susan Tegel comments, “the Jews of Prague were on the western side of the divide within European Jewry and were unlikely to have been Chasidic, Harlan’s preferred sect. Thus they required instruction from Harlan in order to produce the ‘demonic effect’ which he thought so desirable.”¹⁰⁶

Ironically, Harlan altered and manipulated the appearance of his Jewish extras to appear “more authentic”. Michael Chasin, One of the Czech extras who survived the holocaust, described how Harlan pushed the Jewish extras in the synagogue scene to perform the ritual of prayer with “rocking movements”, which Chasin reportedly found ridiculous. Nevertheless, Harlan was pleased with the result and so was Goebbels, who recording in his diary on 18 August 1940: “an anti-Semitic film, we could only wish for.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Tegel, *Jew Süss*: 164.

¹⁰⁵ Tegel, *Jew Süss*: 165.

¹⁰⁶ Tegel, *Jew Süss*: 166.

¹⁰⁷ Tegel, *Jew Süss*: 167.

As an anti-Semitic propaganda film, *Jew Süss* was indeed successful, yet its claim to expose the “real” Jew is false. Instead of unmasking the Jew, the film actually created an endless procession of masquerades – presenting Germans in masks of Jews who are themselves masked as non-Jews, while the real Jews in the film were forced to mask themselves as “authentic” Jews as a non-Jew imagines them. Furthermore, to expose the “real” Jew meant to demonstrate a singular Jewish type behind the different appearances the Jew takes. However, like *The Eternal Jew*, *Jew Süß* seems to lose grip of its Jewish subject as a stable individual type. Süß - the film’s exemplary Jewish type - actually appears not as an individual, but more as a virus-like entity, a disease which disrespects “natural” borders, plagues the land and threatens the integrity of both the social and the individual body (as Süß not only penetrates the Aryan social structure but also literally penetrate the Aryan body, having “carnal knowledge of a Christian woman”).

Süß does not only represent the Jew as a loathsome type, but appears as an anti-type. Indeed, Süß is “the Jew within” – that which blurs the lines and threatens to make the distinction between types impossible. Here precisely lies the subversive potential of the Jewish chameleon as a figure which can be used to destroy the Nazi myth from within.

The destructive power of the figure of the chameleon Jew is utilized in *Zelig*, which emulates and mocks such films as *The Eternal Jew* and *Jew Süß*. *Zelig* takes literally the figure of the chameleon Jew, and like these Nazi films, pretends to “unmask” this figure. In one of the first scenes of the film, we see Zelig in a Jazz club as a white/Italian gangster visiting the show, and moments later, as a black trumpet player on stage. Immediately afterwards we see two photos of the black and the white Zeligs, appearing on the screen next to each other, juxtaposed in a manner not unlike *The Eternal Jew* which frequently compared images of different looking Jewish men.

In this case however, unlike *The Eternal Jew*, the narrator does not treat one of the pictures as a disguise and the other as the real identity. Woody Allen’s familiar face is indeed noticeable through all the different characters (as we can identify Werner Krauss behind different Jewish characters in *Jew Süß*), yet *Zelig*’s “true” identity remains a question. There is certainly no “Jewish type” behind Zelig’s masks. Even when he appears in orthodox Jewish beard and costume, it is just another character he momentarily assumes. While in *The Eternal*

Jew and *Jew Süß* the bearded, orthodox looking Jew, represented the “real” Jew, in *Zelig* even the traditional Jewish face is a mask.

In *The Eternal Jew* and *Jew Süß*, the mask indicates that there is a real Jewish face behind it, whereas in *Zelig*, when a couple of detectives are trying to pull off Zelig’s Chinese “mask” they discover, to their astonishment, that it is not a mask at all but Zelig’s real face. The mask of the Jew is constructed in Nazi cinema as a secret, something which hides the truth, a fake appearance which hides a real face. Yet in Zelig’s case, the mask *is* the real face. Zelig’s many masks do not hide his “real” Jewish face, but - to paraphrase Jean Baudrillard’s formula of the simulacrum - they only hide that there is nothing to hide.¹⁰⁸

According to Homi Bhabha, the menace of colonial mimicry does not result from some kind of “true”, “authentic” identity behind the mask, but precisely from the absence of an “original” or “pure” identity, from the uncertainty which lies in its “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”¹⁰⁹ By using the Nazi image of the chameleon Jew and utilizing Nazi cinematic tactics of representation – especially the documentary pretence of *The Eternal Jew* – *Zelig* created a form of mimicry which mocks Nazi cinema on its own terms. *Zelig* not only mocks the attempt to “unmask” the chameleon Jew and show its “real” face, but also undermines the authority of the Nazi gaze and its pretence to serve as a “sharp eye” that can detect (or reinstate) the Jewish type.

After showing the dangers of Jewish infiltration, *Jew Süß* ends by restoring the “natural” order with a dissolve shot that turns Süß back to his “true” Jewish form (as an orthodox looking Jewish man), and then moves to Süß’ execution and the expulsion of the rest of the Jews. In *The Eternal Jew*, the language of the documentary genre is used in order to establish the “truth” about the Jewish type. *Zelig* uses similar forms of representation, yet the film not only fails in establishing a Jewish type, but itself seems to be “infected” by the ambiguity of its main character, and therefore seems unable to determine not only the meaning of the story it tells but even what is its reality status.

¹⁰⁸ “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth - it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” This quotation, supposedly from Ecclesiastes, appears in the first page of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1995)

¹⁰⁹ *The Location of Culture*, p. 88

The films discussed in the following chapters follow Zelig's lead as they attack Nazi ideology and imagery by taking the idea of Jewish infiltration into non-Jewish identities to its radical limit with the uncanny figure the "Nazi-Jew".

Chapter 3

The Jewish-Nazi

The chameleon Jew was debased by Nazi cinema, yet the same figure held a subversive power which potentially could undermine Nazi ideology and imagery. This chapter explores films which utilized this potential by presenting Jewish characters that infiltrate Nazi identity itself, thereby taking the theme of Jewish masquerade and infiltration to the extreme logical end, to be used as a weapon against Nazism and anti-Semitism. Woody Allen's *Zelig* sets a prime example.

Among the many borrowed identities Zelig takes throughout the film, at one point he is found as a Nazi during a Nazi party parade in Germany. In line with the Nazi image of the chameleon Jew, Zelig represents the stereotype of the Jew as a master of disguises, yet his figure takes this image much further to include the possibility of fabricating Nazi identity itself, which was supposed to protect from such infiltration. The figure of the chameleon Jew is thus radically pushed to its logical end, which activates a reversal of its value as something which goes against Nazi discourse. In *Zelig* the chameleon Jew is turned from a derogative attribute to a source of mockery. If a Jew can even penetrate Nazi identity, the whole foundation of Nazi ideology falls apart.

The Jewish-Nazi is probably the most grotesque and unsettling figure from both Nazi and Jewish perspectives, a figure which unites identities that are usually considered as mutually exclusive, yet surprisingly, quite a few films depicted such a figure. Not all "Nazi Jews" represented in cinema really adopt Nazi ideology. Most of the Jewish figures discussed here just pretend to be Nazis, but at least one of them (as we shall see) really becomes a fully fledged Nazi.

The Great Dictator

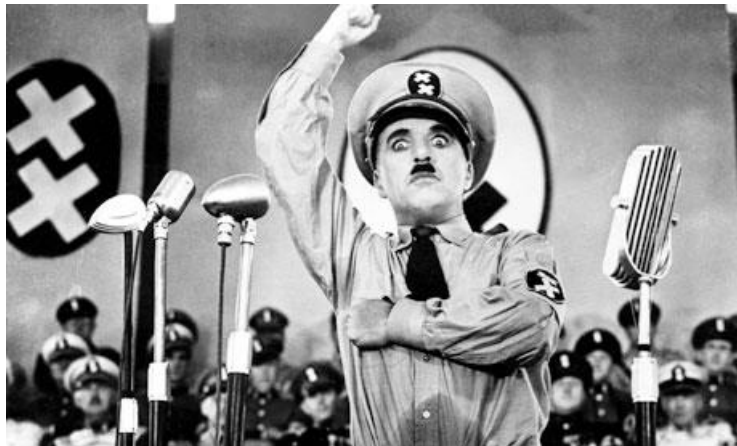


Figure 6 Chaplin as The Great Dictator.

Before *Zelig*, the earliest appearance of such a paradoxical figure was in Charlie Chaplin's first talking movie, *The Great Dictator*, which he directed in 1940. Chaplin himself played the main character, a Jewish barber whose appearance is strikingly similar to the dictator Hynkel (a barely-disguised Hitler-like figure, also played by Chaplin). During an escape from a concentration camp the Jewish barber dresses in Nazi uniform in order to disguise himself, and ends up being confused with the dictator Hynkel. The film came out at the same year as *Jew Süss*, which also shares the theme of Jewish masquerade and infiltration. However, by depicting a Jew who is successfully disguised as none other than Hitler himself, *The Great Dictator* comically destroys the Nazi pretence to serve as the last outpost against the Jewish infiltration. Indeed, if Hitler himself can be confused with a Jew, the basic Nazi premise that there is a fundamental, essential difference between the races, collapses.

Chaplin, who indeed looked somewhat similar to Hitler and was considered to be Jewish by the Nazis (as he is depicted in *The Eternal Jew* for example), plays the Fuhrer with frenzied gestures, poking fun at Hitler as a megalomaniac buffoon; yet Chaplin takes quite literally Hitler's attributed saying about the Jew that potentially hides in every German. By showing a Jew hiding inside the identity of none other than the great dictator himself, Chaplin pushed the anti-Semitic theme of Jewish masquerade and infiltration to an absurd end, using it as a Golem against its own creators in a way that threatens, and indeed destroys, the Nazi myth from within. All the subsequent Jewish chameleons in Nazi disguise followed this lead.

Train of Life

In the comical fantasy film *Train of Life* (original French title: *Train de vie*), directed by Radu Mihaileanu in 1998, Hasidic Jews from a French Jewish shtetl get a warning about the impending catastrophe which lurks them when the Nazis occupy France, and devise a mad plan: to acquire a big cargo train and pretend to be Nazi troops that deport the entire Jewish village to a concentration camp (while actually taking them to a safe haven). In this film Jews are taking upon themselves their own deportation – only here the negative goal turns into a positive, as they deport themselves into freedom and life instead of embarking a train that leads to death.

In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin is pushed to become the stereotypical Jew in disguise as a means of survival. Here as well, the shtetl Jews become the stereotypical Wandering Jews in disguise since they are pushed to leave their home and hide under false identity by the Nazis themselves, who threaten them with annihilation. None of the Jews wants to play a Nazi at first, but someone has to take the unpleasant role for the sake of the community. Eventually Mordechai, a wood merchant (played by Jacques Narcy a.k.a. Rufus), is chosen as the Nazi commander. He shaves his beard, puts on a Nazi commander's uniform, and guided by an Austrian Jew, learns how to imitate German mannerisms and proper dialect (in order to change Yiddish into German, one has only to get rid of the humor, tells him his instructor) . The wood merchant eventually masters his role. A Moses-like figure, he leads his people to the direction of the Promised Land (the final destination of the journey is Palestine), only he is a Moses dressed in Pharaoh's clothes.

While the Jewish figure in *The Great Dictator* is not affected by his Nazi costume and clearly remains a Jew which eventually, in the guise of the Fuhrer, delivers a speech for freedom and human rights, in *The Train of Life* this uncanny mix of identities becomes more ambiguous. Indeed, under the Nazi facade there is a Jew who is marked by Jewish symbols such as the *tzitzit* (Jewish religious undergarment) that Mordechai wears under his Nazi uniform; as under the symbol of swastika on the train lies a hidden *mezuzah* (Jewish religious emblem of protection).

As some communist Jews on the train observe, this situation is not merely a game that doesn't affect reality, but a play which determines real social relations. For example, the Jews who take the role of Nazis are located in the spacious front wagons of the train, while the rest are collected like cattle in the back wagons (a situation which almost causes a revolution by

the communist Jews who object to this “Nazi” and “bourgeois” class system). Although Mordechai remains loyal to his Jewish faith, his posture as a “Nazi” commander makes him both the leader and the outcast of the group.

This ambiguity reaches a comical climax in a scene that depicts Jews in Nazi uniforms pray together with regular looking Jews to receive the *shabat* (Saturday, a holy day of rest in the Jewish tradition). As some of the communist Jews refuse to partake, Mordechai, dressed in his Nazi uniform, forcefully orders them to succumb to the ritual rules of the ceremony. Standing firm behind their atheist conviction, the communist Jews call Mordechai a “Nazi” – quite a paradoxical and hilarious attribute to a man who tries to impose on them the religious law of the Jewish faith.



Figure 7 Mordechai (right) in Nazi uniform and yarmulke, discussing with the rabbi.

Mordechai’s name alludes to the main protagonists of the Biblical text *The Scroll of Ester*.¹¹⁰ The Jewish minority in the story escapes extermination against all chances thanks to Mordechai, who advises Ester to infiltrate the king’s palace and marry him while hiding her Jewish identity. The holy day of Purim is therefore a day of Jewish masquerade, celebrated by putting on masks and costumes and getting drunk until one “cannot tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai”, that is, until the bad and the good, the strong and the weak, get completely mixed up. Similarly, in *The Train of Life* Jews and Nazis get confused and become non-essential fluid identities that can be intermixed. Yet the comical situation of this

¹¹⁰ *The Scroll of Ester* is the constituting text of the Jewish celebration of Purim, which is often referred to in many of the films discussed here. The text marks the first place in the Bible where Jews are mentioned by name. It is considered to first appear between the fourth and second centuries B.C.E. Historians could not find factual backing to the story, which most probably was a work of fiction composed by Jews for Jews as a fantasy of revenge against their oppressors. Nonetheless it is a central text in the Jewish canon, which was included in the Bible, is repeated every year, and gained its own holy day.

Jewish-Nazi mixture is revealed at the last scene as a fantasy made up by the main character, a mad man who invented the whole story while actually being locked in a concentration camp. As the tragic reality of the holocaust takes hold, we learn that the play and mix of identities was after all just a bogus line of flight, a mere dream of escape.

Europa Europa

The figure of the chameleon Jew as an escape strategy and subversion of anti-Semitic stereotype appears as a more tangible possibility in *Europa Europa*, directed by Agnieszka Holland in 1990, and based on the 1989 autobiography of Solomon (Shlomo) Perel, a German Jewish boy who survived the Holocaust by becoming a member of the elite Aryan youth organization, the Hitler Youth.¹¹¹

Solomon is born in Germany to religious Jewish parents. The film opens with the ceremony of Solomon's circumcision as a baby – the ritual cut performed on the Jewish man's genitalia – which will haunt Solomon for the rest of his life. On the day of his 13th birthday (the traditional day of *bar mitzvah* when a Jewish boy becomes a man), Nazis storm his family house. Solomon, who was just taking a bath, runs naked out into the street and hides until the perpetrators leave. To cover his nakedness, a neighbor girl gives him his first Nazi costume - a leather jacket with a swastika arm band on the sleeve.

Solomon returns home to see his house vandalized, his family wounded and one of his brothers lying dead on the kitchen table. The family moves to Poland in hope to find better life. Solomon learns the Polish language and pretends to be a Polish boy. He falls in love with cinema and aspires to become an actor, something that he will indeed accomplish, but in real life. When Nazi Germany attacks Poland, Solomon's parents force him to escape with his big brother. During their escape, Solomon gets separated from his brother, ending up among Russian Bolshevik troops. They transfer him to an orphanage, where Solomon learns the communist doctrine and turns into a Soviet patriot and a devoted young communist who argues fervently against the existence of God.

Meanwhile, as with all the Jews in Poland, Solomon's parents are moved into a ghetto. The Nazis attack the Russian controlled areas of Poland where Solomon's school is located. Solomon flees again, and this time gets caught by German troops. When Solomon is up for interrogation he claims that he is German. His perfect German dialect convinces the soldiers

¹¹¹ The German title of the film is more explicit: *Hitlerjunge Salomon*, i.e. "Hitler Youth Salomon".

that he speaks the truth and they take him along as a trilingual (Russian-Polish-German) interpreter. Solomon becomes the group's mascot and nobody suspects him of being a Jew. To keep his Jewish identity hidden, Solomon avoids urinating next to the other soldiers so that his circumcision will not be exposed. Being among the Nazi brothers-in-arms and confronted by the horrors of war, Solomon becomes utterly confused about his loyalties, and wonders (in off screen dialogue) "Who was my friend, who my enemy? What sets us apart? A simple foreskin?" When a homosexual Nazi soldier attempts to rape Solomon he discovers Solomon's secret of circumcision. The soldier repents and promises to keep the secret if Solomon will keep his (homosexuality was not tolerated in the Wehrmacht) and the two become close friends, forming an alliance of covert rejects.

Shortly after, during battle, Solomon's new friend gets shot and dies in his arms, as Solomon finally grants him the kiss he yearned for. Thereafter Solomon tries to defect to the enemy lines, but as he moves towards the Russian troops a whole Nazi brigade follows, and Solomon is perceived as a war hero who led the battle. Solomon's devoted anti-Semitic commander sends him to an elite school of the Hitler Youth and offers to adopt him with his wife after the war.

Solomon arrives at the school and pledges allegiance to a statue of the Fuehrer in front of all the students. He quickly becomes a favorite student who excels in all physical and mental training, and is considered by the teachers to be a perfect Aryan model. When Solomon hears that Germany lost the battle of Leningrad he cries with his fellow students and joins their singing "Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles".

Solomon's circumcision is the last and only mark that separates him from the rest, and he tries to undo it by pulling and tying the skin of his penis so that it will look like a foreskin. The agonizing experiment fails as Solomon learns he cannot escape his own body. Afraid to expose his secret, Solomon does not dare to have sex with his Nazi girlfriend, and she eventually gets pregnant by one of his friends. Solomon often crosses the Jewish ghetto with a tram in hope of finding his family, but through the cracks in the painted windows of the tram he can only see glimpses of horror. In the night Solomon dreams that he returns to the house of his parents. The Nazis are coming and his parents are hiding him in a closet. Horrified, he discovers that Hitler is hiding there as well. As he covers the area of his genitals, Hitler tells Solomon that he has to hide because he is also Jewish.

The war reaches its final stages. Solomon is sent to the front again and this time succeeds in crossing to the Russian side. However, the Russian soldiers do not believe that Solomon is Jewish, and just before they execute him, his brother shows up and saves his life. Solomon learns from his brother that their entire family has perished in the camps. Solomon finally emigrates to Palestine. "From that moment on," he says, "I decided to be only a Jew." The final scene depicts the real Salomon Perel as an old man in Israel. On the background of a pastoral field he sings *hine ma tov ve ma naim, shevet achim gam yachad*, and although the words of the song mean "how good and pleasant it is to be with brothers" he stands by himself, walking alone towards the horizon.

Europa, Europa depicts an exemplary figure of a chameleon Jew. Solomon slips in and out of identities which usually tend to violently clash, moving from orthodox Jewish identity to atheist communism and to Nazism; as he easily changes languages from German to Polish, to Russian and Hebrew. In more than one occasion Solomon incorporates a few of these conflicting identities at once, as for example while dressed in a Nazi uniform, he explains to one of his comrades his communist views which, according to religion (including, of course, Judaism), is an opium for the masses.¹¹²

According to Omer Bartov, Solomon's figure is a mere variation of the Nazi stereotype of the Jew as a master of disguises. Bartov argued that like Zelig, Solomon is a sort of human chameleon that changes appearance to anything that allows him to survive. Like Zelig, it seems that all Solomon really wants is just to be accepted, to blend in, in whatever identity will be socially acceptable, even as a Nazi in The Third Reich (just as Zelig ironically finds a sense of belonging among the Nazi ranks). "In essence," Bartov argued, "Solly's character is no character at all. In that sense, he is indeed a 'human chameleon'; underneath his various facades one finds nothing at all, neither heroic or insidious, but merely an instinct of survival that instantly transforms him into whatever it is that would make him least vulnerable: Jew or German, coward or hero. From this perspective, Solly is hardly the contradiction of the anti-Semitic stereotype, but merely one of its variations, that of the eternal parasite hiding under a thousand masks."¹¹³

¹¹² Although the film depicts Nazism and Communism as having some mutual grounds (in one fantasy sequence Stalin and Hitler dance in each other's arms in Solomon's communist school), they are still shown as competing ideologies (that are in fact in war).

¹¹³ Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*: 141.



Figure 8 Solomon as a Communist.



Figure 9 Solomon as a Nazi.

Solomon is indeed an exemplary Jewish anti-type, similar to other chameleon Jews in Nazi cinema. However, *Europa, Europa* depicts a far more complicated image, as it shows that Solomon’s situation is a product of anti-Semitic persecution. Like the Jews in *The Train of Life*, Solomon is pushed to run, change locations and languages, and hide behind different identities – not because he is a “wandering Jew”, but as a matter of survival. Furthermore, *Jew Süß* and *The Eternal Jew* depict the Jew as a chameleon figure who hides his Jewishness by transforming his appearance, and claims to possess a gaze which can strip this figure from its masks and expose the “real” Jew underneath. Faber, the prototypical Nazi in *Jew Süß*, can immediately detect the Jew behind Süß’ mask, yet the less sharp-eyed viewers are helped by cinematographic techniques such as the dissolve shot and the cut which technologically enhance the Nazi gaze.

Europa, Europa, in contrast, mocks the Nazi pretence to differentiate the Jew from the non-Jew as Solomon enters the heart of the Nazi elite and fools various racial “experts” to believe that he is an exemplary Nazi, “the typical, authentic Aryan”, as one of his teachers declares. The viewers indeed know that Solomon is Jewish, yet his Jewishness is not depicted as a certain type or even as a certain character. On the contrary, as Bartov remarked, Solomon appears as a “non-character” without ever exposing a “real” self behind the false characters he

assumes in order to survive (and just like Zelig, his imperceptibility is precisely what gives him the power to survive).

Bartov argued that Solomon is a mere reproduction of the Nazi image of the chameleon Jew, but in fact there is a great difference. In *Jew Süß* and *The Eternal Jew* the Jewish chameleon is a degraded image, while in *Europa, Europa* it is a source of strength which is used precisely to obscure the Nazi gaze and undermine its authority. Solomon's figure repeats to a certain extent the stereotypical image of the Jew as a master of disguises that infiltrates non-Jewish/Aryan identities, yet his figure takes the stereotype to the maximum degree, as Solomon infiltrates specifically the one identity that was supposed to protect from such infiltration. If a Jew can become an exemplary Nazi, then – as Hitler allegedly said - any Aryan can secretly be a Jew. In Solomon's dream, Hitler himself therefore appears as a Jew in the closet.

Solomon's split identity is related to gender ambivalence. According to Bartov, "As long as he is a Jew, Solly plays the familiar role of a victim escaping persecution. But once he joins the other side, whether as a Komsomol member, a German soldier, or a Hitler Youth, he excels not only intellectually but also physically."¹¹⁴ In other words, as a Jew Solomon personifies the stereotypical Jewish "sissy" who can only run and hide for his life, but as a non-Jew he becomes "manly", a physically courageous, commemorated war hero.¹¹⁵ Yet as Bartov further noted, when Solomon takes the "masculine" position, he is forced again into the stereotypical role of the Jewish castrate, who cannot perform sexually "although he is the target of both homosexual and heterosexual desire, since he cannot reveal his circumcised penis. Solly's circumcision becomes the last barrier to his desire to merge; or, seen differently, it serves precisely the role for which it was intended by protecting his Jewish identity even when he is entirely willing to give it up. Just like Bertolt Brecht's slogan on the wall, circumcision cannot be erased, and any attempt to 'correct' it only enhances his pain and sense of exclusion."¹¹⁶

Solomon's circumcision serves its religious function by "protecting" him from having sex with non-Jewish women, and ironically, it also prevents him from committing what, from a Nazi perspective, is the ultimate "crime" of defiling an Aryan maiden (which was Jew Süß'

¹¹⁴ Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*: 139.

¹¹⁵ In this respect, wrote Bartov, Solomon is 'an extreme version of the entire discourse on Jewish degradation, masculinity, and passivity that formed an important element of anti-Semitic, Zionist, and post-Holocaust discourse.' Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*: 138.

¹¹⁶ Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*: 139.

ultimate offence). His friendship with the gay Nazi soldier –seen from this angle - is a bond between secretly “effeminate” men within a macho culture which is both anti-Semitic and homophobic.

Solomon’s circumcision suggests his symbolic castration and queerness, as it directly relates to his inability to fully perform as a man (preventing him from having sex with his girlfriend). In one scene, Solomon even bleeds from his genitals (after trying to pull back the skin of his penis to cover up the missing foreskin), evoking the anti-Semitic fantasy of the Jewish man as menstruating.¹¹⁷ Circumcision, the last and ultimate mark of Solomon’s Jewishness, is therefore associated with a “feminine” lack. Instead of a “normal” (white, Christian, European) identity which revolves around a phallus as a stable signifier of being, Solomon’s identity revolves around a wounded penis, a basic phallic lack, which can account for Solomon’s fluid chameleon transformations.

Indeed, according to Jacques Derrida, circumcision is a sign of Jewish “non-self-identity”. As Gideon Ofrat claims in his book *Jewish Derrida*, circumcision appears everywhere in Derrida’s writings as the fundamental cut and separation from the origin.¹¹⁸ The connection appears most explicitly in his book from 1991 *Circonfessions* (a title which is a neologism for “circumcision-confessions”) where the Jewish philosopher returns to his own circumcision as an establishing philosophical event, a “wound” which is expanded from the autobiographical level to onto-theological and hermeneutical levels of the tear between men and God and between men and meaning (as ultimate truth).¹¹⁹

If the phallus, considered from a Western point of view, is the great promise of meaning (the phallus as a meta-signifier as it appears for Freud and Lacan, for example) and the ultimate guarantee of self-identity, circumcision is a cut or a wound inherent to the identity of the Jewish man. From Derrida’s perspective, circumcision is not just a physical mark of Jewish difference, but what Derrida perceives as a fundamental sign of a non-self-identity which is cut from its own origin.

Accordingly, Derrida offered a new understanding of the concept of the “chosen people”. Jewish exemplarity, he claimed, precisely means not-being-identical to one-self, or

¹¹⁷ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 210.

¹¹⁸ Gideon Ofrat, *Jewish Derrida* [original Hebrew title: *דרידה יהודי*] (Israel: *ha’akademia*, 1998).

¹¹⁹ Ofrat, *Jewish Derrida*: 35.

being other than one-self.¹²⁰ As he said in another place, "The more you break up self-identity, the more you are saying 'My self-identity consists in not being identical to myself, in being foreign, the non-self-coincident one,' etc., the more you are Jewish!"¹²¹ According to Derrida, to say "I am Jewish" (a claim of an original identity) and at the same time "I am not Jewish" (denying access to origin) is the basic paradoxical condition of Jewishness.¹²² Jewish difference is thus understood as "differance",¹²³ a movement towards an origin that is constantly delayed, and at the same time, "that which bars the origin."¹²⁴ Jewish exemplarity is therefore according to Derrida a "force of rupture that uproots and universalizes the place [lieu], the local, the familial, the communal, the national and so on."¹²⁵

From a Derridean perspective, Solomon's chameleon (non) identity revolves around the circumcision wound as a site of differance. In this view, Solomon is an exemplary Jew precisely because becoming-other-than-Jew is the most Jewish. Therefore, although the film ends in what seems to be a final grounding place in territorial identity, as Solomon finally asserts his Jewishness in the state of Israel, while singing a hymn of belonging - he is nonetheless alone, still marginalized in what appears as otherness that is found even in the place of the so-called "origin".

¹²⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Abraham, the Other", In: Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (editors), *Judeities – Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007): 1-36.

¹²¹ Derrida, "A Testimony Given...": 41.

¹²² Derrida, "A Testimony Given...": 42.

¹²³ Derrida described this concept as a 'dislocation of the origin' and a 'gap of the origin in relation to itself.' The word is intentionally misspelled since 'It's a differance of the origin, the origin is differlant, it is separated from itself, it is not what it is.' Derrida, "A Testimony Given...": 55.

¹²⁴ Derrida, "A Testimony Given...": 55.

¹²⁵ Derrida, "Abraham": 13.

The Believer

The Believer, directed by Henry Bean in 2001, features the most radical appearance of a Jewish-Nazi on screen. Loosely based on true events, the film tells the story of Danny (Daniel Balint, played by Ryan Gosling), a young Jewish-American *yeshiva bocher* (a pupil of Jewish orthodox school) that turned into a neo-Nazi.¹²⁶



Figure 10 Danny (Ryan Gosling).

Unlike the other “Jewish-Nazi” figures discussed here, Danny is a real believer in Nazi ideology, yet although he violently rejects his Jewish identity, he cannot really separate himself from it. Danny’s Jewishness comes back in his personality traits (his Nazi associates praise him for his verbal eloquence and inelegance and offer him the stereotypical Jewish position of spokesman and fund-raiser), in the mixed emotions he discloses towards Judaism, and in the theological content of his story which reflects Jewish archetypal sources.

In one scene, for example, Danny and his friends are breaking into a synagogue and vandalize it, but Danny tries to save the *Torah* scroll from their hands, and hides a tear when they rip it apart. He then takes the scroll home and tenderly repairs it. In another scene, Danny is wrapping himself with a *talit* (a Jewish religious ceremonial gown) and performs the Nazi salute while singing *ve zot hatorah* (Hebrew, meaning: “and this is the *Torah*”). Danny’s strange and unsettling story depicts a unique case of Jewish self-hatred. But what exactly does Danny hates in Judaism? As I propose, Danny’s anti-Semitism and “conversion” to Nazism in fact relates to his rejection of a certain gender image of the Jew as a “feminine” victim, and furthermore – relies on an odd interpretation of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac, which underlines the deep Jewish theological motivation for his actions. From this perspective, Danny’s Nazism should be understood as an uncanny act of Jewish faith.

¹²⁶ Danny’s character is based on Daniel Burros, a member of the American Nazi Party and the New York branch of the United Klans of America. He committed suicide after being revealed as Jewish by a New York Times reporter.

According to Daniel Boyarin, in the anti-Semitic (European) imagery, male Jews have been traditionally represented as female, but this was obtained only in relation to the negative sense of feminization.¹²⁷ What Danny hates about Jewish men is their stereotypical victim role and their weakness, which he perceives as feminine. Danny became a Nazi in order to overcome his own “Jewish femininity” and be a “real” man (as he understands it – to become a physically active and aggressive man).

The first scene of the film depicts Danny on a subway train in which he detects a young *yeshiva bocher*, who resembles Danny himself a few years earlier. In the opening sequence Danny appears in bare muscular torso covered with Nazi tattoos while pushing weights - a sharp contrast with the frail *yeshiva bocher* he once was, and now with his neo-Nazi clothes and boots, and his overall macho conduct - in striking contrast to the feeble young Jew he meets on the train.

Danny starts harassing the boy, and when the *yeshiva bocher* gets off the train, Danny follows. Danny eventually corners the Jewish boy in the street and attacks him, all the while teasing him to fight back, asking the boy where is the lamb to replace him (referring to the sacrificial lamb offered by God to replace Isaac on the stake). Danny’s attempt to force the young man into fighting back should be understood as part of his Jewish-gender complex. Danny turns the young Jew into a victim but at the same time what he resents is precisely the Jewish role as victim. He therefore urges the *yeshiva bocher* to fight back as an attempt to beat the “man” out of the Jew.

Danny expresses his radical anti-Semitic views on many occasions, most explicitly during an interview he gives to a journalist that later exposes Danny’s Jewish upbringing. This lengthy piece of monolog is worthy of a full quote since it reveals much of Danny’s beliefs and motivation:

“Jews, Judaism, is like a sickness... Take sexuality. Jewish girls love to give head... and Jewish men love to get it... Jews are obsessed with it. You want to know why? Because Jews are essentially female. Real man, white, Christian man, we fuck a woman, we make her come with our cocks, but a Jew doesn’t like to penetrate and to thrust, he can’t assert himself in this way so he resorts to these perversions. They undermine traditional life and they deracinate society, tear out the roots. A real people

¹²⁷ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 11.

derive its genius from the land, from the sun, from the sea, from the soil. This is how they know themselves, but the Jews don't even have soil. [– “They have Israel” interferes the journalist] – Those are not Jews... The Israelis, it's a fundamental secular society. They don't need Judaism because they have soil. Because the real Jew is a wanderer, he's a nomad, he's got no roots and no attachments, so he universalizes everything. He can't hammer a nail or plow a field. All he can do is to buy and sell and invest capital and manipulate markets and you know, it's all mental. He takes the life of the people, that is rooted in soil, and turns it into this cosmopolitan culture based on books and numbers and ideas and you know, this is his strength. Take the greatest Jewish minds ever: Marx, Freud, Einstein. What have they given us? Communism, infantile sexuality and the atom bomb. In a mere three centuries it's taken these people to emerge from of the ghettos of Europe, they ripped us out of a world of order and reason, they have thrown us into a chaos of class warfare, irrational urges, relativity; into a world where now the very existence of matter and meaning is in question. Why? Because it's the deepest impulse of a Jewish soul to pull at the very fabric of life until there is nothing left but a thread. They want nothing but nothingness. Nothingness without end.”

Danny explicitly describes the opposition between Jewish and white, Christian men as an issue of gender. For Danny the problem with the Jew is not just that he is a rootless wanderer and unproductive parasite, while the white, Christian man is rooted in a soil and meaningful labor, but that the Jewish man is “essentially female”. Danny describes it as a difference of sexuality: while Jewish men perversely prefer oral sex, white men are “penetrating” and “thrusting”.

“Real” male sexuality is understood by Danny as an aggressive conduct, and therefore he physically abuses his girlfriend during sex. For the same reason he is aggressive towards Jews, who in his mind takes the place of the “feminine” victim. The “femininity” of the Jewish man represents for Danny not just a “lack” (the feminine lack of a phallus, as Freud posited), but a far greater abyss – “nothingness without end” that threatens to undermine the meaning of life itself.

Putting the Israelis aside as non-Jews or even a sort of Nazi Jews (Danny compares the early Zionist narrative to the discourse of Goebbels, and says that in the occupied territories the Israelis are behaving like Nazi storm-troopers), Danny attacks world Jewry as threatening

any territorial basis of identity. According to Danny, the modern world is inflicted by the “Jewish disease of Abstraction”. The Jews bring their nomadic flows into established cultures, deracinate societies, while making everything into a matter of endless interpretation and relativity.

By converting to Nazism, Danny seeks to overcome the feminine abyss that Jewishness opens, yet ironically by becoming a Nazi he actually portrays the stereotypical chameleon Jew who undermines solid identities, while inserting “Jewish” uncertainty to the Nazi identity itself. When Danny concludes his monolog, the interviewer asks him about his Jewish upbringing. Danny becomes upset, turns his face to present his profile and angrily asks “do I look Jewish to you?” – to which the unreplied answer is no, since there isn’t any specific Jewish face or type – a point which Danny actually proves as he himself paradoxically serves to destroy the Nazi myth of types from within.

The canonical biblical story of the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham (“Genesis” 22) is the leitmotiv which haunts Danny throughout his childhood to his adult life and eventual conversion to Nazism. This establishing story of Jewish faith (and monotheistic faith in general) marks the turning point in Danny’s life as a young *yeshiva bocher*. Danny rejects the conventional acceptance of Abraham as a positive model of belief (the ‘knight of faith’ as Kierkegaard called him).¹²⁸ Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his only beloved son (which he miraculously got when he was one hundred years old from his barren old wife Sarah) is considered traditionally as the ultimate sacrifice for God.

By accepting the unreasonable and cruel command to sacrifice what he loved most, Abraham accepted, in a way, to sacrifice himself. Yet unlike his yeshiva teacher and fellow students, young Danny finds Abraham and God (and in a way, also Isaac) condemnable for their actions (or passivity, in Isaac’s case). According to Danny’s interpretation of the story, Abraham is a castrating father figure (not only as Isaac’s father, but as the forefather of the entire Jewish nation), as he himself is castrated by God – the celestial Big Father which passes down through the line of Jewish fathers and sons as the symbolic law of castration. Isaac appears in the story as a passive victim who submissively gives himself up for slaughter, and even helps his father to carry the wood for the stake.

¹²⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Merchant Books, 2012)

According to the biblical story, an angel of God appears at the last moment and prevents Abraham from fulfilling the act (literally holding back Abraham's hand with the dagger which is about to slay Isaac). Yet young Danny found a Talmudic interpretation of the text, according to which Isaac did die on the altar and was later resurrected. In fact, there are more than a couple of *midrash* interpretations that claim just that.¹²⁹

In the Genesis text, when Abraham comes back from the Mariah Mountain where the event took place, only he and his helpers are mentioned, while Isaac is missing from the picture. According to one *midrash* interpretation, Abraham did not return together with Isaac because "he slaughtered him ... and angels lead him [Isaac] to heaven to cure him, and he was there three years, and he blessed: 'blessed be God who resurrects the dead'."¹³⁰ In another *midrash* Rabbi Yehuda says that "since the sword reached his neck, Isaac's soul left his body. Because [God] sounded His voice... and said "do not touch the boy", [Isaac's] soul came back to his body and he was unbounded and stood on his feet. And Isaac saw the resurrection of which the Torah speaks, that 'all who die will be alive again'."¹³¹

By extending the story of the binding of Isaac to Isaac's physical death, the *midrash* subtly points to the psychological death which occurred to Isaac in any case. Even if eventually Abraham did not kill his son, the damage was already done. As a *midrash* by Rabbi Israel ben Padat states, "even if he did not die, the text sees it as if he was dead and his ashes remained on the altar."¹³² Even if Isaac was saved at the last moment, from a psychoanalytic perspective he still went through a traumatic event of symbolic castration by his father, and therefore not accidentally – Isaac is the first Jew to be circumcised by his father (Abraham, who was the first to receive this practice, circumcised himself).

In Danny's view, both Abraham and Isaac were traumatized by God, and passed this wound to generations of victimized Jews to come. Danny relates the story of the binding of Isaac to the long history of Jewish martyrdom, and mainly to the modern mass annihilation of Jews committed by the Nazis. In Danny's mind, the Jews who died in the holocaust took the place of Isaac on the altar.

¹²⁹ *Midrash* (Hebrew) is the body of exegesis of Torah texts along with homiletic stories as taught by *Chazal* (Rabbinical Jewish sages of the post-Temple era).

¹³⁰ In Hebrew, my translation from: *Yalkut Reuveni* (פרשת חיי"ש) (ילקוט ראובני, פרשת חיי"ש)

¹³¹ In Hebrew, my translation from: *Pirkei de'rabbi Eliezer* (פרקי דרבי אליעזר, פרק ל"א)

¹³² In Hebrew, my translation from: *Midrash Tanchuma* (פר' וירא פכ"ג)

The second story which shaped Danny's mind as deeply as the story of the binding of Isaac, and became linked with it, came from a testimony of an old holocaust survivor. After Danny and his neo-Nazi friends start a fight in a Jewish deli and get arrested, they are sent by court to take sensitivity training, where they would listen to testimonies of holocaust survivors. During this meeting, an old Jewish man described how a Nazi soldier killed his infant son in front of his eyes. Upon hearing the story Danny became enraged, not with the Nazi soldier, but with the old man for letting it happen without fighting back. What Danny finds even more disturbing than the murder itself is what he sees as a Jewish passive willingness to become a victim and go as "a lamb to the slaughter".¹³³

After hearing the story of the holocaust survivor, Danny sees the event time and time again in dreams and visions, in which he appears as the Nazi soldier who kills the small Jewish child in front of his father's eyes. Danny's turn to Nazism was indeed an attempt to become the perpetrator in order not to be a victim. Yet later in the film Danny's visions of this story change, and he appears not just as the Nazi soldier, but also as the Jewish father who is witnessing the murder of his son.

Danny, at this point, identifies with both roles of the assailant and the victim. In this variation, however, the father (portrayed by Danny) is no longer a passive victim, but an aggressor who attacks the Nazi soldier with mighty rage and kills him. Imagining himself in both roles, Danny then symbolically kills himself from both sides of his split identity – as a Nazi he kills the Jewish boy he once was, and as the Jewish father who attacks back - he kills himself as a Nazi. If Judaism ultimately advocates "nothingness without end", as Danny claims, than Danny's double self-annihilation (annihilating his Jewish self and annihilating the negation of Jewishness in the form of his Nazi self), is actually the most Jewish act.



Figure 11 Danny in synagogue.

¹³³ The Zionist narrative of the holocaust adopted this phrase, coined by the partisan leader Aba Kobner.

After Danny is exposed as a Jew in the media, he places a bomb in the synagogue where his family and old friends are praying, and sets it to explode during *Yom Kipur*, the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar, known as the Day of Atonement. Danny arrives at the synagogue with a yarmulke on his head and forces his way up to the central stand (where the bomb is located) to conduct the service. He sings in Hebrew *Avinu Malkenu Chatanu Lefaneicha* (Hebrew: “Our Father, Our King, we have sinned before you”), and moments before the bomb explodes, he alerts everybody to its existence. Everybody runs out, but Danny stays at his place when the bomb explodes. The timing of the scene in *Yom Kipur* suggests Danny’s repentance for his deeds. *Yom Kipur* is a day in which Jews traditionally fast as a gesture of self sacrifice. Danny takes it a radical step further – literally killing himself on the altar (the synagogue stand) to atone for his sins.

Danny presents the most radical Jewish-Nazi figure, who leads this paradoxical identity to its logical end in self-denial and annihilation. The notion of “nothingness without end” has deep roots in Jewish theology – according to kaballah, for instance, the highest manifestation of the infinite God called *keter* (Hebrew for crown) is also known as nothingness (or in Hebrew: *ain*). Infinite nothingness thus appears as the purest form of the Divine. Danny takes this concept as the basis for the formation of Jewish identity which paradoxically cancels itself in order to fulfill itself, similarly to Derrida’s notion of self-denial as the basis for (exemplary) Jewish (non) identity.¹³⁴

In an earlier flashback scene Danny is seen as a young boy at the *yeshiva*, giving his radical interpretation of the story of the binding of Isaac, which raises havoc in class. When he is asked by another boy if he even believes in God, Danny replies “I’m the only one who does believe.” According to Danny’s interpretation of the story of the binding of Isaac, Danny is indeed the ultimate Jewish believer, one who sacrifices himself (and his self-identity) on the altar of faith.

In the previous chapter I discussed the Nazi films *The Eternal Jew* and *Jew Süß*, which asked to expose the “real” Jew. Since the post-emancipated Jews of the time did not look like traditional Jews, and were supposedly hiding their true Jewish character behind the mask of “civilized” Western Europeans, the Jew was presented in these films as a chameleon figure characterized by its ability to masquerade and change appearances, yet behind those different masks – these films claimed - the Jew is basically the same despicable type.

¹³⁴ Ofrat, *Jewish Derrida*: 55-6.

The main function of the Nazi propaganda image was to make this hidden truth visible again. However, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe suggested, the Jew posed a danger for the Nazi myth, not merely as a lower debased type, but as the anti-type that threatens the very notion of the type as an absolute, concrete, singular identity which is plastically limited and formed. Beyond (or below) the Nazi image of the Jewish stereotype, Jews appeared as an abstract and formless “anti-identity”, like a parasite or a plague which is far more dangerous to the Nazi myth as it threatened to contaminate it with otherness from within.

In the films discussed in this chapter, the chameleon Jew does indeed infect Nazi identity from within. *The Great Dictator*, *Zelig*, *Europa Europa*, *Train of Life* and *The Believers* are films which took the theme of Jewish masquerade and infiltration to its maximum degree by inserting a Jew into Nazi identity, thereby turning the chameleon Jew from a debased Nazi image to an anti-Nazi weapon. Nonetheless, reclaiming the chameleon Jew is a dangerous affair which in many of the cases discussed here ends badly. Indeed, the figure of the Jew as an “anti-type” can be used as means of subversion against the anti-Semitic image of the Jewish type, but it also runs the risk of maintaining the same position rats always had - being completely marginalized and eventually exterminated.

In the context of anti-Semitism, facing Jewish annihilation is not a novelty. However, the representation of Jewishness as the annihilation of identity itself – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – can open positive possibilities for greater affiliations, connections and shared flows of becoming with others – whoever or whatever they may be. This is the ultimate threat to anti-Semitism as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe suggested, but also the true meaning of Jewish exemplarity according to Derrida.

Chapter 4

Muscle Jews in Diaspora Denial

Zelig demonstrated the importance of the geographical location as a main influence on the construction and reception of the chameleon Jew. While being a product of the Jewish question as it was formed by the discourse of European Enlightenment, *Zelig's* path is eventually determined by the American "melting pot". In the following chapters (4 and 5) the issue of location becomes crucial. These chapters deal with the diaspora as a geographical location and a concept in which the chameleon Jew (inter)breeds.

Both chapters relate to each other, as both explore the image of the traditional Jewish man of the diaspora as a subject of cultural hybridity, gender ambiguity and, in the films discussed here, a product of Jewish interbreeding with genre cinema. Both films discussed in these chapters insert a diaspora religious Jew into a "manly" genre which usually does not depict Jews at all.

Chapter 4 focuses on *King of Beggars* (Uri Paster, 2007), an Israeli production of an action-packed, martial arts epic set in and around a Jewish *shtetl* on Russian-Polish border in the 16th century; while chapter 5 ("Hassidism in the Wild West") focuses on *The Frisco Kid* (Robert Aldrich, 1979), an American Western-comedy that tells the story of a Hasid from Poland and his adventures in the Wild West. Fishke the lame and Rabbi Avram, the heroes of these films, are chameleon Jews who relate in different ways to the stereotypical image of the traditional Jewish man of the diaspora as a sort of a "woman" - a weak, castrated and even menstruating man.¹³⁵ In addition, both men are forced to confront the masculine codes of the genres they find themselves in. As we shall see, the way they respond to this challenge is greatly determined by their position in relation to the diaspora.

The image of the Jewish man as a "woman" often appeared with negative connotations. According to Sander L. Gilman, the effeminacy attributed to the Jewish man in Europe stemmed from "a long tradition of perceiving the discourse of the woman as different and thus in many ways related to that of the Jew."¹³⁶ In modernity, claimed Gilman, the link between anti-Semitism and misogyny became a natural association, for "both Jews and

¹³⁵ According to Boyarin, this image was common in Europe since at least the thirteenth century. See: Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 210.

¹³⁶ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 243.

women become more visible on the horizon of European consciousness through their articulated demands for emancipation...”¹³⁷

The rise of nationalism and anti-Semitism further contributed to the image of the effeminate Jew in the negative sense that the feminine had in the chauvinistic (in both senses of national and patriarchal) climate of the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Paul Breines argued, the 1890s through the 1920s was “a period of anti-Semitic rhetoric proclaiming the effeminacy of Jewish males, and a broader, non-Jewish (and Jewish) Western, heterosexual, male crises of masculinity occasions by such challenges as the emergent women’s rights movements [...] as well as the openly homosexual subcultures that were starting to appear.”¹³⁸

The films discussed in the following chapters place orthodox Jewish men of the diaspora in genres that are dominated by phallic codes of conduct - namely physically aggressive man-to-man duels with swords, guns or bare hands – thereby confronting the stereotype of the “Jewish sissy” with masculine violence which forges a new image of the “tough Jew” – an equally stereotypical image of masculine Jewish men who by now overshadowed the image of the Jewish weakling. Tough, fighting Jews frequently appear in contemporary culture and media, in news coverage of Israel’s military conflicts in the Middle-East, as in many films which depict hard, muscular and physically active and aggressive Jewish men.¹³⁹ As Breines wrote (in the context of American and Israeli Jewish imagery), “there is now emerging a generation for whom the phrase “weak Jews” will be as odd and oxymoronic as the phrase “tough Jews” would have been to previous generations of American Jews, indeed, to many Jews virtually everywhere for nearly two thousand years.”¹⁴⁰

According to Nathan Abrams, Jewish men were traditionally represented in cinema as stereotypically oscillating between these two conflicting images: “First, the ‘tough’ Jew, that is the idealized hyper-masculine, macho, militarized, muscled and bronzed, though not very intellectual, Jew of the Zionist project [...] Second, the ‘queer’ or ‘sissy’ Jew, which can be defined as the intellectual yet insufficiently, incompetently and inadequately masculine

¹³⁷ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 244.

¹³⁸ Paul Breines, *Tough Jews*: 36.

¹³⁹ There are plenty of examples for films in various genres which feature ‘tough Jews’: *Exodus* (Otto Preminger, 1960), *Raid on Entebbe* (Irvin Kershner, 1977), *Once upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984), *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2003), *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (Dennis Dugan, 2008), *Defiance* (Edward Zwick, 2008) *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) and many more Israeli war films.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Breines, *Tough Jews*: 4.

Ashkenazi (central and eastern European) male found in the diaspora [...] This Jew is a ‘nonmale’ or an ‘unmanly man’. He is feminized, effeminate, gentle, timid, studious and delicate. He never uses his hands for manual labour, exercises or pays attention to maintaining his body. The diaspora Jew of traditional Ashkenazi Jewish culture who devoted his life to the study of the Torah embodies him.”¹⁴¹

Both films discussed in the following chapters move back and forth between these images, as their characters are forced into the same dilemma: whether to maintain the Jewish tradition of “sissyness” and avoid altogether the *goyim naches* (Yiddish: the “pleasures of the gentiles”), which Daniel Boyarin described as “those characteristics that in European culture have defined a man as manly: physical strength, martial activity and aggressiveness, and contempt for and fear of the female body”;¹⁴² or whether to fight back with physical aggression, participating in phallic war games, and thus turning into “tough Jews”. The question is not if Jewish men can fight (obviously they can), but what kind of options diaspora Jews have when confronted with “masculine” violence.

While the films discussed here explore both images of the “sissy” and “tough” Jew, they also point to a third option of hybrid Jewishness which is in-between genders, cultures and genres; introducing images of Jewish masculinities that “populate the ground between the poles of toughness and queerness.”¹⁴³ The question asked here is not only what happens to the stereotypically “feminine” Jewish men of the diaspora when they encounter “masculine” violence, but also what happens to dominant structures of gender in cinema when a traditional Jewish man enters the frame, especially in what is considered to be predominantly masculine genres.

Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark argue that “the structures of pleasure which Hollywood cinema offers male and female viewers alike ultimately work to prop up the phallogocentric bias of its representational system.”¹⁴⁴ This notion is based on Laura Mulvey’s insight that cinema shapes not only what we see, but also how we see it. As she formulized this claim, “cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object.”¹⁴⁵ Women on screen are

¹⁴¹ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 19.

¹⁴² Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 78.

¹⁴³ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 21.

¹⁴⁴ Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male – Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993): 1.

¹⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, In: Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (editors), *Film Theory and Criticism - Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 843.

not only typically presented as objects to be looked at within the diegetic field, but are also objectified by the medium itself which inscribes a male gaze identification: “Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.”¹⁴⁶

Hollywood and mainstream cinema, according to Mulvey, have coded the dominant patriarchal order into the very way we look at films and derive visual pleasure out of them. “The unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form,”¹⁴⁷ and therefore women appear as the “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, since phallogentrism “depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world [...] it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence.”¹⁴⁹ Mulvey’s gender dichotomy was decisive: “pleasure in looking has been split between the active male and the passive female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”¹⁵⁰

Men in this opposition are the ones who are looking and their gaze is defined as active, controlling, objectifying and fetishizing. The gaze of the male viewer is neatly aligned in this model with the camera and the gaze of the male character on screen: “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude [...] As the spectator identifies with the main protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”¹⁵¹ As for the appearance of men on the screen, Mulvey argues that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 843.

¹⁴⁷ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 833.

¹⁴⁸ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 834.

¹⁴⁹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 833.

¹⁵⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 837.

¹⁵¹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 838.

¹⁵² Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”: 838.

Later feminist and queer theorists questioned Mulvey's rigid model which suggested only one way for gender positioning in cinema. These writers pointed in different ways to reverse possibilities, also abundant in cinema, of which Mulvey ignored, for instance – of men on screen “that derives considerable social and sexual – not to say spectatorial – power from being castrated, wounded, and lacking.”¹⁵³

Mulvey's model assumes fixed gender roles, yet “identification is never a simple matter,” as Steve Neale wrote: “Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions, and roles. Identifications are multiple, fluid, at points, even contradictory.”¹⁵⁴ This perspective eluded Mulvey's argument. As D.N. Rodowick argued: “Mulvey discusses the male star as an object of the look but denies him the function of an erotic object. Because Mulvey conceives the look to be essentially active in its aims, identification with the male protagonist is only considered from a point of view which associates it with a sense of omnipotence, of assuming control of the narrative. She makes no differentiation between identification and object choice in which sexual aims may be directed towards the male figure, nor does she consider the signification of authority in the male figure from the point of view of an economy of masochism.”¹⁵⁵

Men in spectacle/action films are usually confronted with other men in ways that might suggest gender ambiguity. Duel scenes in Westerns, for instance, confront two or more men in a conflict which is at once violent and passionate, in which they pose for each other (and of course also for the camera and the spectators), the object to-be-looked-at (at the risk of being “penetrated” by the phallic gaze and gun). Women, conversely, can appear, even in mainstream cinema, as phallic. As Carol Clover had shown in her ground breaking book *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, even a genre which is considered to be the epitome of the sadistic male gaze such as the slasher genre, eventually almost always subvert traditional gender roles and presents a final heroine who takes on the knife or a chainsaw and attacks the male perpetrator, which in turn becomes the object of a literally penetrating gaze.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Cohen and Hark, *Screening the Male*: 2.

¹⁵⁴ Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle – Reflections On Men and Mainstream Cinema”, In: Cohen and Hark (editors), *Screening the Male*: 10.

¹⁵⁵ Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle”: 13.

¹⁵⁶ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws- Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992)

What happens, then, to male identification – supposedly already inscribed in a phallogentric cinematic apparatus – when a man becomes the spectacular object of the gaze? How to account for the many cases in which men become the object of pleasure, when men appear in traditional female roles and are marked as wounded or castrated? Kaja Silverman refers to such cases as “non-phallic masculinities [...] which open in a variety of ways onto the domain of femininity [...] those which not only acknowledge but embrace castration, alterity, and specularity.”¹⁵⁷ The appearance of “castrated” men in cinema, she claims, can lead to a collapse of the scheme of the patriarchal dominant fiction. According to Silverman, the dominant fiction is based on the equation of the male sexual organ with the phallus, yet - as she argues - this equation can no longer be sustained as cinema increasingly depicts male masochism and castration.¹⁵⁸

In the following pages examine how these theoretical formulations can be related to the heroes of *King of Beggars* and *The Frisco Kid* as two films that work within the framework of “masculine” genres. The unexpected appearance of Jews in the genres of martial arts and the Western creates a unique testing ground of experimentation. It allows not only to see what happens to traditional Jewish characters that find themselves in “manly” settings, but also what happens to the “dominant fiction” when confronted with these Jewish orthodox men.

King of Beggars and *The Frisco Kid* are especially interesting because they deal with Jewish gender trouble in the context of religion. Abrams noted that “cinema tended to define Jewishness in secular rather than religious terms,”¹⁵⁹ and “where Judaism was represented on-screen, Jews mainly tended to be non-Orthodox.”¹⁶⁰ The study of Jews in cinema was therefore mainly confined to Jewishness as racial, ethnic, political and cultural identity, and not into Judaism as a religion. This chapter and the next partially serve as an attempt to answer this challenge by incorporating a religious perspective into the film analysis.

We begin with *King of Beggars*, which places its main character between the image of the “sissy” diaspora Jew on the one side and the Zionist ideal of the “tough Jew” on the other. I examine how the diaspora and the Jewish man of the diaspora are represented in this Israeli-produced film, and how much (if at all) the film breaks from what Silverman called the

¹⁵⁷ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 3.

¹⁵⁸ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 2.

¹⁵⁹ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 135.

¹⁶⁰ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 139.

“dominant fiction”. Silverman’s theory will be put to the test from a traditional Jewish perspective, which in turn is contextualized here in the framework of the martial arts genre. The next chapter discusses *The Frisco Kid* in the context of Hasidic thought and feminist theory, and concludes with a comparison between both films.

King of Beggars

King of Beggars (original Hebrew title: *Melech Shel Kabzanim*), released in 2007, was an exceptional production in the scenery of Israeli cinema. The film-makers came from the far fringes of the industry: It was the debut film of director Uri Paster, who was known before only for his work on summer theater musical hits, and it was sponsored by Yaniv Hamama, the heir of the nuts and seeds empire “Hamama Seeds”. Shot in Lithuania with about 350 extras, 200 hundred production personelle, 18 stuntmen and a big cast of Israeli actors, the film was one of the most expensive and largest productions in the history of Israeli cinema.¹⁶¹ It was also the first attempt (and until now, the last) to make an action-packed, martial arts film epic that is set in a “traditional” Jewish context.

The unusual mixture of martial arts, historical drama, sex, romance and Yiddishkite was not well received by the Israeli audience, and the fact that the film-makers were not coming from the industry’s inner circles did not help the film to appeal to the critics. It was no big surprise when the film received negative reviews and failed at the box office. The renowned critic Uri Klein, for instance, wrote that “beyond its elementary flaws, the film lacks a structure, form, style and rhythm [...] The director needed qualifications that, at least according to what we see in *King of Beggars*, Uri Paster lacks, first of all – the ability to give an interesting interpretation to the original literary text.” Klein concluded his negative review of the film stating that it was nothing more than “a few belligerent statements on the greatness of the Jewish people and its need to stay united in front of the gentiles who seek to harm it.”¹⁶²

While this view is partially justified, the film is far more complex and interesting than a simple patriotic parade. Indeed, as I discuss in detail, the film is influenced by modern Zionist ideology and its denial of the diaspora as a place that breeds Jewish sissies. As I

¹⁶¹ According to the Israeli news portal Ynet, the film’s shooting and production costs alone amounted to two million dollars, an astronomical figure for the Israeli film industry at the time. See: <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2995156,00.html>

¹⁶² Uri Klein, “Fishke the Lame Comes Back to the Military” (my translation from Hebrew), In: *Haaretz* (16.09.2007) <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/1.1441856>

further argue, it also shows ambivalence towards the alternative Zionist model of the tough Jew. I contend that rather than making a clear statement, the film explores both options and eventually chooses none.

The film is very loosely based on the short story *The Book of Beggars* or *Fishke the Lame*, written by Mendele Mocher Sforim, which was published in Yiddish in 1869 and later translated into Hebrew by the author.¹⁶³ The original text satirically describes the miserable life of lower class Jews in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century. In the film, the events of the original story are changed almost entirely, placing the story in the 16th century, while changing the narrative to suit an action flick with martial arts sequences which, of course, were not part of the original tale. The story of the film takes place on the border of Russia and Poland, at a time of war between these countries. The war inflicts its toll on the lives of the Jews of the region, which suffer from pogroms committed by groups of Polish troops.

Besides the external threat, an internal one appears in the form of a group of Jewish beggars, bandit nomads that live in the forest and ambush traveling Jews, led by the fearsome Feyvush (Amos Lavi). After a remarkably severe attack on their village, the Jews decide to conduct a “black wedding” ceremony at the graveyard and to marry Fishke (Shahar Sorek), a lame bath house attendant, to Basya the blind orphan (Ruby Porat Shoval) in hope that the ceremony will remove the curse of pogroms. On their bridal night, Fishke’s newly wedded wife escapes to the woods. Fishke, bound by religious law to preserve the sanctity of matrimony, goes after her, but when he finally finds her he discovers that the woman is not really blind and that she is actually a member of the group of renegade beggars.

Reluctantly, Fishke joins the beggars and shortly reveals his incredible fighting skills. The kind-hearted Fishke then comes into conflict with Feyvush, the cruel leader of the gang, and eventually the two get into a bloody duel which ends with Feyvush’s death. Fishke then takes over as the leader of the beggars. Under his leadership, the group stops attacking other Jews, and concentrates its efforts on pillaging gentile villages. In the meantime Fishke falls in love with Bayleh (Gili Saar), who he marries, after divorcing Basya. More Jewish refugees from the pogroms join the pack and Fishke leads them to fight against the Polish perpetrators. Fishke emerges victorious out of these battles, and he is crowned as the “king of beggars”.

¹⁶³ Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendele “the book peddler”) is the literary name of Shalom Jacob Abramovitsch (1835 – 1917), which is regarded “grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature.

Although Fishke gains the respect of many Jews, some of the rabbis are speaking against his militant ways. In the meantime rumors of the beggars' heroic battles reach a Russian high commander. Zissrel, a half-Jew, half-gentile who serves as Fishke's right-hand man, convinces Fishke to join the Russian army as the first Jewish fighting brigade. In return, the Russian commander offers the fighting Jews equal rights and the protection of the Tsar. Fishke's friend Zissrel eventually betrays the trust he was given and Fishke kills him at the fortress of the Russian commander. He then escapes, leaves the war behind, settles down with Bayleh and becomes a rabbi. Finally, Fishke meets his tragic end by a Jewish militant who sees him as a traitor.

Sissy/Tough Jew

Fishke is not only a cultural hybrid (orthodox Jewish martial artist), but also a hybrid gender. *King of Beggars* explores the tension between the images of the "sissy" and the "tough" Jew through Fishke's figure, which is situated on the crossroad between the culture of diaspora and Zionism. Fishke's body is a site of ambivalence, as it features elements of both, seemingly contradictory images: on the one hand Fishke's leg is crippled, an element which can be read as a sign of "castration", marking him as a "typically" weak and "effeminate" Jewish man of the diaspora; on the other hand, apart from his handicap, Fishke's body fits the model of the tough Jew, revealing a muscular body and tremendous fighting abilities.



Figure 12 Fishke (Shahar Sorek).

Fishke, then, is the embodiment of a choice not made, the ambivalent combination of a "sissy" and a "tough" Jew, as both are expressed in his physique. Fishke's story, respectively, explores both options, as Fishke moves from one pole to the other. More specifically, Fishke's character development can be traced along four main stages which mark different phases within the opposition sissy/tough Jew:

1) Marginality. Fishke appears at first as a marginal character within the Jewish community of the *shtetl*: a crippled man whose place is with children and who serves other men.¹⁶⁴ In this respect, Fishke's social position in the first stage is marginal amongst those who are already marginal, the outcast of a minority community, which itself is outcast from the dominant non-Jewish culture. Furthermore, Fishke's disability, read within the symbolic realm of psychoanalysis, marks him as a "castrated" man, which again, suggests a double marginality since the Jewish man in the diaspora is already imagined as castrated (for his circumcision and lack of political power). In other words, at the first stage Fishke is "more woman" even than the other (already "feminine") Jewish men.

2) Nomadic. After his newly wedded wife leaves him, Fishke joins the gang of beggars and becomes a nomad. In this stage Fishke's character represents the Wandering Jew. Fishke is uprooted from his home, as any other Jewish man in the European diaspora, but even more so, as Fishke becomes an outsider even with regard to his own (already "dislocated") community. The group of beggars is marked by its opposition to "civilization". The beggars live in nature (the woods) and are leading a nomadic life style. The opposition is emphasized by the attacks they commit against "civilization", represented by the village Jews. This phase also marks the transformation of Fishke into a warrior. As in the convention of the Western genre, manhood is found in nature and takes a nomadic life style, while the city (or in this case, *shtetl*) appears as a "feminine" realm (where the Jews are being passively slaughtered without the ability to defend themselves).

3) Territorial. After killing Feyvush and taking over the leadership of the band of beggars, Fishke is going through a process of territorialization, assuming a masculine stance which is moulded by nationalism. While in the previous stages Fishke was a marginal character and a nomad warrior, at this stage he becomes a state warrior aligned with the Russian army, while the beggars under his command turn into a "Jewish brigade" which serves the Tsar. This stage, respectively, is accompanied by a replacement of traditional diaspora discourse with nationalist or (proto) Zionist ideals.

4) Yiddishkeit. After Fishke was betrayed by his best friend Zissrel and the Russian commander, he decides to abandon the ways of war and to become a Torah scholar. This

¹⁶⁴ This element appears in the original short story, where Fishke is described as belonging to a lower cast of disabled men and rejects of society.

phase signifies a return to traditional diaspora values of scholarly and peaceful conduct, but it comes with a price, as Fishke is murdered by an extreme nationalist.

By showing an image of a Jewish man of the diaspora who goes through all of these phases, being both a gentle and a tough Jew, a man of war and a scholar, a nomad and a nationalist, the film demonstrates a non-essentialist attitude towards the subject, showing that neither the “sissy Jew” nor the “muscle Jew” are “natural” or culturally essential. However, the film does take a point of view which is clearly determined by a Zionist perspective. This perspective is evident first of all in the way Fishke is depicted. Fishke is quite literally a “muscle Jew”: physically active and strong, muscular, tanned and handsome – the ideal Jewish man that Zionism sought to establish.¹⁶⁵

The Zionist reconstruction of Fishke’s figure is clear when the film is compared to the original story, *The Book of Beggars* or *Fishke the Lame* by Mendele Mocher Sforim. In the text from 1869, Fishke is not a strong and handsome man at all, but on the contrary, he is described as an ugly, weak and small man with “a head that looks like an oval bowl, a wide mouth, his teeth crooked, with a stammering tongue [...] his back bent a little and crippled in one leg.”¹⁶⁶

In the original story Fishke is described as a wretched, timid and miserable character far removed from the heroic figure represented in the film. In the original text, Fishke is constantly abused by stronger men, especially Feyvush, who throughout the story humiliates Fishke verbally and physically. In the original story Fishke never fights back. The one and only time he tries to fight back by attempting to lock Feyvush in a barn, ends by him being beaten up and locked in the barn by Feyvush. The film keeps the figure of Feyvush as a formidable, physically powerful man, but in the duel scene between him and Fishke, the latter overcomes Feyvush and smashes his head with a big rock. The film, then, makes a Zionist adaptation of the story and turns Fishke from a sissy Jew into an ideal tough Jew.

Diaspora Denial

Although *King of Beggars* takes place in the diaspora, the Eastern-European settings of the film actually serve what Amnon-Raz Krakotzkin called “diaspora denial”, which characterizes

¹⁶⁵ Max Nordau, one of the prominent early Zionist leaders, called for the creation of “muscle Jews” in a speech delivered at the Second Zionist Congress held in Basel (1898). See: Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*: 547.

¹⁶⁶ Chapter 5 - http://benyehuda.org/mos/book_of_beggars.html - my translation from the Hebrew version (ספר דקבצנים - מגדלי מוכר-ספרים)

the Zionist approach to the diaspora as a place which offered the Jews nothing but suffering. No doubt, on many occasions the Jews of the diaspora have indeed suffered, but as Krakotzkin remarks, the positive aspects of Jewish cultures of the diaspora were virtually erased in the education system of Israel, as if the diaspora was merely “a temporary situation that gains its meaning only as an expectation to ‘return’ to the Land.”¹⁶⁷

What was left in the Israeli memory from the rich Jewish existence in the diaspora was mainly its suffering. According to Krakotzkin, these sufferings are represented in Israel in terms of feminine victimhood, while Israeli nationalism is represented as the “tough” alternative to the diaspora’s passive Jew. Krakotzkin claims that in Zionism, “From the start the relation towards the feminine is defined as negative, and then used in order to prove the necessity of a sovereign majority. This ‘femininity’ does not have – it is pronounced so explicitly – a place in a present that denies it, and asks to be built as its contradiction.”¹⁶⁸

Paul Breines concurs that Zionism asked to break with the diaspora tradition of Jewish gentleness and to create a new tough Jew instead, but he argues that the break was not so decisive, as Zionism ‘rejects meekness and gentleness in favour of the normalcy of toughness, while preserving the older tradition of the Jews as a special or chosen people, which depends on imagery of Jews as frail victims.’¹⁶⁹ What Breines calls the ‘normalcy of toughness’ (“normal” because aggressive male conduct is the standard for most forms of power in human history) is based then, on an imaginary weakness which justifies it. According to Krakotzkin, Jewish suffering is highlighted in Zionist historiography in order to justify the Jewish settlement in Palestine as a solution to these sufferings. As he wrote, “the suffering was represented mainly as means to deepen the consciousness of ‘diaspora denial’, and it was highlighted [...] as a legitimacy source for present actions, guiding a victim consciousness of those who for some time now hold the power position of a sovereign majority.”¹⁷⁰

The legitimization of power through an image of victimization is common in Israeli politics as in Israeli cinema, especially war films, which came to be mockingly dubbed in

¹⁶⁷ Amnon-Raz Krakotzkin, “Exile in Sovereignty – Criticism of ‘diaspora denial’ in Israeli Culture” (my translation from Hebrew), In: *Theory and Criticism* (Vol. 4, 1993) [1993 סתיו 4, תיאוריה וביקורת]: 28.

¹⁶⁸ Krakotzkin, “Exile in Sovereignty”: 24.

¹⁶⁹ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 50.

¹⁷⁰ Krakotzkin, “Exile in Sovereignty”: 41.

Israel as the “shooting and crying” genre.¹⁷¹ These films typically depict the Israeli Defense Force in a critical light, as traumatizing its young soldiers. Yet the genre itself is often criticized for turning the assailants into victims, which in a sense allows and justifies the continuation of war under the guise of self-victimization. *King of Beggars* is yet another example of how the image of the tough Jew at once disavows and utilizes the image of the weak Jew, and how the suffering of diaspora serves a means towards and a justification of a national power position. The film depicts the diaspora as a place which turns the Jews into victims as it offers them nothing but pogroms and persecution, yet out of these sufferings a tough Jew is born.

The film’s replacement of diaspora with diaspora-denial is accompanied by a displacement of what it presumes to be 16th century East-European traditional Jewish culture with a contemporary Israeli discourse. Modern Zionist discourse appears in the film out of its historical context, most apparently with the dispute about participation in the military, which takes place during the “territorial” (third) part of the film.

While many Jews support Fishke and join him in the war against the Polish, a group of Jews sets up an opposition to the fighting Jews and condemn Fishke for taking up arms. The rhetoric is very familiar for the Israeli viewer since it echoes a long, unsettled dispute in Israeli society and politics between ultra-orthodox groups which refuse to take part in the Israeli army (the IDF), and the secular and religious-national and traditional groups who do participate.¹⁷²

The following dialog between Fishke and the rabbi, which represents the orthodox view, takes place in 16th century Poland, but it could just as well be contemporary Israel: “We have to defend together on our home,” says Fishke to the rabbi, urging him to change his mind and to let his followers join the army; yet the rabbi remains firm in his views that victory will be achieved “not by force, but by the spirit of the learned, those who hold the book and faith... the army of heaven is our army and only in it we give our trust.”

One of the more extreme Jewish nationalists who follows Fishke (and at the end will be the one who kills him) then tells the rabbi “don’t let your learned ones drop out from

¹⁷¹ Some recent examples of “shooting and crying” films are *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and *Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz, 2009). These films deal with the first Lebanon war as trauma which was mainly inflicted upon the Israeli soldiers.

¹⁷² Participation in the military service for at least two years for women and three years for men from the age of 18 (not counting later participation as reserve force) is obligatory in Israel, yet broad sectors of the ultra-orthodoxy refuse to enlist to the army.

battle.” The use of the word *lehishtamet* which translates in English as “drop out”, is a common adjective that is used in Israel against the *haredim* (ultra orthodox Jews) who do not join the IDF. An Israeli viewer would be quite familiar with the whole exchange – both the claim that everyone must share the burden of defending the homeland (which ironically, is made in the film from within the diaspora, a place defined by Zionism as “not-home”); and the resistance of orthodox Jews to actively take arms and fight.

Although until the Second World War Zionism was mainly a secular movement to which very few religious Jews adhered, the film poses Zionism as a relevant option for 16th century Jews, representing traditional Ashkenazi Jewry through the prism of modern Israeli nationalism. But in fact, what seems like a traditional setting and story, would be deemed unsuitable for viewing by orthodox Jews. The problem would not only be the partial nudity and sex scenes – the filmmakers attempted to surpass this barrier by distributing a specially censored version for orthodox Jews. This attempt failed since the film still contained many other problematic scenes for the religious viewer.

The religious elements of the film are misinformed or depicted out of place in many cases, for instance, the duel scene of Fishke and Feyvush, which ends with Fishke smashing Feyvush’s head with a large stone while at the same time reciting the *kaddish* (prayer for the dead). Apart from being one of the most intense and exciting scenes of the film, for an orthodox viewer it would undoubtedly seem no less than sacrilege. The religious settings of the film appear more like a decoration, just as traditional diaspora discourse is not taken seriously as what may offer a relevant critical perspective on Jewish nationalism.

The film is an Israeli production, but its focus on the diaspora and traditional Jewish discourse could provide a critical perspective from within the Jewish territory. Krakotzkin, for instance, asks for the concept of diaspora to be implemented as a basis for a Jewish definition *in* Israel (hence the title of his article – “Exile in Sovereignty”), something which was developed so far mainly among ultra-orthodox communities such as the *Satmer* Hassidic sect and *Neturei Karta*, which are not only against participation in the military but refuse Jewish sovereignty on the Land of Israel, claiming that the Land cannot be owned by men but only by God (both *Satmer* and *Neturei Karta* therefore define themselves as anti-Zionist). *King of Baggers*, in contrast, substituted the diaspora with diaspora-denial, while replacing traditional orthodox Jewish discourse with secular nationalism. This was, after all, the path of Zionism.

Jews and (lack of) the Phallus

The tension between the seemingly contradictory images of the “tough” and “sissy” Jew is expressed through Fishke’s body as a site of ambivalence which stands between phallic toughness on the one hand and castration on the other. Fishke’s body appears to present a break with the “dominant fiction”, which according to Kaja Silverman, relies on the equation of the male sexual organ with the phallus, thus denying castration and projecting it on the female other. Silverman argues that once a disjuncture of these two terms appears in a text or on the screen, with representation of non-phallic masculinities or men who say “no” to power, readers or viewers supposedly experience a “collective loss of belief in the whole of the dominant fiction.”¹⁷³ According to Silverman the dominant fiction is largely predicated upon the denial of these “deviant” masculinities “which not only acknowledge but embrace castration, alterity, and specularly.”¹⁷⁴ The appearance on screen of men who are open to the “feminine” domain, then, means “the collapse of that system of fortification whereby sexual difference is secured.”¹⁷⁵

While the dominant fiction according to Silverman relies on an essential link of male genitalia with the symbolic phallus and the power it supposedly carries, Fishke presents an image of a man who separates the terms, not only by saying “no” to power (in stages 1 and 4), but also by presenting a body image which symbolically exposes a contingency of masculinity and the phallus. In other words, Fishke is a symbolically castrated man who nonetheless can be powerful and phallic. However, the film also reaffirms the dominant fiction by relying on the phallus as the only source of power. Without the phallus, or the masculine power it represents, Jewish men of the *shtetl* are represented in the film as victims. The Jews that do not fight back or say “no” to power are being victimized (including Fishke, who finds his death when refusing the ways of war). Even if the phallus appears to be a contingent category in the film, it maintains its centrality and importance, and the lack of it means “femininity” in the negative sense of victimization.

The problem, according to Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, lies not only in the equation of the phallus with the penis, but also in their Lacanian separation. This separation, they argue, in fact idealizes the phallus, making it a metaphysical principle beyond real bodies, and

¹⁷³ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 2.

¹⁷⁴ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 3.

¹⁷⁵ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 3.

thus a universal postulate. As they wrote, “It is the very transcendent immateriality of the phallus, and thus its separation from the penis, that constitutes its ability to project masculinity as the universal—as the Logos—and by doing so significantly enables both male and imperial projects of domination.”¹⁷⁶

The problem then is not (or not only) the essential link of the penis with the phallus, but the predominance of the phallus itself, which actually becomes even more predominant once it is abstracted as a universal category. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin are therefore critical of Silverman’s model, claiming that “any theory of subjectivity that bases itself on the phallus and castration will always be an instrument in the service of the dominant fiction, the European cultural myth of masculinity.”¹⁷⁷ The European Jewish diaspora culture, they argue, rejected the phallus without necessarily seeing it as a sign of “castration” or weakness. The “dominant fiction”, from this perspective, is the European cultural myth that we need a phallus at all.

King of Beggars could well be a film that doubts the centrality of the phallus as a meta-signifier, not only because it seemingly explores a traditional Jewish culture “of men who are resisting, renouncing, and disowning the phallus,”¹⁷⁸ but also for its connection to martial arts and kung fu cinema,¹⁷⁹ a genre that often presented non-phallic “deviant masculinities” - drunkards, idiots, beggars and cripples, who are nonetheless experts of martial arts. From the one-armed swordsman to the blind samurai Zatoichi, to Chang Che’s crippled fighters - there are many examples of martial arts masters whose body is presented as partial, imperfect and heterogeneous, in contrast to the phallic body image of action figures which prevailed in the West.

Fishke seems to be a similar case, a Jewish take on a kung fu hero such as Fang, the one-armed swordsman (played by Yu Wang) in Chang Che’s *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967). Fang is a swordsman whose arm was severed in battle and now fights with one arm and a broken blade. What would “normally” represent a traumatic castration or a sign of weakness, appears as a source of power in this film, as Fang actually fights better with one arm than with

¹⁷⁶ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora – Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 42.

¹⁷⁷ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*: 43.

¹⁷⁸ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*: 44.

¹⁷⁹ Shahar Sorek, who plays Fishke, is an expert of Taekwondo and was also the film’s martial art choreographer. The film uniquely uses this Korean martial art system in a technique which mimics in body gestures the alphabet of the Hebrew language.

two. Yet while Fang gains power from his handicap, Fishke's lameness appears as a hindrance that must be surmounted in order to survive.

In Fishke's case, the crippled leg appears as a sort of "castration", a weakness which is compensated by Fishke's enhanced muscles, his physical power, and his phallic bath baton. Fang, in comparison, becomes a perfect warrior only *after* his arm is chopped off; not *despite* it but *because* of it. While Fang's missing arm is not understood as castration but on the contrary, as a non-phallic form of power, Fishke's disability appears as a sign of lack which must be compensated with increased masculinity. Accordingly, while Fang's power stems from the avoidance of battle, Fishke becomes powerful only when he fights. When he leaves the ways of masculine aggression behind (stage 4), it results in his death.

In *King of Beggars*, power resides only in the phallus, and without it men turn into victims. Fishke seems to present an impaired body which might threaten the dominant fiction, but his "castration" is quickly disavowed in favor of conventional masculinity. Instead of setting an obstacle to the dominant fiction, Fishke's body image turns into a site of Jewish mimicry of the "Roman-European" phallic ideals which constitute this fiction.

While diaspora Judaism was ambivalent towards the phallus, Zionist Jews accepted the dominant European phallic ideal of masculinity, asking to imitate it in the image of the "muscle Jew". This body image is related to body-politics that seek self-definition in a national "body" which will be separated from the non-Jewish other. The diaspora "body", in contrast, is described by the Boyarin brothers as "the permeable, quintessentially female (birth-giving, lactating) body, interacting and intersecting with the world and not closed in on itself, as the body of autochthony, the classical (male) body, would be. This body, of course, has both utopic and dystopic aspects. On the one hand, it is the vulnerable body, the body that is invaded, penetrated, and hurt. On the other hand, it is the fecund body, the body that interacts with the world and creates new life (Bakhtin 1984). In short, it is a perfect representation of the dangers and the powers of diaspora."¹⁸⁰

Diaspora-denial was therefore also a denial of a "feminine" Jewish body that has no clear borders between the self and the other, and is in constant contact with the non-Jew. According to Breines, the discourse of Jewish nationalism in contrast recognises only hostile gentiles, thus creating an image according to which "there is ultimately no place for Jews in

¹⁸⁰ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*: 38.

the non-Jewish nations. Ergo Jews need their own nation-state.”¹⁸¹ In *King of Beggars* there are, to be sure, only hostile gentile characters. Zissrel, the only non-Jew (a half Jew, to be precise) which seems at first to be a friend of Fishke, eventually betrays, proving that gentiles, after all, cannot be trusted.

Fishke and Zissrel – an Impossible Love Story

The gentiles appear in *King of Beggars* as those who bring out the “man” in the Jew, either by persecuting the Jews and “forcing” them to fight back, or by soliciting them to become fighters with positive rewards (such as the promise for equal rights made by the Russian general). Zissrel is also associated with the “manly” phases of Fishke (stages 2 and 3), and his influence increases especially in Fishke’s “territorial” or nationalistic phase (stage 3). However, the relationship between Fishke and Zissrel is explicitly homosexual, threatening to break out of the heterosexual limits of the “dominant fiction”. Instead of utilizing this subversive potential, the film disavows it, as was the case with Fishke’s symbolic castration. What could have been a homosexual love relation between a Jew and a non-Jew, is eventually depicted as a sick perversion which Fishke terminates by killing Zissrel.

In this murder scene, Fishke takes the stereotypical role of a woman as a seducer who exposes his body to Zissrel – functioning as the erotic object of male desire, which traditionally is reserved in cinema for women (as Mulvey argued). Next, Fishke pretends to stumble on his bad leg, using his weakness to take Zissrel off guard (again, using what is stereotypically a feminine tactic). Zissrel, in response, assumes the role of the “man” as the one who is gazing at the erotic object, who is being seduced, and comes to the rescue of a “damsel in distress”.

Boyarin stressed the “invention of heterosexuality” as a main contributing factor of homosexual anxiety that took hold of modern European men, finding its scapegoat in the figure of the Jew who was already seen as a gender-bending male. Fishke seems to embody both stereotypes of the Jew as a woman and a queer. However, the murder scene actually exposes Zissrel as a homosexual who is attracted to another man, while Fishke in fact establishes himself in this scene as a man who feigns homosexuality to disavow the homosexual relation all together and restore “normal” aggressive heterosexuality.

¹⁸¹ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 42.

Appropriately, this scene takes place at the fortress of the Russian commander - a symbolic locus of nationalism, which at this stage defines Fishke's masculinity.

While Jewish sexuality is an ambivalent matter in *King of Beggars*, the relationship with the gentiles is clear, as the film leads to the conclusion that Jews cannot depend on the *goyim*, and must therefore find their own strength. Eventually (the film hints), they will also have to find their own land. The narrator of the film, himself a member of the group of beggars (Mosko Alkalai, who plays a figure loosely-based on the author of the original story, Mendele Mocher Sforim), makes this conclusion explicit, stating that "we do not have a place among gentiles... We are not as those who bend their heads. We avenge an eye for an eye. We are heroes." This statement, issued from a "tough" Jewish perspective which rejects the diaspora's weak, victimized Jews, appears at the third "territorial" or nationalistic stage of the film, in which the beggars become a "Jewish brigade" for the Russian army. However, after Zissrel's and the Russians' betrayal, Fishke goes on to the fourth and last stage of his life.

Although Fishke abandons the homosexual relationship with his goy friend and moves into a "normal" heterosexual life with his wife Bayleh, he also abandons the ways of war and returns to the stereotypical position of a "feminine" Torah scholar (which eventually turns him to a victim). Fishke's tragic end leaves only one option, which is indeed the Zionist solution for the "Jewish question" - to establish a Jewish sovereign state, completely separate and independent from the gentiles. Since the story occurs in the 16th century, this option of course cannot be presented directly, so the film points to this direction by eliminating all other possibilities for Jews to live in the diaspora. Because any positive relationship with gentiles is completely denied, the diaspora itself is denied as a concept and a place which by definition forms interdependence of cultures.

According to Boyarin 'Diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from "mixing" but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing [...] While this is true of all cultures, diasporic Jewish culture lays it bare because of the impossibility of natural association between these people and a particular land – thus the impossibility of seeing Jewish culture as a self-enclosed, bounded phenomenon. The critical force of this dissociation among people, language, culture, and land has been an enormous threat to cultural nativism and inegrism, a threat that is one of the sources of anti-Semitism.'¹⁸² In *King of Beggars*, in contrast, the Zionist denial of the

¹⁸² Boyarin, *Radical Jew*: 243.

diaspora leads to a self-enclosed image of the Jew and rejection of any positive interaction with the non-Jew. The love story between Fishke and Zissrel was therefore doomed from the start.

Fishke Christ

A positive, peaceful option for a traditional life in the diaspora is examined for a brief moment at the end of the film, which marks Fishke's fourth stage as a rabbi who abandons the ways of war. At this stage, Fishke adopts a somewhat Hassidic view, which internalizes the battlefield as an inner struggle men must take within their own soul. As Fishke puts it: "the battle field is within us... this is the redemption I sought to bring." However, there is no redemption for Fishke at this stage, which ends in a gloomy note with his murder by a former follower.

Fishke's tragic end can be interpreted in two contradictory ways: on the one hand, Fishke's death can be read as a punishment for his return to traditional diaspora values and becoming a man of Torah rather than a man of war. The return to the "feminine" option, according to this reading, is a return to victimization. On the other hand, the fact that the murder is committed by a Jew and not by a hostile gentile, and moreover – by a prototype of a "Zionist" Jew, can be interpreted as the sacrifice of diaspora Judaism on the altar of Jewish nationalism. Both options converge in Fishke's final image (which perhaps marks his fifth stage) as a martyr, an image that is fashioned after the figures of Isaac and Jesus.¹⁸³

The reference to the story of the binding of Isaac repeats here, with the additional connotation this story has in contemporary Israeli culture. The traumatic event of the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, former prime minister of Israel who was killed by a Jewish assassin, was often compared in Israel to the story of the Biblical Isaac sacrificed on the altar by his father.¹⁸⁴ This allusion is evident in *King of Beggars*. Rabin was a military general who became a politician that advocated peace with the Palestinians, and as a result was assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist. Fishke, similarly, is a military leader who turns to peace and is then murdered by a "fundamentalist" Jew.

¹⁸³ Jesus' story is fashioned after the story of Isaac's binding, or from a Christian perspective, Isaac's story is a prefiguration to the sacrifice of Christ.

¹⁸⁴ Yitzhak Rabin was an Israeli politician, statesman and general. He was the fifth Prime Minister of Israel, serving two terms in office, 1974–77 and 1992 until his assassination in 1995.

The similarities to Jesus are evident as well: Fishke is crowned as the king of the Jews and is called a 'saviour'. In a scene in which Fishke returns a stolen golden cross back to a church, he is revered by the priest who exclaims "you are Him". Like both Isaacs (the biblical patriarch and Rabin the prime minister) and similar to Jesus, Fishke is a Jewish leader that is sacrificed, not by the "other", but by one "of his own". This myth serves here two contradictory statements that are inherently a product of the ambivalent choice-not-made between the "sissy" and "tough" Jewish image: on the one hand it recreates the stereotypical image of the traditional diaspora Jewish man as a victim; and on the other hand it shows the violence that "tough Jews" inflicted upon diaspora Judaism. The film ends with a dead end, as both options of the "sissy" and "tough" Jew fail tragically, while the only thing that remains clear is that the binary alternative does not allow for any positive way out.

Chapter 5

Hassidism in the Wild West

The Frisco Kid is a Western-comedy film directed by Robert Aldrich (1979).¹⁸⁵ The film follows the adventures of Avram Belinski, a young Hassid Jew from Poland, who is sent in 1850 to the Wild West of America. Gene Wilder is perfectly cast for the role of Avram, a kind-hearted *schlemiel* (Yiddish: an awkward or unlucky man, an eternal fool and victim), who seems to be the outcast of the Polish orthodox community to which he belongs.

The opening scene shows Avram playing outside, happily skating on the ice like a child, while the elders of the community debate his faith. Can such a naive and silly man be sent to America to become the head of the San Francisco Jewish community? Can he be trusted to deliver the Torah scroll safely to that community, and will he survive the journey himself? Avram is invited inside and a vote takes place. All the elders vote against sending the *shmendrik* (as they call him, which means in Yiddish a stupid person, a clown or a joker) for such a serious and dangerous mission; a *meshugene* (Yiddish: crazy) idea, as the head rabbi says, but nevertheless, he decides to send Avram on the journey.

Immediately upon his arrival to America, the delicate and naive *yeshiva bucher* (Torah scholar) is trapped by three con men, the brothers Matt and Darryl Diggs and their partner Mr. Jones, who abuse Avram's innocence and trick him into paying for a wagon and supplies to go west, and then brutally rob him, leaving him with most of his belongings scattered along a deserted road. By luck (or the hand of God) Avram encounters a group of Dutch Amish people (who he mistakes for orthodox Jews). They take him under their custody, restore him back to health and supply him with money to continue his journey west.

On his way Avram meets Tommy Lillard (Harrison Ford), a good-hearted bank robber who becomes Avram's best friend and companion for the journey. The two men encounter different cultures on the Western frontier, such as a tribe of native Americans, who capture

¹⁸⁵ *The Frisco Kid* was one of the latest films by Aldrich (in fact, it was his second last), who had directed three western films before: *Apache* (1954), starring Burt Lancaster; *Vera Cruz* (1954) with Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster; and *4 for Texas* (1963) with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. *Frisco Kid* was originally a film made in 1935, directed by Lloyd Bacon and starring James Cagney. Aldrich's version has the same title but is not a remake of the first. More likely, the film title refers to the Cisco Kid, a western character who featured in many films in the 30s and 40s and in a TV series from the 50s.

them and nearly burn Avram at the stake. Eventually, due to Avram's complete dedication to his faith, the natives accept them as honored guests.

Near San Francisco, Avram encounters the Diggs brothers and Jones again. The three attack him, but he is rescued by Tommy, who takes back the money they had stolen. Seeking revenge, the three bandits follow the pair and ambush them. The bandits lose the battle again, this time with two casualties. Avram and Tommy finally arrive at Avram's destination, the Jewish community of San Francisco. When Matt Diggs, sole survivor of the ambushing trio, prepares to avenge his brother by killing Avram and Tommy, Avram regains his composure and shows his wisdom and courage in front of the entire community. The story ends with a happy note with Avram marrying Rosalie, the daughter of the head of San Francisco's Jewish community, and Tommy attending the ceremony as his best man.

The Frisco Kid relocated two stories from the Jewish tradition into the Old American West, placing a Jewish narrative in a Western film. The first is the Biblical tale of Abraham, father of the Jewish people, and his journey from Babylon to the Land of Israel. Abraham's story begins with the command to leave his home and go to another land: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you [...]" ("Genesis" 12:1).¹⁸⁶ The story of *The Frisco Kid* also begins with Rabbi Avram being commanded to leave his home in Poland and go to the "promised land" of America; and therefore the name "Avram" for the main protagonist is not accidental; this was the Biblical name of Abraham before he made his pact with God.¹⁸⁷

The second tale which the film relocates from its original context is less obvious (and perhaps not even intentional), is the story of the pilgrimage to Israel made by rabbi Nachman (1772 – 1810) from Breslov (or "Bratslav"). Intentionally or not, the resemblance is striking: Rabbi Nachman came from Medzhybizh in the province of Podolia, the birthplace of the Hassidic movement, which was part of the Polish empire then, now in Ukraine. Rabbi Avram is an orthodox Jew that comes from the same region and at approximately the same time. Although Hassidism is never mentioned directly in the film, it is very reasonable to assume that Avram is a Hassid based on his appearance, and the place and time of his origin.

¹⁸⁶ From the beginning, Abraham's story is a tale of wanderings, tearing out the roots and going towards the unknown. In this sense, Abraham is not only the mythological father of the Jews, but the archetype of their nomadic existence as well, the first Wandering Jew, preceding later Biblical wanderers such as Josef and Moses.

¹⁸⁷ In Israel, the Hebrew title of the film was aptly translated as *Rabbi Abraham in the Wild West*.

Moreover, Avram's character traits correspond to central principles of Hassidic conduct, and his character in general seems to be modelled on the ideal of the *tzadik* (the ideal man of Hassidism).

Rabbi Avram seems to be specifically modelled according to the ideals of the Breslov Hassidic sect; and his journey to San Francisco seems to reflect rabbi Nachman's journey to the land of Israel. The geographical destination of this journey is changed in the film from Israel to the west of North America, which in the Western film is a relocated promised land, a Garden of Eden, which America, the "newly" civilized land, represents.¹⁸⁸ In *The Frisco Kid*, Zion is replaced by the American diaspora; a relocation which does not only signify a geographical shift but a shift of values that corresponds to the Hassid philosophy and its deterritorialization of the concept of Zion and its internalization as a psychological locus.

Avram's figure is taken from the deeply ingrained imagery of the diaspora Jewish man as a sort of a woman, a representation which was not only an external one, "one that originated in the fantasies of anti-Semites," but as Boyarin pointed out, was "also an internal one that represented a genuine Jewish cultural difference."¹⁸⁹

According to Nathan Abrams, the figure of the Jewish man was for centuries "tenaciously intertwined with notions of unmanly passivity, weakness, hysteria and pathology, all bred by the lack of outdoor and healthy activity."¹⁹⁰ However, this image had a positive value within the culture of Ashkenazi diaspora, which "valued timidity, meekness, physical frailty and gentleness, privileging the pale scholarly Jew who studied indoors, excluded from labor and warfare. This resulted in a number of self-images of the Jew: the *nebbish* (Yiddish: an unfortunate simpleton; an insignificant or ineffectual person; a nobody; a nonentity), the *yeshiva bocher* (Yiddish: a religious scholar), the *schlemiel*, the *mensch* (Yiddish: a decent, upstanding, ethical and responsible person with admirable characteristics) and the *haredi* (often conflated, but not synonymous, with the 'Hassid'). All of these images

¹⁸⁸ See: Alireza Vahdani, "European Western vs. American Western" (http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/european_american/); and David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands - Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (University Press of Kansas, 2002)

¹⁸⁹ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 211.

¹⁹⁰ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 20.

were defined by their softness, gentleness, weakness and non-physical passivity, what could be called ‘queer’ or ‘sissy’.”¹⁹¹



Figure 13 Harrison Ford and Gene Wilde as Tommy and Avram.

Rabbi Avram is indeed a *nebbish yeshiva bocher* and a *schlemiel mensch*. The unlikely and unexpected appearance of this “queer” figure in the “manly” genre of the Western is the element that produces the comical effect of the film. Avram’s softness, his gentle and kind demeanor, and his complete unfitness in performing any physical activity, including basic western traits such as hunting, horse-riding and handling a gun (traits which he has to learn from his gentile friend, Tommy) stick out immediately as an oddity in a genre which typically depicts hard-boiled, physically active men.

The Hassid’s figure is presented as radically different from the men of the Western: while Avram is gentle, kind, humble and sweet, the other men in the film are a rough, tough and aggressive bunch. While he excels in scholarly knowledge of the Torah but is completely unfit physically, they are men of action rather than words. The most graphic example for this contrast is that Avram does not carry a gun, which amounts to symbolic castration according to the phallic code of the genre.

Can a Hassidic model of “feminine” masculinity survive the Wild West? The issue concerns the traditional diaspora Jewish male figure as well as the western genre itself. What happens to the “dominant fiction”, or to the viewer’s horizon of expectations, when a traditional Jew, portrayed as a non-phallic man, enters the frame of what is considered to be a predominantly masculine and phallic genre? According to the codes of the western, such a

¹⁹¹ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 20.

man would be deemed “castrated”, yet according to the Hassidic tradition of non-phallic conduct it is an altogether different form of power. What would be the outcome of the clash between these conflicting perspectives?

A *Tzadik* in the Wild West

In many respects, Avram’s character is a reflection of the Hassidic figure of the *tzadik*. While the traditional meaning of the *tzadik* simply designates a righteous man, the Hassidic *tzadik* is described as being in unison with God, expressing divine qualities on earth. The *tzadik* is characterized in Hassidism by the traits of humility, equanimity, *dvekut* (Hebrew: a “clinging” to God), innocence, and joy. Avram’s character corresponds to these qualities one by one.

Throughout the film Avram receives all kinds of humiliation in good spirit and humbleness, and despite all his troubles, he always stays happy and trusting, no matter the circumstances. Avram reflects the virtues of *dvekut* and *hishtavut* (Hebrew for the quality of equanimity) as a person who always reacts with kindness and never with pride or anger, even when being ridiculed (which happens quite often throughout the film).

Avram is a combination of a *mensch* and a *schlemiel*. He is a kind-hearted and innocent man which, in the context of the western genre and its manly codes of conduct, translates as naiveté that makes him an eternal victim, an easy prey for thugs such as the Diggs brothers and Mr. Jones. However, from Hassidic perspective Avram is a true believer precisely because he is an innocent man, one that puts himself completely in the hands of God. *Psalms* guarantees that “The Lord protects the innocents” (116:6), and indeed, the film supports this perspective, showing how against all odds, the innocent and kindhearted Avram survives the cruel, violent and uncompassionate conditions of the Wild West.

From a Hassidic perspective, Avram’s complete innocence and joyful attitude are profound proofs of faith. According to the founder of Hassidism, Ba’al Sehm-Tov (which often goes by the acronym “Besht”), “one should always be in a state of Joy.”¹⁹² This became

¹⁹² Besht, *Zava’at ha-Rivash*: 137.

in Hassidism what Simon Dubnow described as “a philosophy directed towards joyous communion with God.”¹⁹³

Among the key Hassidic figures, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Avram’s archetype figure, was the most eager advocate of joy as the highest spiritual degree. As was testified: “in a number of places our Rebbe, of blessed memory, delivered a number of important exhortations to the effect that a person must accustom himself to be happy always. And we find in his holy words, that it is possible to be joyful only with foolish matters, by making oneself like a fool and making oneself happy with foolish matters [...] And the essence of joy can come only via matters of foolishness, as I heard from the mouth of R. Nachman, of blessed memory [...] it seems that a person can only be happy if he engages in foolish deeds.”¹⁹⁴ In this regard, the cheerful and somewhat foolish Avram appears as a sort of Breslover Hassid who always remains in a joyful state even when faced with humiliation. This characteristic is evident from the first scene.

When Avram enters the elders’ council room in Poland, he is directly warned by the chief rabbi not to smile, but his immediate reaction is to smile. After he is scolded for finishing in 85th place in the *yeshiva*, his reaction again is to smile. When the grim looking rabbis vote against Avram as the candidate for the rabbi position in America, it is a child that changes the ruling, and Avram is sent to America despite the majority vote of the council members. All the serious and distinguished old men equal one child in this scene, which aptly reflects the Hassidic value of childish innocence and joy. On many occasions Rabbi Nachman himself purposely behaved foolishly like a child, since the child signified for him the highest spiritual degree.

Hassidism believes in the immanence of God in the world, or as a phrase often cited in Hassidic texts formulates, that “the whole earth is full of His glory.” (Isaiah 6:3) The Hassidic movement, as Martin Buber noted, therefore “kindled both its simple and intellectual

¹⁹³ Simon Dubnow, “The Maggid of Miedzyrzect, His Associates and the Center in Volhynia 1760-1772”, In: Gershon David Hundert, *Essential Papers on Hasidism – Origins to Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1990): 62.

¹⁹⁴ Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness – The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (New York: Continuum, 2009): 195.

followers to joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is.”¹⁹⁵

The theological significance of joy and laughter appears throughout *The Frisco Kid*. In one scene for instance, a young girl on a train to the West plays “Simon said” while making an anti-Semitic insinuation towards Avram (“Simon said touch your nose”). Avram, as always, reacts with a smile, saying “Simon said everybody laugh”. Another scene, for example, takes place in a silent monastery, where Avram is led to recover after having a psychedelic experience with a Native American tribe. During dinner Avram makes the monks break their vow of silence and burst in laughter. The Hassidic belief is that “God’s divine presence dwells not in melancholy but rather in the joy of holy purpose [...]”¹⁹⁶ Contrary to the mode of religious solemnity and abstinence, the Besht taught that “sadness is a great obstacle to divine service.”¹⁹⁷

In Hassidic view, Avram’s state of joy expresses a deep spiritual principle and is a sign of his righteousness. Conversely, the villains who fight against Avram are motivated by feelings of pride, anger and revenge, which according to the Besht are no less than heretic (*avodah zara*), because they make men believe they are separated from God, while He resides in everything.¹⁹⁸ Based on the assumption that “the Lord blessed he fills all the earth and everything in it,” the Besht stated that “God wants to be worshipped in all ways.”¹⁹⁹ This means that everything men and women do should be dedicated to God. Even sexual intercourse and food consumption are according to the Besht of a “higher need to discern the holy sparks.”²⁰⁰

Avram accordingly finds the divine everywhere and in every person. Tommy, Avram’s best friend, is not just a goy but also a bank robber, a card player and a whoremonger (as he testifies to his own character); yet following the advice of the Talmudic

¹⁹⁵ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991): 3.

¹⁹⁶ Dubnow, “The Maggid”: 68.

¹⁹⁷ Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism - Text and Commentary* (Ktav Pub Inc., 1999): 391.

¹⁹⁸ Hassidic texts often cite a passage from the book of *Zohar* (“Genesis” 27b) which says: “the man of anger is like the idolator.” See also: Besht, *Al Ha’Tora* (על התורה, עמ' ס"ה) (הבעל שם טוב, על התורה, עמ' מ)

¹⁹⁹ Besht, *Al Ha’Torah* (my translation): (על התורה, עמ' מ).

²⁰⁰ Besht, *Al Ha’Torah*: (לח). “Holy spark” being Divine illuminations which are actually parts of the Godhead that got scattered and trapped in this world after the cosmic breakdown of the Godhead – an idea which stems from Lurian kabbalah.

tractate *Avot* (“fathers”) which states, “Who is the wise - the one who learns from all men” (4:1), Avram not only befriends Tommy, but declares him to be his rabbi.²⁰¹

Avram finds God even among the Native American, pagan worshipers, with whom he participates in a ritual which involves the intake of some hallucinatory substance, which would be considered as the highest form of idolatry by most conventional forms of Judaism. This openness towards the non-Jewish other is not common in Jewish orthodox communities, yet according to Rabbi Nachman, “It is necessary to know that “the whole earth is full of His glory” and that “there is no place empty of Him,” and that “He fills all the worlds and surrounds all the worlds. Therefore, even if you are engaged in doing business with pagans, you cannot offer the excuse for yourself by saying that it is impossible to serve God because of the grossness and corporeality that befalls you as a result of your continual business with them. For our Sages long ago revealed to us that Godliness may be found in all material things, and in all the pagan languages, because without the presence of His Godliness, they would have no life or existence whatsoever, as it is written, ‘And Thou givest them all life’ (Nehemiah, 9:6).”²⁰²

The diaspora appears here as a geographical as well as psychological zone which allows for a positive spiritual interaction between Jews and non-Jews.²⁰³ According to Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, the traditional Jewish relationship to the diaspora (which includes, of course, Hassidism) offers “a consciousness of Jewish collective as one sharing space with others, devoid of exclusivist and dominating power [...]”²⁰⁴ The formulation of Jewish diaspora as (at least ideally) a zone of interconnectivity between Jews and non-Jews sets for the Boyarin brothers a precedent for resistance to the nationalistic promise of Jewish self-determination, which tends to exclude the non-Jewish other (as exemplified by the tragic development of Israel and its conflicts).

²⁰¹ At a certain moment Avram even considers the possibility that Tommy is an angel sent from God to assist him on his journey.

²⁰² Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*: 29.

²⁰³ It is important to note that while Hassidism exemplified great theoretical openness, in practice most Hassidic communities (including Rabbi Nachman’s own Breslov community) are traditionally very much closed and portray a rigid observance of *halacha* (Jewish religious laws). However, it might be argued that their practical rigidity is precisely what allowed great theoretical freedom.

²⁰⁴ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora Identity”: 713.

This political alternative is prefigured in theological and psychological terms in the Hassidic call for self-nullification. Since there is no place empty of God, the “I” is considered in Hassidism as the source of (the illusion of) separateness. As Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk said, “The “I” in you is what stands between you and the Lord.”²⁰⁵ One should therefore nullify the *ani* (“I”) and become *ain* (“nothing”). “Only then,” said rabbi Nachman, “when you attained true self-annihilation, does your soul rejoin its [divine] roots.”²⁰⁶ The nullification of the “I” is a major principle of Hassidism.²⁰⁷ Here I intend to examine this principle through Avram’s figure, in the context of the Hassidic gender theology.

Theologically, Hassidism sees the annulment of the “I” as the main key to access the true reality of the radical immanence of God. As the Besht said, “Everyone should know that a man cannot reach the truth unless he will become completely humble to his core, until he will see himself as nothing [...] The one who is nothing in his own eyes is closest to God and His sacred knowledge.”²⁰⁸ It is important to note that the annihilation of the “I” is not understood in Hassidism in negative terms as a form of limitation or reduction of the self, but on the contrary, as what opens the self to a greater field of immanence. In fact, it is the “I” which reduces the self and blocks it from realizing its connection to God and everything else is the universe. One should therefore empty oneself in order to give room for God, for - as the Besht said – “He [God] and ‘I’ cannot live at the same place.”²⁰⁹

In gender terms, the Hassidic annulment of the “I” can be conceived as a form of “feminization” - a rejection of what is usually considered as phallic, masculine traits, namely the aggressive features of the ego, pride and anger.²¹⁰ In *The Frisco Kid* the connotation is made explicit with the figure of rabbi Avram as the egoless *tzadik* who does not carry a gun. According to the codes of the Western genre, a man without a gun is perceived as symbolically castrated. The tough men around Avram indeed view it a sort of “feminine lack” – a point made clearly by the villain Matt Diggs, who upon realizing that Avram does not

²⁰⁵ Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*: 444.

²⁰⁶ Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*: 200.

²⁰⁷ Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism* (Ktav Pub Inc., 1992): 20.

²⁰⁸ Besht, *Al Ha’Torah*: (ב"ח)

²⁰⁹ Besht, *Al Ha’Torah*: (ב"ח)

²¹⁰ Byron L. Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006): 94-96. It should be emphasized that the representation of anger and pride as masculine traits should be viewed as a contingent cultural image (dominant as it is) rather than a reflection of some essential reality.

carry a gun, inserts one of his own guns into Avram's pants while proclaiming "here, just like a man."

However, what the tough, white men of the Western see as castration and weakness, the Native American chief and his tribe see as a sign of faith and an expression of power. When they discover that Avram does not carry a gun nor a knife, they react with awe and respect. When they learn that the lack of a gun is backed by the lack of an ego-oriented mind (as Avram is willing to give his life for the Torah), they release him and treat him as an honored guest. The scene emphasizes that Avram's ways are different from the masculine norms of the western culture by creating the affinity between him and the Native Americans as two non-white people who resist the phallic ways of the white man.²¹¹

Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin described nineteenth-century European Jewish culture as a culture of "antiphallocism."²¹² From a European non-Jewish perspective, the Jewish man's gender was therefore often perceived as an ambivalent sort of queerness. Yet the Jew was also often perceived as a mixed, hybrid race, a sort of "mulatto".²¹³ In the terms of the Western genre, then, Avram takes the place of the other (with regard to both his gender and ethnicity), which is typically reserved for the Native American.

Avram seems to correspond to what Kaja Silverman described as "non-phallic masculinities", and his appearance in a predominantly "masculine" genre such as the Western, can lead to a collapse of the scheme of the patriarchal dominant fiction.²¹⁴ This assumption is only partially true. Avram's appearance as a "sissy man" indeed disrupts the phallic code which dominates the genre and effectively questions the penis-phallus equation. However, while Avram's figure is "castrated" from the genre's point of view, it is not the case from a traditional Jewish and Hassidic perspective (nor from the Native American perspective, as depicted in the film).

Boyarin made a distinction between external representations of the male Jew as a sort of a "woman" in accounts that understood the "feminine" as a negative term which contains

²¹¹ Interestingly, in *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974) - the only other film where Gene Wilder plays a cowboy - the Native Americans speak Yiddish.

²¹² Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*: 77.

²¹³ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 262.

²¹⁴ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 2-3

attributes such as “lack” and “castration”, and what Jews themselves represented as their own “feminization”, which was understood in positive terms. According to Boyarin, “In a cultural system within which there are only two genders, the only way to symbolize ‘refusing to be a man’ may be an assertion that one is, in some sense, a woman. This represents then, at least potentially, a positive oppositional identity to ‘manliness’ that is neither ‘castrated’ nor emasculated, because it does not read femininity as lack.”²¹⁵ The dualist or binary opposition of genders, which in itself is a product of phallogocentric thought, refers to any resistance of “manliness” as feminine lack. However, the Boyarin brothers pointed to the fact that for traditional Ashkenazi Jews (which includes, of course, Hassidic Jews), resisting the phallic ways did not mean castration, but “a place from which a particular knowledge is generated.”²¹⁶

To a certain extent, Silverman’s theory seem to correspond to the Hassidic principle of the annulment of the “I”. Her theoretical starting point is the assumption that there is no real possibility of “wholeness” and that “lack of being is the irreducible condition of subjectivity.”²¹⁷ Silverman further argues that “If we were in possession of an instrument which would permit us to penetrate deep into the innermost recesses of the human psyche, we would find not identity, but a void.”²¹⁸ The “I”, according to the Lacanian theory which Silverman presupposes, is just an illusion, a mirror reflection, while the subject of the unconscious in reality is “a pure lack”.²¹⁹

In somewhat similar terms, Hassidism claims that ultimate reality is not that of *yesh* (Hebrew: being or “somethingness”), but of *ain* (“nothingness”). The “I” as the source of being is therefore a mere illusion in Hassidism.²²⁰ However, Hassidism - in contrast to the Lacanian theory which Silverman presupposes - does not define “nothingness” as a negative lack of something, but conceives it as the immanence and plentitude of God.

²¹⁵ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 11.

²¹⁶ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*: 78.

²¹⁷ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 4.

²¹⁸ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 4.

²¹⁹ Silverman’s definition of the ego derives from Lacan: The ego or moi as that which is responsible for the production of identity. It is distinguished from the je or “I”, which for Lacan is the subject proper (i.e. the desiring subject). The ego is the external image one identifies with in the mirror stage (a “self” which is other and fictive).

²²⁰ See for instance the book of *Tania*, where Rabbi Shneur Zalman Meladi determines there that ‘all creatures are always in their origin’ (chapter 3) since they reside within God’s nothingness (*ain*) and revealed within it as *yesh* (chapter 6). My translation.

The Freudian concept of lack is produced by a priority given to the phallus, which then defines women by the lack of it. Hassidic thought - on the contrary - gives priority to nothingness, which paradoxically appears as the ultimate reality of an all-pervasive God. The “I” is conceived as a perception that covers or limits this ultimate reality, and therefore a factor which should be annulled. The Hassidic nullification of the “I” does not produce a lack but on the contrary unites the Hassid with God (*dvekut*) and is therefore understood as the ultimate source of power.

From a standpoint that sees power only as the function of the phallus, the annulment of the “I”, for instance by saying no to phallic forms of power, would be conceived in terms of castration, deviant sexuality, lack, and masochism - what Silverman described as the territory of the (female) “enemy”.²²¹ The Hassidic annulment of the “I” indeed goes to a “feminine” territory, but an understanding of the Hassidic model of masculinity in terms of lack or castration would stay within the frame of the (non-Jewish) dominant fiction and will miss the fact that Hassidism (just like the rabbinic culture before it) did not perceive its model of masculinity as castrated and did not experience its masculinity as a traumatic rupture. On the contrary, the figure of the *tzadik* is a joyous one, and just like rabbi Avram, it draws power from abandoning the phallus.

The Gay Rabbi

In *The Frisco Kid*, the Hassidic abandonment of the “I” indeed moves into a feminine and queer territory. The relationship between Avram and Tommy displays Avram in the traditional role assigned for women. Appearing as physically unfit or unmanly enough for the rough conditions of the Wild West, Avram is dependent for his survival upon Tommy, his gentile friend, who takes the role of the protecting, physically-active man. These gender roles are established from their first meeting.

In the wild, Avram is completely incapable of taking care of himself. After losing all his food to a hungry animal, Avram tries to hunt a chicken, but fails. He then attempts to catch a fish with a pointy stick, but the phallic instrument fails him. Tommy arrives at the scene, and from the back of his horse shoots at the water, successfully killing some fish (for Tommy,

²²¹ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*: 190.

of course, the phallus works). As Tommy takes the role of the hunting man, Avram performs a stereotypical woman's role, and cooks the fish.

Throughout the film Avram and Tommy function as a sort of wife and husband, with certain hints of homosexuality. For example, when Tommy notices that Avram is completely lost, he points to his horse's behind and tells Avram to keep his eyes on the *tuches* (Yiddish for ass). In a later snowy scene the two men snuggle together to warm up against the cold. "We are doing this to keep warm, aren't we?" asks Avram. "Uh-huh," Tommy mutters. "In that case," says Avram, "you can put your arms around me." "Come here, darling," says Tommy, embracing Avram closely to his chest. In another scene, the two men are running half-naked at the seaside while playing happily with each other like a couple of lovers. The homosexual tone of this friendship did not escape a sharp YouTube viewer who compiled these scenes and others into a clip under the title *Indiana Jones and the Curse of the Gay Rabbi*.²²²

While it seems that the Hassid Jew is the one who introduces queerness to this otherwise manly genre, homosexuality is actually a frequent theme in the western, albeit surreptitiously. Hence, the appearance of a "queer Jew" perhaps just exposes the frailty of the genre's heterosexual front. The Western genre is almost strictly a men's genre. Almost all actors who performed in it were men, and it represents the Wild West as a brutal place in which only aggressive masculinity can survive.

Since the West is wild, the law of the gun rules it. The gun is the most dominant sign through which most social interactions in the Western are settled. Every Western man that respects himself carries a gun at all times (the character of the ugly in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* even carries it in the bath). In psychoanalytic terms, the gun functions in the Western as the phallus which every man carries as a proof of his manhood. Avram's gentle demeanor and lack of a gun is therefore understood as a sort of rare queerness in a strictly phallogentric genre.

However, if *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) may have seemed like a homosexual bomb planted into a firmly heterosexual genre, actually it just brought out of the closet the homosexual tendency that in fact accompanied the genre from its very beginning.

²²² The reference to *Indiana Jones* of course comes from Harrison Ford's famous role as the anthropologist adventurer. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCcofGO3ymo>

The Western qualifies as what Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark called a “man to man” genre, “in which a character’s masculinity is primarily constructed not in relation to woman, but to other men”; which raises “issues of male bonding, homoeroticism, and a reconfiguration of the structures of gender difference along the lines of racial, class, and economic differences.”²²³

Although homoeroticism must appear in a genre that deals almost solely with men and their relations, most conventional, “heterosexual” Westerns had disguised it while reconfiguring it along other lines.²²⁴ In order to avoid an over-descriptive representation of desire between men, the Western will use heterosexual alternatives. Instead of representing relationships between men lovers, the Western will present friends or rivals (Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) so that any sexual desire is displaced by the heterosexual framework of loyalty/adversary.

In many Westerns a love relationship between an older man and a young cowboy will be disguised as an initiation story, for instance John Wayne and Montgomery Clift in *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) or Lee Van Cleef and Giuliano Gemma in *Day of Anger* (Tonino Valerii, 1967). Alternative families made solely of men appear in Howard Hawks’ westerns *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *El Dorado* (1966); or a film such as *3 Godfathers* (John Ford, 1948), about three men who find a baby and become a family of three fathers (or alternately, three “mothers”).

The Western man’s queerness is not only a function of content, but also of form. While on the surface, the image of the Western man seems to represent the prototype of heterosexual masculinity, these men are treated as objects to the gaze, which Mulvey described as the position of women on screen. The Western man typically prefers actions to words. As Eli Wallach says in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), “When you have to shoot – shoot, don’t talk.” This inclination leads to an emphasis on the Western man’s physical presence, which paradoxically puts him in a traditional “feminine” position.

²²³ Cohen and Hark, *Screening the Male*: 6.

²²⁴ Homosexuality mostly appeared in the Western in a hidden way, but a few films made it explicit before *Brokeback Mountain*, for instance *El Topo* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (Andy Warhol, 1968).

Steve Neale has argued that in films which represent spectacular forms of masculinity, particularly through elaborately staged rituals of conflict between men such as Western gunfights, “the elements [Mulvey] considers in relation to images of women can and should also be considered in relation to images of men.”²²⁵ Neale further argued that movies that are marked by “action” such as war films, Westerns and gangster films, subject men on screen to “voyeuristic looking, both on the part of the spectator and on the part of other male characters.”²²⁶ Neale gave the example of Sergio Leone’s Westerns, which frequently depict a duel scene “where the exchange of aggressive looks marking most Western gun-duels is taken to the point of fetishistic parody through the use of extreme and repetitive close-ups. At which point the look begins to oscillate between voyeurism and fetishism as the narrative starts to freeze and spectacle takes over.”²²⁷

Mulvey’s gender split between narrative as the domain of men and spectacle as the sphere of women does not entirely fit the Western genre, which subjects men to a fetishizing gaze. Considering *The Frisco Kid* in this context, Avram’s queerness does not really constitute a break with the conventions of the genre.

As in many other western initiation stories which describe a relationship between an experienced gunman and his inexperienced protégé, Avram is learning from Tommy how to become a “real man”. That is, in Westerns’ terms, how to stand on his own, how to use physical power and most important – how to shoot a gun. Eventually Avram indeed looks and behaves like a real cowboy, and interestingly, at the same moment he is not recognized as a Jew by the Jewish community in San Francisco. Avram’s initiation into masculinity, then, is tantamount to becoming (or at least appearing) less Jewish.

The film’s story, however, is modelled after what Steve Neale described as the nostalgic western, which is marked by “lost or doomed male narcissism,” as for example *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), which describes the end of the Wild West and the begging of the civilized West (the formation of a society with law and order).²²⁸ Mulvey referred to Ford’s film in an article which sought to re-consider her *Visual Pleasure*

²²⁵ Cohen and Hark, *Screening the Male*: 3.

²²⁶ Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle”: 17.

²²⁷ Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle”: 17.

²²⁸ Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle”: 15. According to Neale, nostalgic westerns such as Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970) and *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* (1973), are obsessed with ‘images and definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behavior, and with images of male narcissism and the threats posed to it by women, society, and the law.’

piece.²²⁹ In her article, Mulvey distinguishes between male narcissism on the one hand and the law or social authority on the other. Using Vladimir Propp's narrative model for the analyses of folktales (Propp, 1968), Mulvey pointed to two narrative functions: "marriage" (social integration) and "non-marriage" (the narcissistic hero who refuses to enter society). As Mulvey wrote: "In the Proppian tale, an important aspect of narrative closure is marriage' [...] This function is very commonly produced in the Western [...] However, the function's presence also has come to allow a complication in the Western, its complementary opposite 'not marriage'. Thus, while the social integration represented by marriage is an essential aspect of the folk-tale, in the Western it can be accepted... or not. A hero can gain in stature by refusing the princess and remaining alone [...] As the resolution of the Proppian tale can be seen to represent the resolution of the Oedipus complex (integration into the symbolic), the rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence."²³⁰

Mulvey recognized that in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* "The tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism, generates a common splitting of the Western hero into two [...]"²³¹ The Western's dichotomy between nature and culture as different gender realms (masculine and feminine, respectively) resonates the split between the narcissistic man of the Old West and his nomadic lifestyle on the one hand and the social realm on the other. This is the split between Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), who represents the narcissistic male position in Ford's film, and Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), who represents the civilizing function of marriage and social integration.

According to Neale, the nostalgia for the Old West in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a nostalgia "for the masculine narcissism that Wayne represents."²³² *The Frisco Kid* also points to a shift from male narcissism to "feminine" city life. The story is formulated as an initiation narrative in which Avram learns how to become a man, but the final goal of his journey is to let go of the nomadic, narcissistic lifestyle of the Wild West and to get settled

²²⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*, In: Martin McQuillan (editor), *The Narrative Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

²³⁰ Mulvey, "Afterthoughts": 183.

²³¹ Mulvey, "Afterthoughts": 183.

²³² Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle": 15.

with a woman (marriage and social integration) in the city. Avram learns to become a “real man”, while having a latent homoerotic relationship with Tommy.

While Avram’s journey is an initiation towards manhood (as the childish Avram eventually transforms into a tough cowboy type), it is only to let go of this stereotypical masculinity and to again become, at the end of the film, a “sissy” (or at least in the Western’s terms, a city boy). Only then, from this “feminine” position, does Avram show for the first time what can be described as phallic power by physically forcing the villain Matt Diggs out of the city.

As in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the triumph of the “feminine age” (the age of civilization, law and order) comes through a last “masculine” duel which clears the villain (and his narcissistic masculinity) out of the way. Furthermore, the abandonment of the Old West appears in *The Frisco Kid* as a move into heterosexual marriage life (which from the beginning was the end goal of Avram’s journey). Indeed, the last scene depicts Avram’s marriage with Rosalie, daughter of the head of San Francisco's Jewish community. However, the very last and final frame of the movie freezes Avram and Tommy making a toast, both wearing a suit and a yarmulke, appearing as the real groom and bride.

Wherever I go I'm always going to Israel

In the final sequence of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Hallie Stoddard (Vera Miles) tells her husband Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) that although their little hometown was once a wilderness, it is now a garden. According to David Lusted, many Western films represented such an “idealization of the American landscape as a garden and the immigrant desire for a safe haven, a biblical promised land.”²³³ The myth of America as a Garden of Eden “authorized the imperial colonization of a land already inhabited and adapted by peoples of different race.”²³⁴ For the early European settlers, America was as at once a wilderness and a relocated Promised Land, a place in which they were establishing the New Israel.²³⁵

²³³ David Lusted, *The Western* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 20.

²³⁴ Lusted, *The Western*: 20.

²³⁵ See: Conrad Cherry (editor), *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc., 1971)

The Frisco Kid reproduces the western myth of the American landscape as a virgin and fertile land, abound with prospects of new life. America appears in the film as a Promised Land, a site of pilgrimage, almost a holy terrain, which is filled with various religious or spiritual people, from Amish folk to silent monks and pagan natives who in different ways are all devoted believers. Even Tommy, the unscrupulous white bandit, finds faith in this story of redemption on the American frontier. Of course, the film depicts many dangers that are typical to the Western as a locus in which nature and culture collide. As Lusted wrote, “At the same time as conceiving of the West as a garden, it was also paradoxically imagined as a wild place, dangerous and desolate, whose landscape and inhabitants must be ‘tamed’ for settlement and agriculture.”²³⁶

While America appears as the Promised Land in many Western films (those of John Ford in particular), the relocation of Zion to the Wild West is a shift made in *The Frisco Kid* from a Jewish perspective, and in this sense the film reclaims the Jewish origins of the myth. Avram’s story resonates with the story of the Biblical Avram, the man who became known by the name Abraham, father of the Jewish people. He was sent from his original home in Babylon to a foreign land which was promised to him. Yet Avram is a comical figure, much softer than the patriarchal and severe image of the Biblical father of the Jewish nation. He is a typical *schlemiel*, a figure who corresponds to the Ashkenzai model of masculinity which prevailed in Europe (where Avram, the Polish Hassid, came from).

In this respect, Avram’s journey to America rather resembles another journey to the Holy Land - that of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the prominent Hassidic leader who left Poland on a pilgrimage to the land of Israel at the end of the 18th century. Both Rabbi Avram and Rabbi Nachman start their journey from approximately the same location and around the same time period. The end location, however, changes in these stories from Palestine to North America. Zion’s relocation to America follows not only a main theme of the Western’s genre, but as I contend, it is Rabbi Nachman’s unique perception of Zion which allows for its deterritorialization in *The Frisco Kid*.

The documented pilgrimage of Rabbi Nachman to the Holy Land occurred about 50 years before the fictional journey of Rabbi Avram to America. Rabbi Nachman, great-

²³⁶ Lusted, *The Western*: 20.

grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov (the original founder of Hassidism), was already quite established in East Europe and his name reached to remote Jewish communities around the world as a rising star in the sky of Hassidism. One day, in a fit of revelation, Rabbi Nachman decided to leave everything behind and make a journey to Israel. Despite the dangers such a journey entailed in those times, Rabbi Nachman was convinced of taking it as he perceived this pilgrimage a necessary step for his spiritual development, hinting that this ordeal is necessary not only on a personal level but on a cosmic scale. Hassidism sees a reflection of Divine processes in the personal deeds of the *tzadik*. The *tzadik* in Hassidism is not just a righteous man, but the very foundation of the world (in Hebrew: *tzadik yesod olam*), a channel that draws, regulates and connects the divine flow of abundance from God to the world. In this context, Rabbi Nachman's journey to Israel was perceived by him and his followers as no less than a mission to amend the shattered stature of the Godhead.²³⁷

The *tzadik* is elevated in Hassidism to become a key player in the cosmic drama, yet the *tzadik*'s true greatness is measured in humility and self annihilation. Rabbi Nachman called this quality *katnut*, Hebrew for "smallness". Zvi Mark explains that "smallness" "is characterized as a period or state on the border of a normal, adult and mature existence. The descent into "smallness" in essence entails a return to the initial stages of the development of life, and includes – terminologically and in terms of content – a return to the fetal state ('a second gestation'), which is to be understood not only as a pre-*mochin* and pre *daát* [thought and/or intelligence] existence but even as one that is pre-life."²³⁸

During his journey to the Holy Land, Rabbi Nachman gave a personal example of *katnut* in various ways: in Istanbul he hid his identity from Jews he met on his way, pretending to be different men, "and every time he seemed to them like another person."²³⁹ Sometimes the Rabbi was appearing in public "bare footed, without a belt and without a hat [...] and he was walking in the market as the children do, when they run in the market and laugh, and he was playing war games as children do [...]With this behavior the Rabbi ²⁴⁰"

²³⁷ As mentioned before, this idea came to Hassidism from Lurian kabbalah and its narrative of exile in the upper realms (which of course, relates to the exile of the people of Israel below).

²³⁸ Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*: 205.

²³⁹ *Shivchei ha'Ran* (my translation from Hebrew): (שבחי הר"ן, לג)

²⁴⁰ *Shivchei ha'Ran*: לט

made himself some enemies, and people started to “hate him ... and they humiliated him with all kinds of degradation, and cursed him vigorously ...”²⁴¹

This childish, even idiotic behavior was for the Rabbi a matter of deep spiritual knowledge. As explained in the book which contains the story of this journey (*Shvhei ha’Ran*, “Praises of Rabbi Nachman”), “The principle of the matter is, that he (blessed his memory) did that on purpose, and he let himself be humiliated with all kinds of degradations, and he said to the man that was with him, that these degradations will be of a great favor for him in going and returning [to the Land of Israel] and it would not be possible to come to the Land of Israel but only by this smallness [...].”²⁴²

More than just a place, Zion was considered by Rabbi Nachman as the highest spiritual degree. Since Hassidism believes that one must first descend in order to ascend (*yerida le-tzorech aliah*), and since the land of Israel is the “greatness of greatness”, it is therefore necessary first to fall into “smallness of smallness.”²⁴³ According to this theory, movement from one level to a higher one has to go through a fall into nothingness, which is self-annihilation achieved through regression to childhood or even beyond – to the fetal state, or liminal state in-between life and death.

As Zvi Mark described it, “Only a radical metamorphosis can enable a person to come to the *mochin* [mind] of ‘greatness of greatness,’ associated with the land of Israel. And that begins with a nullification of the existent, a nullification of the *mochin*, the removal of *da’at* [knowledge] and a descent to ‘smallness of smallness’ of the *mochin*. That is the condition that makes it possible for a new creation and new *mochin* to blossom and grow.”²⁴⁴ The knowledge and mindset one already has, must be erased in order to give way for the new knowledge and new mind of the higher degree. One has to fall into a nullification of the self (what Hassidism calls *bitul atzmi*) in order to become a kind of tabula rasa that is ready to accept the new spiritual level.

Like his predecessor Rabbi Nachman, Avram goes through many humiliations on his path, from bad to worse. He also appears as an idiot or a child, while in fact he is a *tzadik* in

²⁴¹ *Shivchei ha’Ran*: גל

²⁴² *Shivchei ha’Ran*: יל

²⁴³ Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*: 207.

²⁴⁴ Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*: 207. My translation of the Hebrew in italics.

disguise. While within the context of the Western genre such a figure seems comical, if not pathetic, in Hassidic context Avram is going through smallness as a “descent for the sake of ascent” (in Hebrew: *yerida zorech alia*), “for the purpose of the ‘greatness’ that will arrive after it.”²⁴⁵

In order to claim the Promised Land of America Avram has to learn how to become “manly”, but his initiation into the Western model of tough masculinity follows a Hassidic path which asks to go through a reverse process of *katnut*, a regression into voidness or self-annihilation. This process is the opposite of the manly demeanor and self-assertion western men usually portray, but (as already discussed above) it should not be understood as lack or castration, for the Hassidic conception of self annihilation means to be closer to God. In fact, self-annihilation in the Hassidic context should be understood as fullness. The real opposition here is not between the phallus and its lack, but between the ideal phallic identity, which is self-enclosed, unified and fixed, and the Hassidic ideal of the *tzadik* as a figure which goes through a constant process of renewal and metamorphosis. This notion influenced the spiritual attitude of Hassidism towards the Land of Israel. In Rabbi Nachman’s case in particular, self-dismantling and radical metamorphosis were accompanied by a deterritorialization of Zion.

Once Rabbi Nachman finally reached the Land of Israel, almost immediately he asked to turn back. To his bewildered followers the Rabbi explained that “immediately by walking four feet in the Land of Israel, he instantly accomplished what he wanted to do.”²⁴⁶ As the document of his travels depicts, a short time after his arrival, near *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish new year), “it was the will of our rabbi, blessed be his memory, to return at once to his home, and he did not want to travel anywhere, not to Sefad and not to Tiberius [...]”²⁴⁷ Before going back, the Rabbi eventually did visit Safed and Meron, but he skipped the most sacred place for the Jews, the holy city of Jerusalem.

After having left Israel without even visiting what is considered as the holiest place in it, the Rabbi supposedly gave his famous and paradoxical statement: “Wherever I go I'm always going to Israel.”²⁴⁸ This often misunderstood statement should be interpreted in the context of what Yoram Jacobson described as the Hassidic “psychologization of the

²⁴⁵ Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*: 206.

²⁴⁶ *Shivchei ha'Ran*: הח

²⁴⁷ *Shivchei ha'Ran*: הח

²⁴⁸ This famous statement does not appear in *Shivchei ha'Ran*, the text which describes his travel.

theosophical content of Kabbalah.”²⁴⁹ As Gershom Scholem explained, “The distinctive feature of the new school [of Hassidism] is to be found in the fact that the secrets of the divine realm are presented in the guise of mystical psychology. It is by descending into the depth of his own self that man wanders through all the dimensions of the world; in his own self he lifts the barriers which separate one sphere from the other; in his own self, finally, he transcends the limits of natural existence and at the end of his way, without, as it were, a single step beyond himself, he discovers that God is ‘all in all’ and there is ‘nothing but Him’.”²⁵⁰

Hassidism shifted the attention from the beyond and turned within, into the depth of the soul, where it believes God resides. Rabbi Nachman could claim that everywhere he was going is Israel - after actually having left the geographical location known as Israel - since for him Israel became a psychological locus and a spiritual degree which could be found anywhere with the right state of mind.

Zion becomes in Hassidism a spiritual degree which signifies the realization of total immanence, that there is no place vacant of God. The territorial Land of Israel then actually becomes a stumbling block in reaching this realization. From a Hassidic perspective, the danger of the external, material and territorial conception of Zion is twofold: that the Divine presence will be restricted to one place alone, and that this territory will become a final resting place.

Reaching the destination is the biggest danger confronting the *tzadik*, which always must move from level to level without ever stopping his spiritual journey. Breslov Hassidism especially gave great value to the idea of constant renewal. As Rabbi Nachman said, it is “a great principle in serving *ha'Shem* [Hebrew for “the name”, i.e., God] – that one must literally every day begin anew.”²⁵¹ In another place the rabbi testified on himself: “I am constantly progressing from level to level; if I thought that I am now standing where I had been an hour ago, I would have absolutely no desire to be in this world.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Yoram Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism to the Psychological Theosophy of Hasidism* (Israel: Ministry of Defense publications, 1984) [original Hebrew title: *מקבלת האר"י עד לחסידות*]

²⁵⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major trends in Jewish mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995): 328-9

²⁵¹ *Likutei ha'Ran* (ליקוטי הר"ן): 93

²⁵² *Chaiey ha'Ran* (חיי הר"ן): 112

Beginning anew, as Zvi Mark explains, “refers not only to a new freshness and energy, but in essence to the beginning point, the point of zero. This return involves the nullification and forgetting of everything that has been attained from the beginning until now, for only by nullifying that which exists currently is it possible to create a new man who can arrive at insights and new attainments and levels [...] The assumption is that a new spiritual level comprises a new man, a new manner of existence, which necessitates an actual metamorphosis, one made possible solely by means of a return to the zero point, to the point of beginning, from which everything is renewed: ‘fetal existence,’ ‘nursing’ and ‘greatness’.”²⁵³

Reaching the Land of Israel was therefore something which Rabbi Nachman simultaneously desired to achieve and to avoid. Zion as an end to the spiritual quest, a territory that will become a final resting place, was not what Rabbi Nachman sought. For the Rabbi, Zion was a spiritual state of mind which eventually is truly achieved in exile, where Jews are forced to constantly wander and renew themselves without ever reaching a territorial finality. Therefore, immediately after reaching the territorial Zion, the rabbi asked to turn back, and when he was in the diaspora again, he made the paradoxical claim that everywhere he is going to is Israel. The narrative of exile and redemption is thus turned upside down, as redemption is found in diaspora, while the territorial Israel becomes exile.

More than just accepting the *galut* (Hebrew for “exile”), prominent Hassidic figures such as Rabbi Baer of Meseritz used to stress that it is easier to serve God in exile than in Palestine. The Hassidic perception of *geula* (Hebrew for “redemption”) as something which can be found in the *galut* deterritorializes the concept of Zion. Finding Zion in the diaspora means that Zion is no longer perceived as a place where the wandering stops, but where it actually begins. It is no longer a territorial place where one returns to one’s self, but a place in which one loses his or her self (and thereby finds God).

Like Rabbi Nachman, Rabbi Avram finds his Zion in a place other than the geographical Land of Israel - the American Old West - which surprisingly and despite the initial expectations, turns out to be a perfect location for a Hassidic tale. Despite their seeming incompatibility, both the Western and the Jewish diaspora tradition have in common a strong

²⁵³ Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*: 208.

relation to the concept of the frontier. Western films are set in a specific location and historical period of what is known as “the western frontier” of North America between roughly 1865 and 1890, from the end of the Civil War (1861–1865) to the closing of the frontier just before the twentieth century.²⁵⁴

According to Sander L. Gilman, the frontier as a “conceptual and physical space where groups in motion meet, confront, alter, destroy, and build” characterizes the Jewish culture in the diaspora.²⁵⁵ The frontier is a liminal space of hybridity, or what Homi Bhabha called the “migrant culture of the in-between”.²⁵⁶ It is the optimal space/concept for interbreeding chameleon Jews like Avram the Hassid-cowboy and people who “are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation [...]”²⁵⁷ *The Frisco Kid* shows the Western frontier as a New Israel, Zion found in diaspora as a meeting place between the Jewish Avram and various cultures (be it Native Americans, Amish people, or even Catholic monks).²⁵⁸ Even though threatened many times (as diaspora Jews often were), Avram eventually finds his redemption precisely through contact with others on the western frontier.

The concepts of Zion and the diaspora merge in the film to become at once a locus in space (where Jews and non-Jews mix together), and a state of mind which is defined as liminal, the “zero point” in-between *katnut* (smallness) and *gadlut* (greatness), Jew and non-Jew, nature and civilization, feminine and masculine. The diaspora’s frontier appears in the film as a space or concept which allows for what Hassidic thought defined as *ahdut hanigudim* – the “unity of opposites”.²⁵⁹ Avram, eventually, is in a state of in-betweenness which characterizes the chameleon Jew and encompasses both terms of the opposition: at once in exile and in Zion; a man who rejects violence and appears without a gun (but who shoots when he has to); a man who gets married, but keeps his best buddy (or lover); a Rabbi and a cowboy; a tough man and a sissy.

²⁵⁴ The website of the American Film Institute defines the western as “a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier.” (<http://www.afi.com/10top10/>)

²⁵⁵ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers – Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave, 2004): 15.

²⁵⁶ Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*: 15.

²⁵⁷ Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers*: 20.

²⁵⁸ Of course, one cannot ignore the historical reality of Jewish segregation in the European diaspora. The film, though, refers to the Jewish diaspora in America, which enjoyed far better conditions.

²⁵⁹ The roots of the idea of “unity of opposites” can be found in Kabbalah. It appears explicitly in many Hassidic texts, and was mainly a central issue in *Habad* Hassidism.

Avram exemplifies the words of Rabbi Kook: “The real holy *tzadik* unites within him all oppositions.”²⁶⁰ In this sense Avram breaks away from the duality that was imposed on Jewish men in cinema for many decades, embodying what Rowena Chapman called “a hybrid masculinity” that can survive the phallic codes of the Wild West.²⁶¹ Abrams identified this characteristic as a trait of the “new Jew”, yet Rabbi Avram represents a *traditional* Jew that nonetheless “populate a spectrum between the poles of tough and queer, collapsing the distinction between these categories.”²⁶²

Fishke vs. Rabbi Avram

King of Baggers and *The Frisco Kid* are both Jewish takes on - or cross-overs with - genre cinema, surprisingly placing Jewish characters and themes in genres that almost never depict Jews. Both films take place in Jewish diasporas and both tell a story about a religious Jewish man (a *hassid* or *haredi*) that is tested against rough and violent masculine non-Jewish settings. Despite their shared premise and themes, these films eventually suggest different models of Jewish masculinity, and reach different conclusions regarding the main problems they postulate: how can a traditional diaspora - and stereotypically feminine – Jew respond to gentile masculine aggression? As a summary, I compare the figures of Fishke and Rabbi Avram and the main themes and issues which the films share and explore. This comparison will hopefully give an answer to the question at hand.

While Rabbi Avram is a *tzadik* who refuses to fight until almost the end of the film. At the very end he fights a duel “like a real man”, and wins. Fishke starts as the stereotype of the castrated Jew - a limping man who symbolizes the weakness of the Jewish residents of the *shtetl* - yet very quickly turns into a tough Jewish Zionist hero. He fights like a “real” man until the end, and then at the very end, returns back to traditional values of Torah study and non-violent conduct, but dies.

Avram is closer to the feminine ideals of traditional diaspora (Hassidic) Jewes than Fishke, who is actually a “muscle Jew” disguised as a diaspora Jew. However, both figures

²⁶⁰ Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Eight Tractates* (my translation from Hebrew), שמונה קבצים קובץ א' פסקה תקע"ה,

²⁶¹ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 42.

²⁶² Abrams, *The New Jew*: 42. Abrams dates the appearance of hybrid Jewish men on screen to the 1990s and onwards. *The Frisco Kid*, however, was made in 1979.

are hybrid Jews, in-between the muscle Jew and the *yeshiva bocher* (Torah scholar), or what populates ‘the ground between the poles of toughness and queerness.’ [Abrams 21]

Both Avram and Fishke have a relation with a gentile best friend, with homoerotic undertones. Fishke’s relation with Zisrel is condemned as perverse and ends with Zisrel’s betrayal and death. Avram’s friendship with Tommy survives every hardship on the way, and seems to continue even after Avram’s marriage.

Both films reconstruct Zion: *King of Baggers* imagines it as a nationalistic ideal in a 16th century East European shtetle; while *The Frisco Kid* connects the myth of the Wild West as a relocated Zion to the Hassidic idea of Zion as a spiritual and psychological locus. However, while in *King of Baggers* Zion points to a fixed territorial identity, in *The Frisco Kid* Zion is deterritorialized both in a geographical and a psychological sense – turning into a locus that can be found anywhere through self-dismantling. While *King of Baggers* ultimately rejects the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews and replaces the diaspora with diaspora-denial, *The Frisco Kid* finds Zion in the diaspora as a productive meeting place between Jews and none-Jews.

How can a traditional, “feminine” diaspora Jew respond to gentile masculine aggression? *King of Baggers* only offers a deadly opposition – either remain a stereotypical “sissy” victim or become a tough man like your oppressors (adopting the “Roman” ideal of phallic masculinity). Although Fishke embodies both sides of the opposition as at once a “castrated” and phallic Jew, the dualist structure of the film forces him to choose between the poles, ending with tragic conclusion in any case.

Despite the representation of his body as a site of gender ambiguity, Fishke is a figure that is captured within a deadly opposition. In contrast to the binary opposition set by *King of Baggers*, Jewish hybridity is taken seriously in *The Frisco Kid*, which develops the cultural hybridity of the diaspora into a positive political alternative. More than a comical exercise which combines the typically non-Jewish genre of the Western with a Jewish character, the film effectively introduces Hassidic ideas to the Wild West. This fusion represents the

American Jewish diaspora as a frontier “where the confines between the body of Jewish culture and other social bodies are overcome [...]”²⁶³

While in *King of Baggers* the diaspora offers nothing but suffering since the Jews cannot trust the gentiles, in *The Frisco Kid* the diaspora appears as a positive political prospect for Jewish life, incorporating and combining simultaneously the Western notion of Zion with Hassidic theology that finds *geula* in the *gola* (redemption in exile). While Fishke constantly searches for a fixed identity and a solution outside the conditions of diaspora, Avram finds his Promised Land *in* the diaspora as a space that allows otherness and the ideal of self-transformation to become the “resting place” for the Jew.

²⁶³ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 93. This is an ideal picture of the interaction of Jews and non-Jews in the diaspora, which of course was also frequently violent, as Boyarin is fully aware of.

Chapter 6

Jewish Face, Black Mask

The following two chapters (6 and 7) are dedicated to Jewish chameleon figures that turned black. Rarely appearing on screen, the Jewish-black chameleon figure gained popularity in the late 1920s when the American Jewish actor and singer Al Jolson performed in blackface in the cinematic millstone *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927). This chapter explores this film and Jolson's figure as an archetype model, while the next chapter is dedicated to Jewish-black chameleon figures in contemporary culture.

After *The Jazz Singer*, the Jewish-black chameleon figure had virtually vanished from the screen for decades. It regained increased popularity in contemporary culture with the film *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 20013) and the success of the television and film character Ali G, performed by the Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Chapter 7 deals with these "Jigga" (slang for "Jewish-nigger", which can be both derogatory or empowering) characters and their influences – from Al Jolson to the hipster "white-negros" of the 50s, and the rise of Black Power in the blaxploitation cinema of the 70s.

By becoming-black, these Jewish-black chameleon figures emphasized their racial and cultural differences. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon argued that the difference between the Jew and the black is that the Jew can remain undetected. "Apart from some rather debatable characteristics,' wrote Fanon, the Jew 'can sometimes go unnoticed."²⁶⁴ Blackness, however, is determined 'from without' as it is inscribed on the skin. As Fanon wrote, in contrast to Jews, "I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance."²⁶⁵

If becoming-black only increases the otherness of the Jew, what are the reasons for these Jewish characters to become-black? As a character in one of the films discussed here asks, isn't being Jewish hard enough? The following chapters attempt to answer the question, while pondering if such a racial cross-over is even possible beyond mere imitation.

²⁶⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008): 87.

²⁶⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin*: 87.

The scarcity of Jewish-black hybrid figures in cinema might be related to the notion that racial characteristics cannot be easily altered. Unlike other appearances of Jewish chameleons, becoming-black implies a physical transformation such as demonstrated by Zelig. Yet the Jewish characters discussed in the following chapters do not “become-black” by changing their skin color, but by putting on a black mask and/or adopting a black culture, black “style” and black vernacular. Their “blackness” is therefore more an issue of cultural adaptation than of racial conversion, although they all challenge the borders of identity and its reliance on racial origin.

The uncommonness of such figures can be further attributed to the fact that Jews have often been condemned by anti-Semites for being racially impure and mixed with black (or oriental) blood. Most likely, Jews in cinema rarely appeared as blacks or Jewish-black hybrids so not to repeat the stereotype, yet the few examples of Jewish figures that did explore this image used it to their benefit.

Although Jewishness is also a factor of race (one is born into it from a Jewish mother), it is not restricted to a specific racial origin. Jews might have white complexion, but can also come in different shades of black according to the various diasporas they came from, for instance Arab Jews, Ethiopian Jews, or even African-American Jews (perhaps the most famous among them was Semi Davis Jr.). The original Jewish forefathers were most likely non-white. Coming from Babylonia (now days Iraq), Egypt and Canaan (now days Palestine/Israel), Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and other originators of Judaism were most likely of dark complexion.²⁶⁶

According to Daniel Boyarin, “in the racist imagery of the late nineteenth century, Jews were most often designated mulattos. The best denotation, then, for the “race” of the European Jew seems to be off-white.”²⁶⁷ Sander L. Gilman similarly claimed that “the general consensus of the ethnological literature of the late nineteenth century was that Jews were “black” or, at least, ‘swarthy’.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ The same could be said of Jesus, or Yeshua from Nazareth, who was “whitewashed” in Western iconography to become the blond, blue-eyed Messiah, while actually – as a “Palestinian” Jew - was probably of darker appearance.

²⁶⁷ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 262.

²⁶⁸ Sander L. Gilman, “The Jewish Nose: Are Jews White? Or, the History of the Nose Job”, In: Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (editors), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History - Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*. Edited by (New York: New York University Press): 638.

In his book *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Gilman argued that “Medieval iconography always juxtaposed the black image of the synagogue, of the Old Law, with the white of the church.”²⁶⁹ In order to differentiate itself from its Jewish origins, Christianity painted the Jews black, which according to Gilman “reflects the protean nature of all perceptions of difference.”²⁷⁰ In the nineteenth century this association was incorporated into the rhetoric of race. As Gilman claimed: “Within the late-nineteenth century racist tractates published in Germany, the image of the black Jew appears with specific political implications. In his *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899), Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Richard Wagner’s son-in-law, categorized the Jews as ‘a mongrel race which always retained this mongrel character.’ This is not merely a gratuitous insult, for Chamberlain, like many of the thinkers of the late nineteenth century, stressed the centrality of racial purity. The Jews are the least pure race, the inferior product of a ‘crossing of absolutely different types.’ ... The Jews appear for Chamberlain as the prime example of the negative results of such interbreeding. For Chamberlain the most recent ‘hybridization’ of the Jews was the ‘admixture of Negro blood with Jewish in the Diaspora of Alexandria – of which many a man of Jewish persuasion at this day offers a living proof’.”²⁷¹

Not white, but not quite black, the Jews became Europe’s “white Negroes,” as Otto von Bismarck’s friend Herman Wagener observed in 1862.²⁷² More than just signifying an inferior race, the Jews were seen as intermixed people who threaten the borders of racial identity. While the Jewish-black “mongrels” discussed here are mainly a product of cultural interbreeding, the racial “science” of the late 19th century conceived the “Jewish-Negro” as a biological mix, claiming that Jews have a black physiognomy. For instance, as Gilman observes in an article dedicated to the Jewish nose, “Both Aryan and Jewish anthropologists of the fin de siècle wrote of the ‘predominant mouth of some Jews being the result of the presence of Black blood’ and the ‘brown skin, thick lips and prognathism’ of the Jew as a matter of course.”²⁷³

European anti-Semitism certainly contributed much to the conception of the Jews as black, yet the Jewish-black chameleon figures discussed here are made in the USA (the only

²⁶⁹ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 7.

²⁷⁰ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 12.

²⁷¹ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 6.

²⁷² Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*: 7.

²⁷³ Gilman, “The Jewish Nose”: 372

non-American is the British Ali G, yet still, his figure is heavily influenced by African-American hip-hop culture). In this respect, these figures are more a product of the relationship between Jews and blacks in the United States.

In his book *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy cites the black-American theologian James Cone who argued that “a significant number of black people were confident that the God of Israel was involved in black history, liberating them from slavery and oppression.”²⁷⁴ Gilroy adds that “This consciousness which derives from the Old Testament was enhanced by other biblical tales of co-operation between blacks and Jews as well as by the sense that there were close parallels between the historical experiences of the two groups during particular periods. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba has, for example, been endlessly remarked upon by slaves and their descendants, and its effects have been consistently complicated by the emergence of ethnological and historical data linking the populations together. Many other biblical tales could be used to bring this argument into focus. But it was Exodus which provided the primary semantic resource in the elaboration of slave identity, slave historicity, and a distinctive sense of time... The heroic figure of Moses proved especially resonant for slaves and their descendants. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Marcus Garvey are only two of the most obvious modern leaders who drew on the power of Old Testament patriarchy to cement their own political authority.”²⁷⁵

This mythological/religious perspective was backed by Jewish involvement in the American Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. White racism often targeted both groups, and therefore also united them together in a shared struggle. Fanon, for example, described his bond with Jews on that basis. As he wrote: “I joined the Jew, my brother in misery. An outrage! At first thought it may seem strange that the anti-Semite’s outlook should be related to that of the Negrophobe. It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: ‘Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.’ And I found that he was universally right—by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my

²⁷⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic – Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1995): 207.

²⁷⁵ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 207.

brother. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro.”²⁷⁶

As oppressed people, some blacks in the United States affiliated themselves with Jews, that is, victims of racists America. As Nat Hentoff claimed, “The black man is, in truth, the American Jew”; or as African American Julius Lester (who later converted to Judaism) said, “In America it is we who are the Jews.”²⁷⁷ Yet by the 1970’s the Jewish-black comradeship was replaced by mutual animosity and rise in black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-black racism.²⁷⁸ As Gilroy noted, the black identification with the Exodus narrative and with the history of the Chosen People “seems to be waning. Blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs than with the abject plight of those they held in bondage.”²⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the distance Jews and blacks took from each other was only temporary, as figures such as the Hebrew Hammer and Ali G can attest, the Jewish-black alliance is restored, albeit with a contemporary, postmodern twist. But before addressing these contemporary figures (these “Jewish Jiggas” are discussed in the next chapter), I start with the first example of a Jewish-black chameleon depicted on screen.

The Jazz Singer famously marks Hollywood’s transition from silent cinema to sound film. While most of the movie still retained the silent film form, which conveyed narrative through intertitles and pantomime gestures, it was the first feature film to incorporate lip synchronized musical performances and one scene of voiced dialogue.²⁸⁰ The first “talkie”, though, is infamous for also introducing the first Jewish-black chameleon figure, played by

²⁷⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin*: 92.

²⁷⁷ Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 72

²⁷⁸ Breines, *Tough Jews*: 68. As Breines argues, the emergence of black power and the dissolution of the civil rights movement “marked, at least temporarily, the end of the long standing connection, often even the real bond, between progressive black intellectuals and activists and their counterparts among Jews.”

²⁷⁹ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 207.

²⁸⁰ Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice”, In: *Critical Inquiry* vol. 18, no. 3 (The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 421. According to Rogin, although sound was already used in cinema, “No feature film before *The Jazz Singer* had either lip synchronized musical performance or dialogue. None used sound to cut away from and yet retain the previously visible action, and none incorporated words and music into the story. These innovations are still electrifying because they are preceded within the film by the earlier forms this movie will destroy-silent, documentary, lower East Side scenes, pantomime gestures, and intertitles. When young Jakie Rabinowitz sings in Muller’s cafe bar, he announces a cinematic revolution.”

the Jewish performer Al Jolson whose trademark was to appear in blackface (face painted in black), which by today's standards is largely considered a troubling reminiscence of minstrel shows.



Figure 14 Al Jolson in blackface.

The Jazz Singer is therefore condemned by many contemporary critics as racist. The film's most vigorous critic to date is Michael Rogin, who argued the movie used blackface and jazz music to find a voice for Jews while disavowing blacks, comparing the film to the notoriously racist *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). Charles Musser reports that when Warner Bros. released an eightieth Anniversary DVD set, "Entertainment Weekly's Steve Daly savaged the movie, remarking that 'there's an ugly stereotype under wraps here', for 'Jolson spends a significant portion of *Jazz Singer* in blackface, masquerading as an African-American man – that is, as a grotesque, degrading approximation of one'. In the process, he 'blunted his own "racial" heritage Jewish identity (a term used freely at the time in discussing Jewish identity) by assuming the trappings of another. The gimmick helped make him a recording superstar ... and pigeonholed him forever inside an indefensible minstrel-show tradition'. At the end of his review, Daly concludes, 'Thankfully, history has moved beyond this movie and its attitudes. How sobering to be reminded that something so wrong could ever have been so popular'."²⁸¹

Musser asked to redeem the film's problematic reputation, and pointed to theoreticians such as Linda Williams and Carol Clover, who offered a more sympathetic treatment, arguing for the film's "power to speak of racial affliction through music" (Williams), and that the use of blackface at least acknowledged Jolson's love and theft, something which a film like *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly 1952) did its best to efface and deny

²⁸¹ Charles Musser, "Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture", In: *Film History* vol. 23 (Indiana University Press, 2011): 196.

(Clover).²⁸² While taking Rogin's and others' criticism into consideration, I intend to add substance to the more positive readings of the film by viewing it from the viewpoint of the chameleon Jew.

The Jazz Singer

The Jazz Singer was a remake of Samson Raphaelson's play of the same name, and was readapted in cinema twice, in 1927 and 1944, with the same title and a similar basic premise, albeit without the problematic blackface feature (except a small comical homage in the 1944 version). The plot of the original film tells the story of a son of Jewish immigrants in New York who is torn between the tradition of his forefathers and his passion for jazz music. Jackie Rabinowitz (Al Jolson) is a descendant of five generations of synagogue cantors, and his father (Warner Oland) – a strict religious patriarchal figure – expects him to follow the tradition and become the next cantor after he retires. Jackie was trained by his father for this mission from a small age, but during his adolescence he occasionally sneaks into night clubs to sing “jazz” songs (which are actually more a Broadway musical style of songs) in front of largely non-Jewish audiences.

On the eve of *Yom Kipur* – the Day of Atonement, which is the most solemn day of the Jewish holydays - cantor Rabinowitz discovers that his son is performing “raggy time” numbers in a night club. Outraged, he pulls his son off the stage and takes him home. There, despite the pleas of Jackie's mother (Eugenie Besserer), he physically punishes his son. Jackie runs away from home, leaving his father to sing in the synagogue by himself, in tears for the loss of his son. The years pass by, and young Jackie Rabinowitz becomes a man and a full time musical performer who now goes by the name Jack Robin. Jack falls in love with Mary (May McAvoy), a non-Jewish dancer, and with her help becomes a renowned performer.

On cantor Rabinowitz's birthday, Jack returns home for a visit after a very long absence. He is greeted by his mother, and the two hug, caress and kiss each other. At this point appears the historical cinematic landmark of the first talking scene in a feature film, as Jack sits at the piano and playfully flirts with his mother (the oedipal aspects of their relationship will be discussed later on). Jack then sings to his mother a selection of his musical numbers, until the father arrives back home and, appalled by what he hears, shouts

²⁸² Musser, “Al Jolson”: 205.

“stop!”. This command is the last speaking voice to be heard in the film, as from this point on the film reverts back to the use of intertitles. Despite Jack’s and his mother’s pleas, the father refuses to accept his son and again throws him out of the house.

After this intense emotional encounter, cantor Rabinowitz falls sick, while Jack and his lover are preparing for their big breakthrough in a Broadway show that is scheduled to open on the eve of *Yom Kipur*. While preparing to go on stage for the general rehearsal (a scene in which Jack puts on his blackface for the first time), Jack’s mother arrives to tell him that his father is gravely sick and asks him to take his place as the synagogue’s cantor for *Yom Kipur*. Jack is confronted with an impossible choice between his family and tradition on the one hand, and his musical career on the other. Which should he destroy? As Jack says (in intertitles), “It’s a choice between giving up the biggest chance of my life – and breaking my mother’s heart. I have no right to do either!”

Eventually, after performing for the general rehearsal, Jack goes back home to meet his dying father. At home, Jack’s mother begs him to take his father’s place and perform the rite of *Yom Kipur*, so that the voice of his singing may influence the father to rise from his sickbed; but then, the producer of the Broadway show arrives with Jack’s *shikse* lover and the two try to convince Jack to go back with them, or else risk destroying his career.²⁸³ Jack eventually decides to sing in the synagogue, and in effect the Broadway show is cancelled. As the father hears the voice of his son coming from the nearby synagogue, he says to Jack’s mother “Mama – we have our son again,” and dies. On the synagogue’s stage, Jack sings the prayer of *Kol Nidrei* (*Yom Kipur*’s highlight prayer of repentance) with immense emotional drive, as the spirit of his father appears behind him to support his prayer.²⁸⁴

Finally, despite what seemed like a choice that will destroy Jack’s career, an intertitle announces that “time goes on, and the show must go on,” and the film ends with a scene of Jack performing in blackface before a large crowd, singing “Mammy” (one of Al Jolson’s major hits) – a love song to his mother, who is smiling approvingly in the audience.

²⁸³ The Yiddish term *shikse* is used in the film to describe Jack’s lover. Within the Jewish Ashkenazi tradition, this term denotes a non-Jewish woman, and has a somewhat demeaning connotation.

²⁸⁴ *Kol Nodrei*, which is sung on the eve of *Yom Kipur*, includes a declaration of the nullification of vows and oaths. In this context it allows the cantor to repent the ban on his son, and in a broader context, to make changes in the tradition.

The Jazz Singer reflects the split identity experienced by Jewish immigrants in the United States at the time, specifically by the Jewish Hollywood moguls that produced the film, the Warner brothers. According to Neal Gabler, for these Hollywood Jews who were completely assimilated in American culture, *The Jazz Singer* was “a highly personal dramatization of the conflicts in their own lives and within their own family”; and therefore for the main role they have cast a Jew ‘as totally assimilated as they were.’²⁸⁵ Al Jolson was then a popular Broadway star who was likely an assimilated Jew. Moreover, as Gabler writes, Jolson’s own experiences so closely paralleled those of the original play’s protagonist, Jackie Rabinowitz, “that he was practically playing himself.”²⁸⁶

Much like his film character Jackie Rabinowitz, Al Jolson left home to join a traveling show and later became a popular singer and actor. Like his film character, Jolson’s father was a Russian immigrant, a rabbi and a cantor in Baltimore who abhorred his son’s attraction to the secular world. “The chief difficulty in our home life,” wrote Jolson’s brother, Harry, “was that Al and I had been absorbed by American customs, American freedom of thought, and the American way of life. My father still dwelt in the consciousness of the strict, orthodox teachings and customs of the old world.”²⁸⁷

Jewish assimilation into American culture was certainly a goal these figures endorsed, both on-screen and in their personal lives. Yet *The Jazz Singer* plays a double tune, at once pointing the way out of the Jewish tradition and still maintaining a relationship with it. Jack Robin could also be Jackie Rabinowitz, a secular show-business performer with a non-Jewish wife *and* a synagogue cantor who remains loyal to his Jewish mother, without really having to make a choice between these worlds. Jolson’s blackface is the element which interlinks these worlds, yet it lacks any justification in the narrative, and is particularly odd in view of the predominantly Jewish and white social context of film.

Indeed, blackface disappeared from the following adaptations of *The Jazz Singer* (directed by Michael Curtiz in 1952), yet the main plot could remain basically the same. In the second version, assimilation is no longer a goal but an established fact. The Jews in this

²⁸⁵ Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own – How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989): 141.

²⁸⁶ Gabler, *Empire of Their Own*: 141.

²⁸⁷ Gabler, *Empire of Their Own*: 141.

film are the offspring generation of the orthodox ghetto Jews who appear in the original version, and although they hint to having to deal with anti-Semitism, they seem to be completely assimilated. These are rich, highly-educated, successful Jews that have the lifestyle and appearance of high class whites.

The main difference that distinguishes them as Jews is that they go to a synagogue, yet the Jewish temple in this version is a liberal synagogue which looks like a church, and the service is accompanied by church-like organ music. Immediately after the service, everyone takes off their yarmulkes; they do not bless the food they eat; and the main character even turns the lights on in the synagogue, during the *shabat* (which is of course forbidden by Jewish religion, particularly in the synagogue). As the synagogue becomes more like a white church, the “Jazz” club becomes a “temple” in which the performers and audience are totally white, thus actually converting both the Jewish and black minorities into white culture (which according to Rogin, already happened in the original version).

The third version of *The Jazz Singer* (Richard Fleischer, 1980) again jumps a generation and presents post-assimilated Jews. Unlike the (relatively) liberal father in the second version, the cantor in this version is strictly orthodox; while the son, Yussel Rabinovitch (a.k.a. Jess Robin, played by the singer Neil Diamond) follows his predecessors from the previous versions and, like them, leaves his religious house and marries a *shikse*. Nonetheless, they keep the Jewish tradition in their home, eating kosher food and celebrating the *shabat*. The religious difference of Judaism re-enters the scene, and perhaps for this reason blackface reappears in this film as well, if only for a short comical episode, when Jess is asked by some black friends to replace one of the musicians in their band.

While in the original version Jolson is performing in blackface in front of a white audience, here Jess performs in front of a black audience in a black club; but since in the 1980s blackface was already seen as an insult, the audience is outraged and a fight breaks out. Although a post-assimilation film in which Jews are proudly performing their religion, the film supports the image of the American melting pot. Jess’ final song is "America" (also known as "They're Coming to America"), an ultra-patriotic song which celebrates the history of immigration to the United States. In this version the Jewish “jazz” singer leads his congregation to the American dream.

What is, then, the point of using blackface in the original film? If assimilation was indeed the goal, Jackie Rabinowitz could just pretend to be white (as in the other versions of the film), which is a much easier task considering his white complexion. Why to go through the ordeal of blackface, which only accentuates his difference (and aligns him with another minority which was heavily oppressed at the time)? As Rogin puts it, “why should the member of one pariah group hide his identity under the mask of another?”²⁸⁸ Or as the father of the jazz singer from the 1980 version asks (after discovering his son was in blackface), “Isn’t it tough enough, being a Jew?”

Jolson’s blackface can be seen as an expression of the film’s hybridity, which appears on many levels – from the split identity of its Jewish protagonist to the film’s own hybrid form, which is situated between silent and sound cinema. Rogin aptly described *The Jazz Singer* as a “liminal movie” which “goes back and forth not only between sound and silence, music and intertitles, blackface and white, but also between *Kol Nidre* and ‘The Robert E. Lee,’ Jew and Gentile, street and stage, male and female.”²⁸⁹ It is a film which shift from “vaudeville to Hollywood, immigrant community to mobile individual, silence to sound,” while retaining both options at once.²⁹⁰ “In this sense”, wrote Rogin, “Jack’s putting on and taking off blackface is synecdochical for the movie’s reversibility, its promise that nothing is fixed or lost forever.”²⁹¹

However, Rogin does not accept this premise and argues that in reality the Hollywood Jews had said goodbye to their Jewish traditions with *The Jazz Singer*. As he wrote, “The movie was promising that the son could have it all, Jewish past and American future, Jewish mother and gentile wife. That was not what happened in Hollywood. The moguls left their Jewish wives for gentile women in the 1930s and eliminated Jewish life from the screen. They bid farewell to their Jewish pasts with *The Jazz Singer*. Americanized Jews ultimately would retain Jewish identities, but there was no going back to the lower East Side.”²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Rogin, “Blackface”: 439.

²⁸⁹ Rogin, “Blackface”: 449. The choice between “male and female” being the choice between the tradition represented by the hard patriarch on the one hand, and the more lenient mother/lover on the other.

²⁹⁰ Rogin, “Blackface”: 449.

²⁹¹ Rogin, “Blackface”: 449.

²⁹² Rogin, “Blackface”: 426.

Indeed, according to Nathan Abrams, after the release of the original film “cinematic Jews began to fade away, in what Henry Popkin called ‘the great retreat,’ with the effect that by 1935 Jews had all but vanished from the screen.”²⁹³ When Jews did appear on the Hollywood screen during this period, they were barely recognizable as Jews. The aspired assimilation had led to what Sander L. Gilman called a Jewish “desire for invisibility, the desire to become ‘white’.”²⁹⁴ Indeed, the second version of *The Jazz Singer* from 1952 muted Jewishness to become almost undifferentiated from white (middle/high class) America. Yet according to Rogin, the main victims of *The Jazz Singer*’s identity erasure were not Jews but blacks. Jolson’s blackface was not just a sign of breaking away from Jewishness, but as Rogin sees it, it was the ultimate symbol of the silencing of blackness.

While Al Jolson’s face is painted black, the area around the mouth is left unpainted and remains white – as if to show that he who speaks for the black man (or more accurately - instead of him) is actually white. Silencing appears as a central theme in *The Jazz Singer*: the silencing of the voice by the father who represents not only the old Jewish tradition, but in this respect, also the old silent medium; the silencing of Jewishness, which was virtually erased from the Hollywood screen after the film came out; but more than anything else – the silencing of black men who were replaced and disavowed by a Jew in blackface.

Rogin tracks the origins of blackface to the era of slavery, when blacks were forbidden access to the stage (as well as many other public spaces).²⁹⁵ According to Rogin, “Vaudeville, which succeeded blackface minstrelsy as the most popular American entertainment form, was in turn displaced by movies. Each of these spectacles, however, was linked to its predecessor. Vaudeville absorbed minstrelsy, as Jewish vaudeville entertainers like George Burns, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, and Jolson himself (Heywood Brown called him ‘the master minstrel of them all’) gave blackface a new lease on life.”²⁹⁶

Rogin therefore aligns *The Jazz Singer* with D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), another defining film in American cinema that depicted white men in blackface, and which celebrated the Ku Klux Klan and their racist ideology. According to Rogin both films “use the black man for access to forbidden white women” (in *The Jazz Singer*, Jack’s *shiksa*

²⁹³ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 3.

²⁹⁴ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 4.

²⁹⁵ Rogin, “Blackface”: 448.

²⁹⁶ Rogin, “Blackface”:430.

lover), yet since these films do not have black actors but whites or Jews with blackface, “the interracial double is not the exotic other but the split self.”²⁹⁷ Both films, he claims, exploit and disavow blacks: “*The Birth of a Nation*, climaxing the worst period of violence against blacks in southern history, lynches the black; the jazz singer, ventriloquizing the black, sings through his mouth.”²⁹⁸ The sole difference, in his view, is that unlike the open animosity towards blacks in *Birth of a Nation*, in *The Jazz Singer*, the “minstrelsy mask kills blacks with kindness.”²⁹⁹

While Jolson’s use of blackface visually emphasizes the difference between Jews and whites (which is far less obvious without the use blackface, as in the 1952 version of the film), Rogin claims that it is actually used in order to disavow this difference. “Blackface,” he argues, “is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American. By taking on blackface the Jewish jazz singer acquires that which is forbidden to the tramp and the student: first his own voice; then assimilation through upward mobility; finally women.”³⁰⁰

Jewish blackface functions in *The Jazz Singer* as an odd double of Frantz Fanon’s famous formulation of colonial mimicry as “black skins, white masks”. In Fanon’s description, the black man identifies with his colonizers by assuming a white mask. By taking a different identity he asks to erase or hide his difference. Yet as Homi K. Bhabha wrote (in his introduction to Fanon’s book), it is an ambivalent act which actually means that “to be different from those that are different makes you the same.”³⁰¹ In *The Jazz Singer*, similarly, Jolson puts on a mask which makes him different from Jewish difference, and by that – as Rogin claimed, “washes himself white.”³⁰² Rogin argued that the use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* is a means of Jewish assimilation “achieved through the mask of the most segregated; the blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps the blacks fixed in place. By wiping out all difference except black and white, blackface turns Rabinowitz into Robin, but it does so by retaining the fundamental binary opposition.”³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Rogin, “Blackface”: 419.

²⁹⁸ Rogin, “Blackface”: 419.

²⁹⁹ Rogin, “Blackface”: 420.

³⁰⁰ Rogin, “Blackface”: 434.

³⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha, “Forward to the 1986 Edition”, In: Fanon, *Black Skin*: xxviii

³⁰² Rogin, “Blackface”: 440.

³⁰³ Rogin, “Blackface”: 440.

However, Jolson's mask is not entirely black and hence can also be seen as a sign of hybrid identity which is located in-between black and white. According to Gilman, Jewish "blackness" was indeed often considered as a sign of racial hybridity. As he wrote, "within the racial science of the late nineteenth century, being 'black' came to signify that the Jews had crossed racial boundaries. The boundaries of race were one of the most powerful social and political divisions evolved in the science of the period. It was held that the Jews, rather than being the purest race, were, because of their endogenous marriages, an impure race and therefore a potentially diseased one and that this impurity was written on their physiognomy... Jews had 'hybridized' with blacks in Alexandian exile... a 'bastard' race, the origins of which condition was caused by their incestuousness, their sexual selectivity."³⁰⁴ Jolson's blackface, seen in this context, is actually an expression of a Jewish "bastard" identity which transgresses the white-black binary opposition.

Rogin claimed that *The Jazz Singer* is as equally racist as *The Birth of a Nation* (although racist "with kindness"). Both films indeed portray whites (or Jews) in blackface, yet Jolson had no mockery in his performance. His blackface performance, carefully observed, does not seem to imitate a stereotypical black person, and indeed - according to Musser - black-American audience at the time did not perceive *The Jazz Singer* as racist. In fact, Musser claims, "In the late 1920s African American newspapers and moviegoers warmly embraced Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*",³⁰⁵ and Jolson was actually "the most popular Hollywood star among African Americans" at that time.³⁰⁶

While Rogin sees only exploitation of blackness as an intermediary identity used by the Jew to become white, *The Jazz Singer* actually stresses a deep connection between Jewishness and blackness. The film suggests a connection between Jews and blacks

³⁰⁴ Gilman, *Jewish Nose*: 370

³⁰⁵ Musser, "Al Jolson": 205.

³⁰⁶ Musser, "Al Jolson": 206. Musser further states that Jolson was active in promoting black musicians. For example, when Jolson was working on the musical comedy *Big Boy* (which opened 7 January 1925 at New York's Winter Garden) he insisted on hiring "an all colored combination of 10 musicians", and that "contrary to the usual arrangement the band will play on the stage and not in the pit." (208) According to Musser, there was a moment when Jolson was scheduled to star in Griffith's film *Be Yourself*, which became *His Darker Self* (1924). At some point, the entertainer realized he had made a mistake and resigned; and was subsequently sued by Griffith. As Musser writes, "the performer's readiness to stand up to the famed director, whose racial politics were well known among African Americans, was widely reported in the black press." (212)

(mythological as it may be) which comes from the innermost depth of the black and Jewish soul and which finds its expression through music – the Jewish tradition of singing during prayer and black jazz music – which collide, but also unite in the figure of the jazz singer.

Jack's blackface symbolizes the great distance Jack took from his family and tradition (to the point that his own mother cannot recognize him), yet the moment he puts on blackface for the first time, he expresses a yearning for his Jewish tradition and confesses to his lover that "There's something, after all, in my heart – maybe it's the call of the ages – the cry of my race." Paradoxically, only in blackface Jack feels the cry of his Jewish "race" (which can be understood also as the cry of both blacks and Jews and their respective histories of sufferings).

This cry is heard through Jolson's singing, "the cry in his voice," which is mentioned in the film as his unique voice signature and as the ingredient which makes him a striking jazz performer (indeed, jazz music, with all its upbeat tempo, often has a tendency to sound melancholic). This special cry is presented in the film as the cultural inheritance of both Jews and blacks, which aligns jazz music with the Jewish prayer. As the opening intertitles of the film state: "In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression – perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer."

The opening scene then shows the Jewish ghetto in New-York, "throbbing to that rhythm of music which is older than civilization." The Jewish ghetto is thus linked with the black ghetto, the Jewish diaspora with the black diaspora. Paul Gilroy claimed that these spaces/concepts historically connected Jews and blacks in the United States. Ghetto life and "the helplessness of the village community before the perpetual and unpredictable imminence of the lynching or the pogrom, the race riot" were well familiar for both groups.³⁰⁷ According to Gilroy, the Jewish experiences of dispersal indeed served as a model for comprehending the history of black Americans and that the concept of diaspora was in fact imported into Pan-African politics and black history from unacknowledged Jewish sources. As he wrote "It is often forgotten that the term 'diaspora' comes into the vocabulary of black studies and the practice of pan-Africanist politics from Jewish thought."³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 206.

³⁰⁸ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*: 205.

The Jazz Singer makes the link not just through social analogy (the exile, oppression and ghetto life), but through jazz music and rhythm which, according to the film, express an ancient prayer. In an argument with his father, Jack makes this point explicitly. When the father rejects Jack's musical career, Jack protests and tells him: "You taught me that music is the voice of God! It is as honorable to sing in the theatre as in the synagogue!" For Jack the theatre is not the opposite of the synagogue but a surrogate temple, just as jazz singing is a continuation of the cantor's work, which is to bring the voice of God to his congregation; and although Jack sings to a non-Jewish crowd, he insists to his father, "My songs mean as much to *my* audience as yours to *your* congregation!" In Jack's view (which the film embraces), jazz music is not against the old Jewish tradition but is actually a new expression of it in a new place and to a new congregation. Jack's blackface (which represents the face of jazz) is therefore not just a sign of rejection of the Jewish tradition, but - as Jack sees it - also a form of its re-adaptation.³⁰⁹

Jewish Jazz

Rogin acknowledged that "Jakie finds his voice through black music; Jack will succeed as a blackface singer. But if the movie insists on the black origins of jazz... it also wants the music to have Jewish roots, and so represents jazz as the link between Jews and America."³¹⁰ However, according to Rogin, the music played in the film is actually not jazz at all, but a white imitation of jazz that again silences blackness by the very same mask which pretends to represent it.

As he wrote, "The most obvious fact about *The Jazz Singer*, unmentioned in all the critical commentary, is that it contains no jazz. Al Jolson may have saved minstrelsy from extinction by giving it a syncopated beat, as Hoberman claims, but he rescued minstrelsy by blocking out jazz. The 'jazz' of the jazz age, to be sure, was not the music of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fletcher Henderson... As Amiri Baraka puts it, 'Jazz had rushed into the mainstream without so much as one black face.' Blackface did the work of black faces, standing not for what is now called jazz but for the

³⁰⁹ The idea that popular music is continuing the Jewish tradition outside of its traditional realms also appears in the next two versions of the film. In the 1952 version, the jazz singer appears as a sort of priest or rabbi of popular culture, and he is even called a "preacher" by his friends. As he sees it, his role is to praise God through show business, and so the lyrics of one of his central songs are "thank the Lord I'm living, living the life I love."

³¹⁰ Rogin, "Blackface": 434.

melting pot music of the jazz age.”³¹¹ According to Rogin Jews had a pivotal role in assimilating jazz into the American white culture. Citing John Tasker Howard who stated that jazz “has become a Jewish interpretation of the Negro,” Rogin argues that *The Jazz Singer* is symptomatic of the white takeover of jazz, mediated by and large by Jews.³¹²

However, from a musicological point of view, it is difficult to determine what jazz really is, as “jazz” is an umbrella term for diverse musical styles which are different from each other as Dixieland, bebop and free jazz. Perhaps the only common factor for the various styles that can be categorized as jazz is the use of improvisation. Although the music performed by Jolson is largely based on written scores, there are improvisational elements to it (for instance, when he plays the piano for his mother at his parents’ house), yet his music certainly lacks a jazzy “groove”.

At any rate, Jolson’s Jewishness should not be a factor in this assessment, for there are evidently many white jazz musicians (Chat Baker, Bill Evans, Stan Getz and others) and Jewish jazz musicians (Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, George Gershwin and others) who entered the jazz pantheon and proved that anybody can get the groove of jazz, which although of African-American ancestry, is not restricted to any racial origin. According to Michael Gerber, in a book dedicated to the participation of Jews in jazz (*Jazz Jews*), Jews in fact “have been heavily represented in Jazz, and closely associated with it.”³¹³ Jazz music, in any case, is a hybrid art form which emerged out of the encounter between African and Western music. It is what Gerber described in his book as “a coat of many colours, the dominant thread of which is black.”³¹⁴

Jazz is an art of improvisation which invites constant adaptations and interpretations, and hence an art form which is open for otherness by definition. Even if Jolson does not make “real” jazz, the character he plays in the film certainly follows the basic concept of jazz, which is to improvise on a given standard (usually well known musical composition). Just as jazz contains and appreciates the standard, while constantly redefining it and giving it new interpretations through improvisation, so does Jack preserve his Jewish tradition while

³¹¹ Rogin, “Blackface”: 447.

³¹² Rogin, “Blackface”: 437.

³¹³ Michael Garber, *Jazz Jews* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2009): 14

³¹⁴ Garber, *Jazz Jews*: 14.

redefining and adapting it to the new times.³¹⁵ For Jack, jazz becomes a new expression of the Jewish traditional prayer, just as many blacks in the United States saw it as a modern expression of their African roots.

While Rogin's criticism concerned the silencing of blacks by Jewish jazz, the association of Jews with jazz music was also a concern for white racists who detested both Jews and blacks. A prominent example was the American industrialist Henry Ford (founder of the Ford Motor Company), who, besides funding the printing of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the US, published his own anti-Semitic booklet in 1921 titled *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, a book which was as hateful towards Jews as it was towards blacks. Ford's book (which came out six years before the release of *The Jazz Singer*) contains a chapter titled "Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music", in which he charges Jews for corrupting white American culture through their musical collaboration with blacks, resulting in "a moron music rubbish" that he called "Yiddish jazz".³¹⁶

Ford described this music as "Monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love are camouflaged by a few feverish notes and admitted to homes where the thing itself, unaided by the piano, would be stamped out in horror." The stereotype of black primitive sexuality converges in Ford's text with the anti-Semitic notion of Jewish infiltration into Western culture in order to destroy it from within; in this case, through the moral and sexual corruption that jazz music supposedly transports to a white "civilized" audience.

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler expressed a similar view from a racial perspective, claiming that "it was the Jews who brought the Negro to the Rhine. The motive behind this is clear and his intention is always the same. He wants to destroy the hated white race through bastardization. He continues to bring negroes in as a flood and force the mixing of races. This corruption puts an end to white culture and political distinction and raises the Jew up to be its masters. A racially pure people, which is conscious of its blood, can never be defeated by the Jew. In this

³¹⁵ Ornette Coleman is contributed with the saying that "Jazz is the only music in which the same note can be played night after night but differently every time."

³¹⁶ Henry Ford, *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*
<https://ia801406.us.archive.org/16/items/TheInternationalJewTheWorldsForemostProblemhenryFord1920s/TheInternationalJewTheWorldsForemostProblemhenryFord1920s.pdf>

world, the Jew can only be the master of bastards. This is why he continually tries to lower the racial quality by poisoning the blood of individuals among the targeted peoples.”

While for Hitler Jewish bastardization was a problem of miscegenation, a cross-breeding of races which poisons the purity of the Aryan blood, for Ford the danger was cultural hybridization, harbored in America by “the passion of the Jew to make an alliance with the Negro.” Indeed, jazz music became immensely popular among whites in the United States, and the 1950s saw the rise of the hipster, a new hybrid figure which was considered back then as a “white Negro”.

The Jewish Hipster

The “white Negro” gained cultural awareness with Norman Mailer’s notorious essay from 1957 which established the white hipster as a new figure of rebellion against the conformity of “squares”.³¹⁷ As Mailer claimed, “one is Hip or one is Square... one is rebel or one is conformist...”³¹⁸ The source of the white hipster, according to Mailer, is the Negro - “for he has been living on the margins between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.”³¹⁹

The white hipster rebels against the established (white) order by adopting the marginal position of blacks. The characteristic hipster picked up black culture and life style including (first of all) playing and listening to jazz music, the use of marijuana, a specific dress code (typically with a broad-brimmed hat and a zoot-suit) and occasional acts of petty crime (although some hipsters had found ‘safe refuge in the upper income brackets,’ much like the current hipsters – who are actually mocked for their conformity).³²⁰ The hipster is the bastard offspring of a crossbreed wedding, and if marijuana was the wedding ring, wrote Mailer, “it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.”³²¹ Yet more than simply adopting black

³¹⁷ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro – Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (Published originally in *Dissent*, Fall 1957, reprinted in June 20, 2007): https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957

³¹⁸ Mailer, “White Negro”: 278.

³¹⁹ Mailer, “White Negro”: 278.

³²⁰ Mailer, “White Negro”: 276. The term “hipster” went through many transmutations since it was coined. During the jazz age, “hip” emerged as an adjective to describe aficionados of jazz and black culture. Initially, hipsters were usually middle-class white youths seeking to emulate the lifestyle of the black jazz musicians they followed and rebel against the conformism of American politics and culture; but in its current usage the term is used to describe quite the opposite, that is, someone who is pretentious, overly trendy or effete.

³²¹ Mailer, “White Negro”: 279.

culture and life style, Mailer saw the hipster as a person who was deeply transformed and “had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro.”³²²

According to Scott Saul, in the late 1940s white hipsters and “predominantly Jewish intellectuals” were indeed “attracted to jazz for the leverage it gave for a critique of culture at large.”³²³ Offbeat Jewish intellectuals and white hipsters found in jazz a subversive form of expression against the white hegemony, and were critiqued both by white supremacist and some blacks who defined jazz and “hipness itself as a black vernacular, something no ‘white Negro’ could capture.”³²⁴

Saul argues that the figure of the hipster was originated by Jews (as Ford suspected). Saul traces the history of the “white Negro” back to the Jewish authors Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe and their book *Really the Blues*, which was published in 1946 and told the story of a young Jewish man who “crossed the color line, backwards.”³²⁵ The book was a semi-autobiography of Mezzrow (whose birth name was Milton Mesirow), a writer and a jazz musician who (more than a decade before Mailer’s essay) “dedicated his entire adult life to a race and class masquerade.”³²⁶

Saul describes how Mezzrow’s career as a professional jazz musician and marijuana dealer swept him deep into the ghetto’s most segregated spaces and eventually lead to his imprisonment. Mezzrow appears as a real-life Zelig-like character, a Jewish chameleon who not only adapted black vernacular, black culture and music, but believed he was going through an actual physical transformation: “As he camouflaged himself in the black community, Mezzrow believed, he had soaked up not only the culture that sustained the blues but also some extra melanin as well. Mezzrow observed that he had physically become black - that his lips had become fuller, his hair had frizzed and thickened, and his skin had turned

³²² Mailer, “White Negro”: 279.

³²³ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t – Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005): 7.

³²⁴ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 7. Although Saul’s book refers to later developments in jazz music than the period of *The Jazz Singer*, namely the 1950s and 1960s BeBop and Hard Bop jazz, it nonetheless testifies to the evolution of jazz through Jewish collaboration.

³²⁵ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 20. According to Saul, the book was published while bebop was emerging as music of “studied dissonance and athletic improvisation,” charting “the progress of an older musical generation, the white ‘Austin High Gang,’ which emerged from a Chicago suburb in the late 1920s and championed New Orleans combo jazz through the swing era and into the forties.” (41)

³²⁶ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 41.

darker.”³²⁷ According to Saul, Mezzrow’s claims were not entirely a fruit of his imagination, noting that when Mezzrow was discharged from prison, he was classified as a “Negro” on his draft card.³²⁸

Despite their connection, there is a gap between the model of the Jewish-black chameleon figure presented by Al Jolson in the 1920s, and the later and much more radical development presented by Mezzrow in the late 1940s. While Jolson adopted black jazz music (or a variation of it) and put on a black mask that deliberately announced itself as a mask and thus declaring the racial masquerade in play, Mezzrow went much further in claiming to really becoming black. As co-writer Bernard Wolfe explained, Mezzrow believed “he had scrubbed himself clean, inside and out, of every last trace of his origins in the Jewish slums of Chicago, pulped himself back to raw human material, deposited that nameless jelly in the pure Negro mold, and pressed himself into the opposite of his birthright, a pure Black.”³²⁹

While Jolson’s blackface is clearly a mask, Mezzrow claimed he was really becoming black. Like many of his Jewish contemporaries, Jolson aspired to assimilate and be accepted in (predominantly white) American culture, while Mezzrow actively marginalized himself from the same culture. While Jolson’s character in *The Jazz Singer* plays with blackness but maintains its Jewishness, Mezzrow believed he “scrubbed himself clean” of his Jewish origins. As Saul remarks, citing critic Gayle Wald, Mezzrow’s story was “a conversion narrative about the impossibility of conversion.”³³⁰

Becoming-Jewish / Becoming-Black

Can a Jew or white really become black, or is it always only a matter of masquerade? The essentialist viewpoint claims that blackness is ultimately determined by a person’s complexion, although the “one-drop rule” suggests that a person can be “invisibly black”, that is, appear white but with “black blood” which equally determines him or her as black.³³¹ Like Jewishness, blackness can be seen as a culture or “race”, but while conversion to Judaism is open to non-Jews from any kind of ethnic background, the essentialist argument would be that blackness is a physical fact which cannot be altered by cultural conversion.

³²⁷ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 42.

³²⁸ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 42.

³²⁹ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 42.

³³⁰ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 22.

³³¹ The so-called “one-drop rule” which evolved over the course of the 19th century and which became prominent in the United States, asserts that any person with even one African ancestor (“one drop” of black blood) is considered to be black.

In contrast to the essentialist argument, Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming-black, just like becoming-Jewish, can be real processes and not just fantasies or acts of imitation. The difference between “becoming-Jew” and “becoming-black” and the imitation of a Jew or a black relates to the distinction Deleuze and Guattari make between the concept of “minoritarian” as a deterritorial process of becoming and “minority” which is an aggregate or a relatively stable state of identity. As they argue, one can belong to a minority group, but that doesn’t make one a minoritarian, which is a question of how to enter a becoming. In fact, they argue, “Even blacks, as the Black Panthers said, must become-black. Even women must become-women. Even Jews must become-Jewish (it certainly takes more than a state).”³³²

The concept of “becoming-Jewish” refers to both Jews and non-Jews for it describes a movement which bonds and transforms both: “A Jew becomes Jewish, but in a becoming-Jewish of the non-Jew.”³³³ Yet becoming-Jewish or becoming-black, when taken by Jews and blacks, paradoxically means a becoming other-than Jewish or black, as one leaves the stable aggregate of the minority to which one belongs to, and enters a becoming-imperceptible which is no longer perceived as a fixed identity in relation to the majority.

Jolson’s blackface can be viewed from both angles: on the one hand, Jolson seems to remain within the confines of minority politics of identity that is measured and fixed according to the standards of the white majority. Jolson’s blackface, from this perspective, is merely a fake mask, an imitation of a black person, while what he actually aspires to is to become white (and therefore, as Rogin claimed, his character in *The Jazz Singer* actually erases both Jewish and black identities). But on the other hand, Jolson’s blackface can be viewed as a becoming-black in a minoritarian sense of becoming-imperceptible. No longer identifiable as purely Jewish, black or white, Jolson becomes an imperceptible entity that is the movement of becoming itself. While Mezzrow’s claim of becoming-black seems at first more related to a real process of transformation or becoming, his essentialist discourse (“scraping himself clean” of Jewishness and becoming a “pure Negro”) actually falls back into the concept of minority as a fixed aggregate, which marks the very discourse of the (white) majority.

³³² Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*: 321.

³³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*: 322.

What puts both Jolson and Mezzrow on what Deleuze and Guattari call a “plane of flight” (minoritarian becoming), despite Jolson’s aspirations to assimilate and Mezzrow’s essentialism, is not Jolson’s blackface or Mezzrow’s supposed physical transformation, but their engagement with jazz music and the black vernacular known as “jive”.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, music contains a deterritorializing force which “always seems caught up in an indivisible becoming-child or becoming-animal.”³³⁴ Referring to Kafka’s stories they write: “What interests Kafka is a pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to *its own abolition* – a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words – a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying.”³³⁵ It isn’t the systemized aspect of music, a musical form, composed and shaped, but rather a pure sonorous material which opens up a deterritorialization.

Jazz music relies on composed standards but it often produces such sonorous “blocks of becoming” through the act of improvisation, for example, the cries of John Coltrane’s saxophone or the screams of Charles Mingus which “evoke abandon and humility, imposition and self-denial.”³³⁶ These pure sonorous materials (which Ford mocked as “monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts, squeaks and gasps”) are related to a becoming-animal not because they resemble animal sounds (although they might), but because they escape the signification of the musical structure and composition and open up the composed standard to a process of deterritorialization. According to Deleuze and Guattari, one does not become an animal by imitating an animal, but by getting into a “proximity” to an animal, in this case “through voice and through sound and through a style that one becomes an animal.”³³⁷

Whether Al Jolson’s music can be technically defined as jazz or not, the famous cry in his voice certainly relates to the deterritorial aspects of jazz. It is a cry which comes out of the depth of both Jewishness and blackness, but has no signification in a specific identity. According to Rogin, when Jolson sings in blackface he is becoming childish because he

³³⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka – Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 5.

³³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*: 6.

³³⁶ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 1.

³³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*: 7.

imitates a naïve and infantile black man, but from a Deleuzian perspective, Jolson is becoming-child (and becoming-black and becoming-Jewish) precisely because his cry produces a plane of becoming that escapes the plane of composition and its signification.

“Everywhere, organized music is traversed by a line of abolition,” wrote Deleuze and Guattari, ‘just as language of sense is traversed by a line of escape – in order to liberate a living and expressive material that speaks for itself and has no need of being put into a form.’³³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari take Kafka as the point of connection between the deterritorializing force of music and what they call ‘minor literature’ and the minoritarian use of language. They consider Kafka as a prominent example of minor literature, although he decided to write not in Yiddish, the language of the Jewish minority in Prague, but in German, the non-Jewish majoritarian language par excellence. As they explain, “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.”³³⁹ There is a chameleon Jewish element to minor literature, certainly in Kafka, who “infiltrates” German in order to abolish it from within and liberate an expression of becoming that cannot be put into a formed identity.

Black-American vernacular, or jive, is another example: it is not another language than American English, yet within this major language it creates a minoritarian form of expression. Deleuze and Guattari characterize minor literature not only as a language that “is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization,” but also as a language that makes everything political, since everything in it takes a collective value.³⁴⁰ For Mezzrow, who was a jazz musician and a writer, it was certainly a political language of subversion, a sort of colonial mimicry which undermined the dominant white discourse, used by disempowered blacks: “Deny the Negro the culture of the land? O.K. He’ll brew his own culture - on the street corner. Lock him out from the seats of higher learning? He pays it no nevermind - he’ll dream up his own professional doubletalk, from the professions that are open to him, the professions of musician, entertainer, maid, butler, tap-dancer... The hipster stays conscious of the fraud of language. Where many of ofays will hold forth pompously, like they had The Word, the Negro mimics them sarcastically.”³⁴¹

³³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*: 21.

³³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*: 16.

³⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*: 16.

³⁴¹ Saul, *Freedom Is*: 43.

Saul tells how for Mezzrow, “jive was a “professional” idiom, a language that helped entertainers, porters, and maids comment on the white world that they had to defer to: it reflected high culture’s esteem for technical expertise even as it converted its own expertise into a form of doubletalk. As doubletalk, jive was meant to accomplish two ends: to nod to high culture, then to establish an alternate kind of knowledge, one based in worldly experience.”³⁴² More than fashionable street talk, black jive was for Mezzrow a political weapon which introduced a double-talk that subverted the very same white language it mimicked.

According to Rogin, the “interracial double” in *The Jazz Singer* “is not the exotic other but the split self.”³⁴³ Black otherness is mimicked but in fact the black man and woman are silenced, “retaining the fundamental binary opposition” between black and white, while silencing Jewish otherness on the way.³⁴⁴ However, Jolson’s blackface can be seen as affecting a reverse path akin to the colonial mimicry introduced by Fanon’s. It suggests a split in Jewish identity, and it also functions to insert doubt to the dominant discourse which relies on fixed identities whatever they may be - white majority or the black/Jewish minorities. Just like the double-talk of jive, or the cry of jazz, it creates uncertainty and subversion which threaten to abolish the language of signification.

The main threat that the Jewish chameleon posed for Ford, Hitler and others was the bastardization of race and culture – the inability to determine one identity from the other. Homi K. Bhabha argued in his introduction to Fanon’s book that “In occupying two places at once—or three in Fanon’s case—the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally, difficult to place.”³⁴⁵ According to Bhabha this ambivalence can become a political weapon against colonialism, or any other discourse which seeks to allocate social divisions according to racial hierarchy. Indeed, the jazz singer’s racial masquerade which “crosses the color line” maintains racial and cultural confusion which in later cases of Jewish-black hybrid figures turns into a strategy of political subversion.

³⁴² Saul, *Freedom Is*: 43.

³⁴³ Rogin, “Blackface”: 419.

³⁴⁴ Rogin, “Blackface”: 440.

³⁴⁵ Bhabha, “Introduction”: xxxiv

Chapter 7

Jigga Jews

The Jazz Singer presented the first Jewish-black chameleon figure in cinema, but the blackfaced Jakie Rabinowitz was also the last of his kind for decades to come. The “white-Negro” had become well known in American culture since the 1950s, but the Jewish origins of this phenomenon (which started with Jewish hipsters such as Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe) were almost forgotten.³⁴⁶ It was only in the last decade that the Jewish-black chameleon figure came back on screen with the film *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2003), and with more extensive exposure in the immensely popular TV and cinema persona of Ali G, played by the Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. These contemporary “Jiggas” subvert the derogatory association of the term and present their Jewish-blackness as a source of mockery and empowerment.³⁴⁷

The first generations of Jewish immigrants to the United States aspired to assimilate and hence muted down their racial or ethnic differences from hegemonic white America. Associating with the black minority whose difference could not be so easily hidden (as it is literally “written on their face”) was therefore counterproductive. *The Jazz Singer* was an exception that pointed to the rule, a moment which made Jewish difference more visible via association with blackness – but as Rogin claimed, it was in order to eventually disavow the differences of Jewish identity and to assimilation into white culture.

Indeed, in the later version of *The Jazz Singer* from 1952 Jews are barely differentiated from white gentiles. Citing David Bial, Nathan Abrams argues that “This was not a ‘simple invisibility’ but an ‘active vanishing, a selective approach to visibility that is consistent with the everyday behavior exhibited by the majority of American Jews during the

³⁴⁶ Many white rock n’ roll musicians in the United States and Britain – such as Elvis, the Beatles and Led Zeppelin - have adopted black music. Eminem is a more contemporary example of a white hip-hop musician who became immensely successful among white and black fans alike. Hip-hop in general has moved from the black underground to become a dominant mainstream music; and it includes some Jewish performers such as the Beastie Boys, Matisyahu, Remedy (the Jewish member of The Wu Tang Clan), Nissim Baruch Black (a.k.a. D. Black) and others.

³⁴⁷ “Jigga” or “Jigger” is often used as a derogatory slur, meaning a “Jewish nigger”. The term originated from the word “wigger” (“white nigger”) and is a specifically Jewish take on the general phenomena of black culture adopted by mainstream popular culture. It can be used as a racial slur, and sometimes by blacks to denote a “fake nigger”, a wannabe (such as Vanilla Ice). However, the term can be also used as a subversive play on identities, asserting power from cultural performance and turning stereotypes upsidedown.

1940s and 1950s’.”³⁴⁸ According to Abrams it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Jewish American filmmakers “began making films that explored Jewish self-definition,”³⁴⁹ dubbing it as the first big “coming out” of Jewishness on screen.³⁵⁰ As Abrams argues, this period “represented an extraordinary and unprecedented flowering of overt, complex, stereotype-confronting exercises in Jewish representation that marked a ‘new acceptance of the textures of idiosyncrasies of Jewishness’ (Rosenberg 1996:24).”³⁵¹ This movement became, according to Abrams, “the hallmark of the post 1990s period.”³⁵²

After *The Jazz Singer*, as the generations passed, and Jews in America felt more secure and confident in their identity, Jews reemerged on screen, followed by the return of Jewish-black chameleon figures such as the *Hebrew Hammer* and Ali G who were not afraid to show, and in fact celebrate, their cultural/ethnic/religious differences, and played with stereotypes that have explosive potential. The “coming out” of Jewishness on screen in the 1960’s and 1970s, and the rise of black power movements in the 1970s with increasing visibility of blacks on the American screen, led to the return of the controversial Jewish-black chameleon figure. A key figure in this development was the Jewish film director Ralph Bakshi, whose animation movies mark a crucial link between Jolson’s blackface and the contemporary figures of the Hebrew Hammer and Ali G.

Although Bakshi did not make any film featuring an explicit Jewish-black chameleon figure, his notorious animation films often dealt with Jews, blacks, and their relationship in the United States. His semi-autobiographical film *Heavy Traffic* (1973) told the story of a love relationship between a young Jewish cartoonist (who probably represents Bakshi) and a black woman. His infamous *Coonskin* (1975), which dealt with the organized crime racket in Harlem, was marketed as the first animated blaxploitation film.³⁵³ *American Pop* (1981) explores four generations of a Russian Jewish immigrant family of musicians whose careers parallel the history of American popular music. *Wizards* (1977) was according to Bakshi

³⁴⁸ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 5.

³⁴⁹ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 6.

³⁵⁰ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 7.

³⁵¹ Abrams, *The New Jew*: 6.

³⁵² Abrams, *The New Jew*: 6.

³⁵³ David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch and Chris Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009). The authors report that *Coonskin* received negative press which accused the film of being racist. Because of that, it “was picketed and even boycotted. As a result, Paramount Pictures dropped the film, and its theatrical run was limited. But the film wasn’t really racist, and the passing of time has gained this once notorious film a fine reputation. Today, *Coonskin* is seen as one of Bakshi’s finest and most daring films.” (2)

“about the creation of the State of Israel and the Holocaust, about the Jews looking for a homeland, and about the fact that fascism was on the rise again.”³⁵⁴ The one film Bakshi had made about white mimicry of blacks (which included some Jewish themes) was actually a film about a cat. *Fritz the Cat* (1972), Bakshi’s first feature film, explored the motivation of the 1970s hipster to become a “white Negro” and asks if such a “crossing of the color line” is even possible at all?

Fritz the Cat

Fritz the Cat gained notoriety for being the first animated film to receive an X rating in the United States.³⁵⁵ The film established Bakshi’s signature style of presenting crass, and even gross images, provocative and uncompromising politics, and high doses of violence, sex and drugs (which seem to influence the psychedelic aesthetics of his films no less than their contents). Originally an underground comic by Robert Crumb, *Fritz the Cat* became in Bakshi’s hands a representative of the 1970s hipster. Fritz is a politically subversive cat that aspires to become a crow - or stripped from the allegorical animal disguises – a white who desires to become black. While criticizing the trend of white adaptation of black culture, the film also endorses it with its use of black music (mainly jazz, but also funk and soul) and a generally funky attitude. Bakshi himself, in this sense, was a Jewish chameleon who dealt with Jewish subjects through the use of “black” forms of expression.

There isn’t much of a narrative to *Fritz the Cat*, which basically follows Fritz’s random adventures, sexual exploits, drug experiences and political upheavals through a series of episodes in which he encounters hippie students, black/crow thugs, a Nazi rabbit and some pig cops (policemen are literally portrayed as pigs). Fritz’s story begins as a student of NYU who rejects the intellectual ivory tower of the academia. He burns his books and study material (accidentally setting fire to the whole building) and embarks on a journey to explore life in its fullest (which for him means getting as much sex and drugs as possible).

A film which marks the shift from the 1960s to the 1970s, Fritz is a sort of hippie with quasi revolutionary tendencies modeled after the ideas of the Black Panthers and other militant movements of the 1970s. Yet the film exposes Fritz’s ideological claims as

³⁵⁴ Jeff Lenburg, *Who's who in Animated Cartoons* (New York: Applause Books, 2006): 15.

³⁵⁵ Walker, Rausch and Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*: 1.

hypocritical. In Harlem Fritz decides to become a revolutionary and starts speaking against capitalism and the oppression of the proletariat. His speech ignites the crowd until a riot breaks out. Fritz managed to escape the violence, but his black/crow friend gets shot by the police while trying to protect him. Fritz's "revolution" ends with the death of his friend, while the military bombs Harlem into ruins.

Fritz becomes a fugitive of the law. Roaming the roads, he meets a neo-Nazi rabbit and a group of terrorists who plot to blow up a power station. Too late, Fritz realizes this was not the revolution he sought for. He tries to disarm the bombs but they explode with him sitting at the top of the power plant. However, as a cartoon figure, Fritz can endure mortal damage and he survives the explosion. At hospital, guarded by police, he is visited by female fans, whom he immediately tries to seduce for sex.

Fritz the Cat raises two main questions that are relevant here and in the previous chapter. First, why aspire to be black? What is the motivation for a privileged white (cat) to affiliate with an impoverished and oppressed minority? Second, beyond the question of motivation, the film questions if such a cross-over is even possible: Can a white or a Jew become black by adopting black culture, vernacular and politics, or is it a mere fantasy which in reality is just as impossible as a cat turning into a crow?

In *The Jazz Singer*, one of the more obvious reasons for Jolson's appearance in blackface is that he was (supposedly) making jazz music, which originated from Afro-Americans. Although there are no blacks in the film and Jolson performs his "jazz" songs in front of predominantly white audiences, the film acknowledges the black origins of jazz. Although blacks in the United States were oppressed, they held a great cultural power and hence were considered by figures such as Mailer, Mezzrow and others as "hip". Similarly, although *Fritz the Cat* presents the poverty of blacks in the Harlem ghetto, anti-black racism and oppression, it associates blackness with hip or cool culture, which is even more appealing to a rebellious young man (or cat) who aspires to align himself with the oppressed. Yet *Fritz the Cat* adds another motivation which does not appear in *The Jazz Singer* or in the accounts of the late 40s and 50s hipsters. In this film black men represent not only a cultural model of hipness or coolness, but also an improved model of masculinity, one that women find highly attractive.

The film begins with Fritz and a few of his friends as they try to impress some “white girls” (who are actually anthropomorphic animals) with their guitar playing. However, despite their ruckus, the “girls” don’t notice Fritz’s group, and instead go to the indifferent black crow which just stands there without trying to impress anybody. These educated middle class white (and apparently one Jewish) “girls” address the black crow with their superficial ideas about black men, trying to impress and seduce him with positive stereotypes which barely hide another set of prejudices: “Black kids are so much groovier”; “I went to a couple of Black Panthers meetings”; “I’m taking a course in African studies at school. I had no idea you people are so civilized”; “Freud didn’t write for the black man”; “Black is beautiful”; “I had a black girlfriend once who said that Jewish people were the closest to black people. I’m Jewish, you know.” Much to the “girls’” disappointment, the crow is revealed to be gay, and he dismisses their “empowering” stereotypes, saying “I ain’t no jive- ass black nigger, honey. Who do you think I am? Geraldine?”

The “girls’” reactions to the black crow demonstrate the change that the image of the black man underwent in American popular culture in the 70s. He came to be seen not only as hip or a cool subversive cultural figure, but also as a more attractive model of masculinity. Fritz’s desire to be a crow/black is therefore not only a cultural and political issue of a white hipster who seeks to emulate the coolness of black culture and take a subversive stand against the predominating norms, but also (and perhaps mainly), Fritz seeks to be black in order to become more attractive to women. The idea that black men are more masculine than white men, or conversely, that white men are less manly, appears most explicitly when Fritz is seduced by a large black crow/woman: when the moment of consummation arrives, the woman/crow looks at Fritz’s genitals, laughs and says ‘you’re not black enough’, suggesting that Fritz’s masculinity as a white/cat is inadequate in comparison with a black/crow (but eventually Fritz gets her consent).

The image of the black man is quite different in *The Jazz Singer*. In blackface, it seems that Jolson’s character regresses to an infant state (in blackface, he often sings songs for his “mammy”). As Rogin observed, “the aggressive, self-confident Jack Robin (at Coffee Dan’s and in the love scene with his mother) is feminized in blackface. He plays not the black sexual menace of reconstruction, progressive, and *Birth of a Nation* fantasy, but the child Negro of the restored 1920s plantation myth.”³⁵⁶ Leaving aside the question of whether Jolson

³⁵⁶ Rogin, “Blackface”: 442.

is performing a stereotype (I disagree with Rogin on this point), Jolson's appearance in blackface indeed turns him to a more feminine and childish figure (which I think is more related to his position as the other of everything the patriarchal father represents). In contrast, Fritz the cat (as the Jewish-black chameleon figures to come), aspires to be black as a way to become manlier. As Jewish men were historically depicted as feminine, becoming black seems to provide access to a denied masculinity.

Once the motivation to cross the color line is better understood, the question remains, is it even possible? Bakshi's approach is double sided: on the one hand, as a filmmaker who made "black films" and supported the black minority in the United States, he himself can be described as a Jewish-black chameleon figure. On the other hand, Bakshi was mocking white "wannabes" who pretend to understand and even take the position of blacks, and although he made the first blaxploitation animated film, he exposed the hypocrisy of privileged whites who presume to speak for the black minority. Fritz's revolutionary speech in Harlem therefore ends with many black casualties, while Fritz himself escapes to continue his adventures.

In the context of Norman Mailer's "white-Negro" and the American hipster phenomenon, Fritz imagines that being a crow will give him the freedom to escape from the constraints of "squareness". As Fritz says in a conversation with his black/crow friend, "I wish I was a crow. If I was a crow, I'd fly away, man." But Fritz is confronted by his friend who tells him that being a crow is not "a big motherfucking ball." Fritz replies that he "studied the race problems" and therefore he knows. Yet Fritz's friend insists that "you got to be a crow to know about the race problem."

The argument that you need to be a crow to understand crows implies that the color line cannot really be crossed. Bakshi's depiction of different races as different animals makes this point clearer. White, black, Jewish or any other human identity is to a great extent a flexible and changeable concept that is determined within culture, while animals are situated in a much more rigid natural order. While black, white and Jew are all part of the same human species, crows and cats are two very different species. It is arguable whether a white man can become black (or a hybrid third category comprised of both), but a cat can certainly not become a crow.

Usually when different races are allegorized as different animals, it is done in the context of essentialism and racism, but this is not the case with *Fritz the Cat*. Bahshi's humanoid animals might seem to make an essentialist argument that whites or Jews cannot become blacks as cats cannot become crows. Yet a more careful look shows that Bakshi's use of animals is not essentialist, but a function of culture and subject positions. For example, as mentioned above, all the cops in the film are portrayed as pigs. One of them, surprisingly, is Jewish. When two police-pigs are chasing Fritz into a synagogue, the Jewish pig becomes upset with the other police-pig since he is desecrating the place as a non-Jew. Nature in this case is irrelevant: a pig can be Jew or gentile since whoever enters the *position* of a policeman is a pig (even a Jew, for whom this animal symbolizes the ultimate otherness). In other words, the film shows a non essential approach to its animal characterization. Cops are not pigs because of their nature, race, or essence, but because of their occupation; and if a Jew can be a pig, so can Fritz become a crow.



Figure 15 A Jewish police-pig dancing in the synagogue.

The contemporary black-Jewish chameleon figures Hebrew Hammer and (especially) Ali G follow the example set by Bakshi in their intentionally offensive play with stereotypes as a form of empowerment. However, these “Jiggas” belong to a postmodern world where identities and representations of identities are far more mixed and ambivalent.

The Hebrew Hammer

74 years passed from when *The Jazz Singer* presented a Jewish black-faced figure until a Jewish-black chameleon appeared on the screen again with the comedy film *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2003). This was the first film (and so far – the last) to ever

cross-mix Jewish characters and themes with a “black genre”.³⁵⁷ Marketed as the first “Jewsploitation” film, the movie is a Jewish take on the blaxploitation genre, served as a Hanukkah flick which avenges the absence of Jews (and blacks) from traditional Christmas films.

The film begins with a childhood trauma which turns a soft, mild mannered Jewish-Haredi (orthodox) boy into a tough private detective, a “certified, circumcised Dick” who goes by the name Hebrew Hammer (played by Adam Goldberg). It is Hanukkah and Christmas time (these Jewish and Christian holydays often overlap). Mordechai Jefferson Carver is the only Jewish *Haredi* boy in “Saint Peter, Paul and Mary” Public Elementary school, located in a gothic building with a big crucified Jesus statue at the entrance. Mordechai enters the menacing building and is greeted with anti-Semitic mockery by the other kids in the school (they drop pennies on the floor for the greedy Jew to pick up; ask him if he wants a bagel; and one girl declares that if Jews don’t wise up and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord savior, they are all going to burn in hell). Mordechai goes to play with his Hanukkah *dreidel* (a four-sided spinning top, played with during Hanukkah), looking gray and solemn, while the other kids are celebrating Christmas with shiny colorful presents.

The kids poke fun at Mordechai until the teacher intervenes and explains to the kids the importance of tolerance, without being aware of her own patronizing (if not bluntly racist) discourse: ‘Just because Mordechai’s people are different from us, and just because they may appear strange to us with their furry hat, beady eyes and long sideburns... not to mention their bizarre customs and funny names. Just because they control all the world’s money... yet they are too cheap to buy their children anything better than spinning tops for presents – does not mean that we can’t learn to love and respect them as our equals. Happy Chanuyaka Mordi!’

Out in the street, Mordechai looks at the decorated Christmas display windows of the shops, which all have signs to keep Jews out and (reminiscent of Nazi Germany). Depressed Mordechai eventually sits down in an alley and finds comfort in spinning his *dreidel* - until a Santa Claus figure appears and smashes the *dreidel* with his boot, laughs his famous “ho ho ho” and sticks up his middle finger to Mordechai.

³⁵⁷ A sequel, *The Hebrew Hammer vs. Hitler* is currently in development.

Mordechai is filled with rage as an adaptation of the theme song from *Shaft* (Gordon Parks' famous blaxploitation film from 1971 about a cool black private eye) plays in the background to the Jewishly modified lyrics: "who is the kike who won't cop out when there are Gentiles all around? (Hammer!) He's a complicated Jew, and no one understands him but his mother."³⁵⁸ The film then cuts to Mordechai as a grown man who looks like a combination between a Jewish-*Haredi* man and a gangster from a blaxploitation film (bearded, wearing typical black *Haredi* clothes and hat, with a long leather jacket, sun glasses and a big "Chai" golden chain).

Mordechai walks the streets of the Jewish "chood" in New York as the theme song still plays on the background until he encounters some gentile kids who bully a young Jewish kid. Mordechai scares them away and tells the kid (appropriating Black power discourse to "Jew Power"): "Be proud of who you are. You're a bad, bold, big nose biblical brother... and Shlomo - stay Jewish!"

Meantime in the North Pole, political tension is rising at the Santa Claus' mansion. Apparently, different generations of the Santa Claus family had different attitudes towards minorities and Jews in particular. While the current Santa Claus has no prejudice towards minorities, his son and heir Damian is an anti-Semitic evildoer. When Damian murders his father and takes over his place it means bad news for Jews this Christmas.

The "Jewish Justice League", residing in a Pentagon-like structure (but in the six-pointed star shape of the Star of David), is discussing the threat by the new 'Anti-Semitic psycho Santa'. The leader of the group, with the impossible name Chief Bloomenbergensteinenthalin, in khaki uniform and with one eye covered in a black eye patch (referencing Israeli General Moshe Dayan), explains the situation as a threat on Hanukkah and declares 'We need a tough Jew for this one.' The Hebrew Hammer is declared to be the most suitable man to take on the task.

³⁵⁸ The lyrics of the original song by Isaac Hayes go as follows: "Who's the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks? (Shaft!) Who is the man that would risk his neck for his brother man? (Shaft!) Who's the cat that won't cop out when there's danger all about? (Shaft!) He's a complicated man but no one understands him but his woman..."

As the evil Damian Claus threatens not only Jews but blacks as well, the “Kwanzaa Liberation Front” and their leader, Mohammed Ali Paula Abdul Rahim (played by Mario Van Peebles), join forces with the Hebrew Hammer. The “Kwanzaa Liberation Front” is modeled after the Black Panthers, including a 1970s dress code, Afros and a militant discourse against the white man (although their main goal seems to be mainly the liberation of Kwanzaa, the African-American alternative to Christmas).

Meanwhile, Damian Claus finds ‘the most Jewish pride weakening substance known to man’: Frank Capra’s 1946 Christmas film *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Santa’s helpers distribute copies of the all-white Christmas movie to Jewish kids while Marvin Gaye’s song “Pusher Man” is played in the background. The Jewish kids who get exposed to the film are indeed affected. Some question their Judaism, while others bring Christmas trees to their homes. Mordechai meets the boy Shlomo again and sees that his Jewishness has been weakened by the video. He gives Shlomo an antidote – a copy of *The Chosen* (Jeremy Kagan’s film from 1981 based on a novel by Chaim Potok), which indeed helps Shlomo to recover. Mordechai then calls the Chief of the JJJ and asks for an immediate supply of ‘every Hollywood movie ever made featuring a positive Jewish protagonist.’ The Chief concurs and sends copies of all three: *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, 1971), *The Chosen* (Jeremy Kagan, 1981) and *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983).

Since his original plan was interfered with, Damian Claus devises a new one: to sabotage the “Jewish atomic clock” which is located in Jerusalem and keeps the time of the Jewish holydays worldwide. The device is run by a fluid substance called “Judeium”, which gives it its energy. Damian’s plan is to steal the Judeium and thus stop Hanukkah from occurring. In Jerusalem, only two Haredi men are guarding the clock. Damian and his helpers easily take them down and extract the Judeium out of the clock. Mordechai and his girlfriend Esther Bloomenbergensteinenthal (JJJ Chief’s daughter, played by Judy Greer) arrive in Jerusalem to stop Damian but as the *Shabat* (the seventh day of rest) enters they fall into automatic inactive mode and Damian wins the day.

The battle is lost but the war is not over. Mordechai and Mohammed attack Damian’s fortress to retrieve the Judeium. Despite triggering the “stereotype alarm system”, they eventually defeat the evil Santa. In a good Jewish ending Mordechai marries Esther (‘you made my mother and me very happy’ he tells her), and a former Santa helper, a black dwarf

named Jamal, is nominated to be the new Santa Claus. Jamal Santa ends the film with final words of blessing: “Happy Christmas Niggers, and a happy Jew-year!”



Figure 16 Adam Goldberg as the Hebrew Hammer.

The war between the Hebrew Hammer and Damian Claus is fought on the battlefield of cinema and cinematic representations. When Damian attempts to weaken the sense of pride among Jewish kids, he does so by distributing to them copies of *It's a Wonderful Life*, while the Hammer retaliates by handing out Hollywood movies that feature a positive Jewish protagonist. Yet only three such examples are found. *The Hebrew Hammer* addresses the marginalization of Jews in Christmas films and the scarcity of Jewish heroes in American cinema more widely. Specifically, it points to the relative absence of tough, Jewish, male role models on the American screen. The figure of the Hammer, who is modeled on cool and sexy blaxploitation heroes such as Shaft, comes to fill in this gap and to do for Jews what blaxploitation did for blacks.

The blaxploitation period, spanning roughly from 1970 to the mid 70s, fulfilled African-American filmgoers' desire to see black actors and actresses in leading roles. For the first time in American cinema (and arguably for the first time since the invention of motion pictures), “there were finally larger-than-life black heroes who saved the day, often by standing up to the dominant oppressor (a.k.a. whitey).”³⁵⁹ The film's own brew of “Jewsploitation” asks to modify blaxploitation's Black Power ideology to Jew Power ideology; and to correct the image of the “sissy” Jew, the stereotypical wimpy, physically incompetent and weak Ashkenazi (central and eastern European) Jewish male of

³⁵⁹ Walker, Rausch and Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*: ix.

the diaspora, by offering its own brand of “tough Jew” modelled after the rough and proudly black heroes of blaxploitation films.

Blaxploitation, as the name suggests (black-exploitation), is an ambiguous genre which changed how black men and women were portrayed in films. However, it replaced the old negative stereotypes of blacks with no less problematic figures of black drug dealers, pimps, hardened criminals and other social outcasts which the genre celebrated as cool pop-culture icons. According to Walker, Rause and Watson, “The new images were initially a welcomed change for black audiences, and the studios were more than happy to be making money, but the constant barrage of morally ambiguous anti-heroes soon led to a backlash.”³⁶⁰ While many black viewers at the time felt they got the heroes they needed, “community leaders, like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], were afraid that the kinds of stereotyping in which these films indulged could ultimately do more harm than good to black communities.”³⁶¹

Was blaxploitation fighting old stereotypes or inventing new ones? Was it cinema of and for blacks, or films which exploited blacks?³⁶² The blaxploitation star Fred Williamson argued in the documentary film *Baadasssss Cinema* (Isaac Julien, 2012) that the fusion of “black” and “exploitation” was in fact a political manoeuvre designed to discredit these ‘vernacular’ films in favour of greater political autonomy for the middle-classes.³⁶³

According to Mikel J. Koven, the term “exploitation” refers to the marketing of the films, i.e., the use of sensational stories and characters for their publicity value. “So in these Blaxploitation films drug use is ubiquitous. Blaxploitation films also exploit the sex industry

³⁶⁰ Walker, Rausch and Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*: ix.

³⁶¹ Walker, Rausch and Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*: 8.

³⁶² According to Jesse Rhines (Black Film/White Money) Blaxploitation cinema was dominated by white money. ‘Much more often than not, whites were in control behind the camera reproducing their own point of view. In fact, of the hundred or so films featuring significant numbers of African-American characters and/or an African-American-derived storyline and produced during the Blaxploitation period, roughly 1970 through 1974, fewer than one-fifth were under African-American control. Even fewer came from black-owned production houses and fewer still were financed and/or distributed by African-Americans.’ Cited in: Mikel J. Koven, *Blaxploitation Films* (Oldcastle Books, 2010): 7.

³⁶³ The actor recalls: “NAACP and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] – they’re the ones who created this terminology: black exploitation. That has to be clear, on the record. It came from them. It didn’t come from the white press. Who was being exploited? All the black actors were getting paid. They had a job. They were going to work. The audience wasn’t being exploited. They were getting to see things on their screen they’d longed for.” In: Koven, *Blaxploitation Films*: 3.

(prostitutes, pimps and bordellos). In many of these films we see the industrial side to drugs and prostitution in great detail. This potentially gives audiences an education in how the whole illegal system operates.”³⁶⁴ In other words, blaxploitation films exploited drugs, sex and crime, but these themes had also a subversive function of revealing larger mechanisms of social oppression imposed by a racist system.

The Hebrew Hammer is a Hanukkah flick, but it also relates to *Purim*, a Jewish holy day of masquerade and a celebration of reversing power relations. The names of Mordechai and his girlfriend Ester allude to the main protagonists of the Biblical text *The Scroll of Ester* in which Haman – the first anti-Semite to appear in text - points the Jews to king Achashverosh as different people that should be exterminated.³⁶⁵ The Jewish minority in the story triumph against all odds thanks to Mordechai and especially Ester, who infiltrates the palace and marries the king while hiding her Jewish identity.

The holy day of *Purim* is therefore a day of Jewish masquerade celebrated by putting on masks and costumes and getting drunk until one “cannot tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai”, that is, until the bad and the good, the strong and the weak, get completely mixed up. In *The Hebrew Hammer* adaptation of the story, Damian, the anti-Semitic Santa, represents the evil Haman; while Mordechai and Ester are Jewish characters that masquerade (in the spirit of the *Purim* festival) as blaxploitation heroes who overturn the power relations, just like the original Mordechai and Ester.

The Hebrew Hammer emulates blaxploitation’s morally ambiguous and exploitative use of black stereotypes by celebrating Jewish stereotypes and using anti-Semitic discourse as vernacular of Jewish Power. Although the Hammer is more clearly a positive hero than say Priest, the cocaine dealer from *Super Fly*, the film rejoices in its protagonist’s stereotypical characteristics (having a big nose, dominating mother issues and a weakness for bagels) and uses words like “kike” (usually considered to be a derogatory slur) as a positive term. Taking its cue from the blaxploitation genre, Hammer is an unapologetic ‘bold, big nose biblical brother’ which celebrates the very same stereotypes that Jews attempted to remove out of sight for many decades.

³⁶⁴ Koven, *Blaxploitation Films*: 5

³⁶⁵ On *The Scroll of Ester* see note 1 in chapter 3.

When the Hammer and Mohammed observe Damian's fortress with binoculars, the image is framed by a Star of David shape in Hammer's binoculars and by the shape of the African continent in Mohammed's binoculars – to suggest that the issue is not just the image itself and whether it is positive or negative, but how it is represented or seen. The blaxploitation tactics that the *The Hebrew Hammer* uses keeps the stereotypical image, but by changing the viewpoint it make its value seen in a completely different way. The Hammer and Mohammed are therefore comfortable in calling each other “kike” and “Nigger”, since from a Jewish/black perspective these derogatory slurs become positive terms.

In *The Jazz Singer*, Jolson's performance in blackface correlates to his movement outside the Jewish home and tradition - as the makers of the film strived to assimilate into white American culture. In contrast, the mix of Jewishness and blackness in *The Hebrew Hammer* enhances and even celebrates Jewish difference - as the film came out at a post-assimilation era when Jews are no longer cautious to show their difference in broad daylight. Therefore, while in *The Jazz Singer* Jacky is dating a *shikse* which helps him to climb up the social scale and out of the Jewish community, in *The Hebrew Hammer*, Hammer strictly avoids the *shiksese* who try to seduce him and he marries a Jewish woman. The motivation to become or perform as black also changed drastically. *The Hebrew Hammer* is influenced by the way the black man was presented in the cinema of the 1970s. *Fritz the Cat* showed how the black man came to be perceived by non-blacks as more manly, tough and sexually attractive; and blaxploitation cinema further magnified (and exploited) this perception.

Although the Hammer retains some stereotypically “non-masculine” Jewish characteristics (he is neurotic, allergic and obsessed with his mother), to a larger extent he comes to replace the image of the “sissy Jew” with an image of a super-masculine “tough Jew”. This gender transformation is achieved through the “Jewsplotation” cross-mix of a Haredi Jew with a blaxploitation hero which creates a new model of Jewish masculinity: a cool, tough Jew that intimidates men and is an object of desire for women (the nickname “Hammer”, it is implied, relates to the size of his penis).

In *The Jazz Singer*, blackface brings out Jolson's inner child who sings to his mother with a cry in his voice. Rogin noticed that “the aggressive, self-confident Jack Robin (at Coffee Dan's and in the love scene with his mother) is feminized in blackface. He plays not the black sexual menace of reconstruction, progressive, and *Birth of a Nation* fantasy, but the

child Negro of the restored 1920s plantation myth.”³⁶⁶ It seems that in blackface Jackie indeed regresses to an infant state (when in blackface, he often sings songs for his “mummy”). In *The Hebrew Hammer*, in contrast, Jewish-black hybridization signifies the transition from child to man, marking Mordechai’s transition from being a stereotypical victimized Jewish boy to becoming the ultimate manly figure.

In shaping its “Jewsploitation” hero, *The Hebrew Hammer* relies not only on blaxploitation’s model of masculinity, but also on the image of the “tough Jew” established by Zionist ideology, represented in the film by the Jewish Justice League and its Moshe Dayan lookalike Chief, and the State of Israel itself with its “Jewish Atomic Clock”. Critics such as Daniel Boyarin, Paul Breines and others pointed to the Zionist ideological rejection of the Jewish diaspora as “feminine”. Young Mordechai represents this image as a bullied wimp who is physically incapable of defending himself. Zionism attempts to replace this “Jewish sissy” with a “muscle Jew” that can fight back, just as the grown-up Hammer.

The Hebrew Hammer is well-rooted in Jewish-American culture and attempts to stand up for the right of Jews to live in the American diaspora. As a Haredi Jewish hero who is unapologetically a traditional diaspora Jew, the Hammer stands in contrast to the Zionist ideology of diaspora denial. However, the film suggests that Jewish existence in the diaspora, as important as it may be, is ultimately guaranteed by the State of Israel and its “Atomic Clock”, which most likely represents Israel’s alleged atomic reactor and nuclear weapon capacities (which Israel never admitted to possess). In other words, Israel’s military force appears as the ultimate assurance of the survival of world Jewry, just as it is the “atomic clock” in a military base in Jerusalem that contains the “Judeium”, the liquid essence of the Jewishness.

Blaxploitation and Zionism seem to coexist naturally in *The Hebrew Hammer*, but in reality this mix is not so feasible. Mohammed teams up with Hammer as they confront a mutual enemy – the racist Damian Claus who threatens both Jews and blacks, Hanukah and Kwanzaa. Yet while blaxploitation heroes were fighting white racists and the oppressive establishment, one could argue that Zionism made tough Jews into a racist establishment.

³⁶⁶ Rogin, “Blackface”: 442.

Intentionally or not, the “Jewish Justice League” organization which appears in the film resembles the name of the “Jewish Defense League”, a far-right Jewish organization founded in 1968, whose stated goal was to ‘protect Jews from anti-Semitism by whatever means necessary.’ The leader, Meir Kahane, later founded in Israel the racist “Kach” movement which campaigned for a transfer of Palestinians. Intentionally or not, the symbol of the JDL in the film (a David Star shape which contains a figure of a man who raises his hands in a victory gesture) remarkably resembles the symbol of “Kach”. For these groups, collaborating with a black man named Mohammed seems farfetched, to say the least.³⁶⁷

The Hebrew Hammer is a “Jewsploitation” film which in a way exploits the blaxploitation genre just to get its cool, tough Jewish figure, while neglecting, if not plainly going against, blaxploitation’s minority perspective and defiance against the “powers that be”. While the film’s Jewish-black mix is a product of the American diaspora, the film’s representation of tough Jewish masculinity eventually falls back into the national-militaristic identity of Zionism. The final Jewish-black chameleon figure to be discussed here sets a much more radical form of Jewish hybridization.

Ali G

Sacha Noam Baron Cohen, the Jewish-English comedian who stands behind the enormously successful TV and film persona of Ali G, represents the most radical development of the Jewish-black chameleon figure on screen.



Figure 17 Sacha Baron Cohen as Ali G.

³⁶⁷ The only somewhat critical reference to the Israeli occupation appears in the film with a road sign in Israel that announces “The Gated community of West Bank Palms” with barb wire and separation wall “decoration”.

Cohen has a Jewish background, and from an early age he showed interest in black culture and politics. He was raised in a traditional Jewish family, and even lived in a kibbutz for a year.³⁶⁸ As a teen he was active in anti-fascist demonstrations, and his senior thesis at Christ's College titled "The Black-Jewish Alliance – A Case of Mistaken Identities" (1993) investigated the "complicated relationship between blacks and Jews during the American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968)". According to Robert A. Saunders, "Baron Cohen has long made a study of black culture, mores, and values. Even in his teens, he was drawn to blackness, as performances with his breakdance troupe known as Black on White proved. It was during this period that Baron Cohen began his attempts at earnest mimicry of the 'street codes of blackness' for comic effects, a praxis which would later serve to fortify his Ali G persona."³⁶⁹

Cohen broke into public attention in 2000 with his TV series *Da Ali G Show*, hosted by his "black" alter ego.³⁷⁰ The show is presented in the guise of an educational (or "heducational" as he pronounces it) show for teenagers, although its host is extremely uneducated, misinformed and an ignorant figure who celebrates "thug life", approves of drugs and unprotected sex, and holds misogynist and homophobic views.

Ali G interviews unsuspecting guests, usually politicians, state agents and experts in various fields, and confronts them with his utter ignorance.³⁷¹ For many of his guests, and probably some of his viewers as well, Ali G seems like a dimwit who asks the most ridiculous questions while misunderstanding the simplest ideas. However, for most viewers who are in on the joke and understand his vernacular, Ali G is actually in full control, as he (or more precisely, Baron Cohen) is using the cover of stupidly to insert doubt to the experts' discourse and disclaim their authority.

³⁶⁸ Kathleen Tracy, *Sacha Baron Cohen: The Unauthorized Biography - From Cambridge to Kazakhstan* (St. Martin's Press, 2007): 10. Baron Cohen was born in Hammersmith, west London. His mother, Daniella Naomi, was born in Israel, and his father, Gerald Baron Cohen, was born in London and raised in Wales. His father's family were Eastern European Jews who moved to Pontypridd, Wales, and London, England, and his mother's family were German Jews. Baron was raised Jewish.

³⁶⁹ Robert A. Saunders, *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen – Politics, Parody, and the Battle over Borat* (Playmouth: Lexington Books, 2010): 65.

³⁷⁰ The first season originally aired in the year 2000 on Channel 4 in the UK, and the second and third (2003–2004) seasons on HBO in the US.

³⁷¹ Ali G often confuses words and phrases, for example mixing references to "Watergate" with the movie "Water World" and confusing "anthrax" with "Tampax", "euthanasia" for "youth in Asia," "veteran" for "veterinarian" and so on.

By playing the ignorant fool, Cohen actually exposes the ignorance and foolishness of those who are supposed to know. When talking with representatives of the establishment about drugs for example, it becomes clear that Ali G is much more knowledgeable about the street terminology and use of drugs than the “experts” he interviews. As Saunders wrote, “Baron Cohen’s Ali G persona functions as a trope for turning his politically powerful guests into visibly flawed characters oblivious to the reality around them. According to Dan Friedman, Ali is able to ‘deny the foundations of authority without ever appearing to have a clue’.”³⁷² In this respect, like the “white-Negro” hipsters in the 1950s and the quasi-revolutionary Fritz the cat in the 1970s, Cohen’s “black” persona subverts the discourse of the dominantly white establishment.

According to Saunders “More than once, Baron Cohen was condemned as a modern day Al Jolson, profiting from grotesque stereotypes of minorities that border on unreconstructed minstrelsy.”³⁷³ Cohen’s blunt display of racial stereotypes raises many negative responses, yet his use (or abuse) of these stereotypes actually serves to attack racial stereotyping (as well as to expose the hidden racism behind politically correct language). Cohen is utilizing a typical chameleon tactic of mockery by using derogatory stereotypes against the racist discourse that produces them. As Saunders wrote, what Cohen does is “to undermine racist stereotypes by embracing them,”³⁷⁴ “Rather than simply relying on traditional ethnic humor made at the expense of minorities, Baron Cohen’s style is based on satire and ridicule of the stereotypes themselves.”³⁷⁵

Fritz the Cat pondered if a cat can really become a crow, meaning to ask if whites (or Jews) can really become black. Cohen doesn’t paint his face like Al Jolson and he doesn’t try to hide his white complexion, yet as Ali G he insists he is black. When an annoyed guest asks to cut the interview and leave, Ali G claims it is because the guest is a “racialist” who doesn’t like blacks. “You’re black?! Who’s black?!” asked the bewildered expert.³⁷⁶ Yet just as Mezzrow could pass as black in the 50s, some of Ali G’s guests buy into his racial facade. For example, in a conversation with experts on medical ethics, Ali G proposes to create the

³⁷² Saunders, *Many Faces*: 64.

³⁷³ Saunders, *Many Faces*: 2.

³⁷⁴ Saunders, *Many Faces*: 18.

³⁷⁵ Saunders, *Many Faces*: 57.

³⁷⁶ *Ali G Rezurrection*, season 1 episode 9 (2014).

technology that will make everyone black, to which one of the experts replies “You ask that because you happen to be black. And you say ‘I want people to be like me’.”³⁷⁷

In another sequence, Ali G participates in a talk show. A black woman from the audience wonders about his Jamaican-Rastafarian accent and asks him if it is real. Ali G replies that “not everybody in England speaks like the Queen. There's a lot of people who does not live like the Queen and do not speak like the Queen. If I had a crown and her money I've might as well speak as the Queen.”³⁷⁸ Clearly not referring to a racial origin, Ali G’s “blackness” stems strictly from cultural and social signs: his mix of Jamaican and lower class British accent, “gangsta” rap vocabulary and American hip hop culture on which he models himself – from the style of his clothes (fleshy sportswear which often has an insignia of the hip hop band Wu Tang Clan, gold rings and chains, and a tight cap), to his “ghetto” vernacular, and his glorification of weed, sex and crime.

Ali G often confuses the word “racialist” with the word “racist”, but is he really confused? A racialist view gives emphasis to racial origin, while Ali G precisely stands as a figure that claims blackness as a cultural and social position. According to Saunders, “Ali G negotiates the pitfalls of identity politics most directly by presenting a character that purposefully confuses objective and subjective aspects of identity.”³⁷⁹ Rachel Garfield relates Ali G’s play on racial signification to postmodern “politics of appearance” in which racial constructs are challenged by actors who do not fit the outward mold, “but nonetheless complexify the debate over ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’”. Thus, Baron Cohen, through the mechanism of Ali G, brings into question the entire notion of the black/white binary which pervades Western culture. He accomplishes this through his playful exploitation of the tension between what is seen versus what is perceived.³⁸⁰

As if not confusing enough as Ali G, Cohen assumes other personalities that add to the mix and further hybridize his figure. Beside Ali G, the white, wannabe-black gangster from the middleclass London suburb of Staines, Cohen also plays completely different characters which include Borat Sagdiyev – a journalist from Kazakhstan, a naïve simpleton who embodies the Western stereotype image of the primitive Eastern-European, and Bruno Gehard

³⁷⁷ *Ali G Rezurection*, season 1 episode 7.

³⁷⁸ *Ali G Rezurection*, season 1 episode 7.

³⁷⁹ Saunders, *Many Faces*: 65.

³⁸⁰ In: Saunders, *Many Faces*: 66.

– a gay, über-glamorous fashion reporter from Austria. Cohen lately appeared also as Admiral General Aladeen, a dictator from the Middle East.³⁸¹



Figure 18 Cohen as Borat.

Considering his multi-personalities, Cohen is the ultimate chameleon Jew, which from all the figures discussed here is closest to Zelig. Like Zelig, Cohen completely transforms with each persona - from the way he looks to the way he speaks and the manner in which he carries himself; and like Zelig – he blurs the lines between these fictitious personalities and his real self, as he makes most of his public appearances as one of these figures, rarely appearing as himself.

While Cohen’s Jewish identity is not explicitly expressed by the characters he plays, his Jewishness is nonetheless clandestinely enmeshed with each of them. Although Borat supposedly speaks Kazakh, he actually mixes a few other languages (including Russian and Polish) and often combines Hebrew in his speech (despite his apparent anti-Semitism). For example, when he was invited to open a baseball game with what is supposedly the national hymn of Kazakhstan, he actually sang a semi-socialist song in Hebrew (with the lyrics: *kum bachur atzel ve'tze la'avoda*, which translates in Hebrew to “get up lazy lad and go to work”).³⁸² Even as the Middle-Eastern dictator Admiral General Aladeen, Cohen often speaks Hebrew, which to the uninformed, paranoid Americans he encounters suspiciously sounds like Arabic.³⁸³

Most often than not, Cohen’s Jewish background comes forth through anti-Semitic remarks made by his alter-egos Borat and Bruno. Bruno often targets fashion industry people

³⁸¹ *The Dictator* (Larry Charles, 2012)

³⁸² *Ali G Rezurrection*, season 1 episode 6 (2014).

³⁸³ Ali G’s name also has an Arabic sound to it, provoking latent Islamophobia.

(interviewing them about what is in and what is “aus”) while making references to the Jewish holocaust in the most inappropriate ways (“Ich was going to be the biggest Austrian super star since Hitler”).³⁸⁴ For example, during his “fashion polizei” segment he asked an interviewee “Ricky Martin: Keep him in the Ghetto or train to Auschwitz?”³⁸⁵ No less audacious with his anti-Semitic proclamations, Borat often refers to Jews as cockroaches and devilish people. In a Tucson bar, he performed a Country & Western tune entitled “So My Country Can Be Free” (also known as “throw the Jew down the well”).³⁸⁶ The skit resulted in an interrogation by Britain’s Office of Communication and drew criticism from the Jewish community, including the Anti-Defamation league. CNN’s movie reviewer Tom Charity described the Borat film as “the most anti-Semitic American movie ever made.”³⁸⁷

Like some of the films discussed in chapter 3 (“The Jewish-Nazi”), Cohen is embracing anti-Semitism in order to fight against it, both by exposing its dormant existence (many of his interviewees feel comfortable to tell an “anti-Semitic” reporter what they really think of Jews and other minorities)³⁸⁸ and by mocking it from within, considering his own Jewishness and his “black” and gay personalities, which are of course completely inconsistent with anti-Semitic ideology.

According to Saunders, Cohen’s humor is his most Jewish trait, yet beyond that, I suggest that his multi-persona, seemingly lack of a “real” self, and his introduction of hybridization and ambivalence to mainstream culture is what make him Jewish, or actually, a chameleon Jew in the line of many other figures discussed here, most of all - Zelig.

Like Zelig, Cohen is a symbol of our times, who is, as Saunders argues, “both embodying and shaping cultural awareness in postmodern Britain” (although his immense success in the United States and worldwide make him a global cultural icon of the postmodern age).³⁸⁹ Ali G is a figure that, according to Paul Gilroy, is “at ease in the postcolonial city,” and represents a start towards “a more productive shame that would be conducive to

³⁸⁴ *Brüno* (Larry Charles, 2009)

³⁸⁵ *Da Ali G Show: “Peace”* (2004)

³⁸⁶ *Da Ali G Show*, season 2 episode 3 (2004).

³⁸⁷ Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 13.

³⁸⁸ According to Cohen part of the idea behind Borat (which goes also for Ali G), “is to get people to feel relaxed enough that they fully open up. And they say things that they never would on normal TV. So if they are anti-Semitic... they’ll say it.” In: Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 3.

³⁸⁹ Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 62.

the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness.”³⁹⁰

Yet like Zelig, Cohen is both the target of admiration and hatred. Many are enraged by Ali G, not just because of his utter disregard for political correctness, but as Gilroy suggested, “For this angry people, the betrayal that Ali G represented was the culmination of a larger process of dilution and mongrelization in which the protective purity of largely racial cultures was being lost, leaving them vulnerable to unprotected encounters with differences that can only invoke risk, fear, and jeopardy.”³⁹¹ In this regard, Cohen/Ali G invokes old fears of the Jew as a figure which threatens to deracinate society and bastardize the purity of (white) culture – the ultimate nightmare for a person like Henry Ford, who foresaw the Jewish “niggarization” of American culture as the utmost threat.

Considering all of Cohen’s characters, he is a highly ambivalent figure with regard to both his “race” and gender. Modeled after hip hop and rap figures, Ali G plays the tough “gangsta” who treats women as “bitches” and “hoes”, bluntly objectifying them as no more than sexual objects, while glorifying himself as a pimp-like figure. In this respect, Cohen’s “black” persona resembles characters like Fritz the Cat and the Hebrew Hammer, whose “blackness” provided masculine bravado (unlike Al Jolson, who actually became more childish and feminine in his black mask).



Figure 19 Cohen as Bruno.

³⁹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 70-99.

³⁹¹ In: Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 65.

However, Cohen's other characters completely break this macho image. Bruno is extrovertly homosexual, while Borat – although also extremely misogynic – never hides his desire to touch or “wrestle” with other men. Similarly, Bruno's and Borat's candid racism (Borat calls black people “chocolate faces”) breaks down with the figure of Ali G, Cohen's “black” (or Jewish-black hybrid) persona; and of course, their anti-Semitism turns into the ultimate gag when taking into account Cohen's Jewish background.

Cohen is the ultimate chameleon Jew and the most Zelig-like figure encountered in this work; and even more ambivalent than Zelig, as he assumes conflicting, if not completely contradictory characters which cancel each other's identity: the macho homophobic figure of Ali G is cancelled by the explicit and implicit homosexuality of Bruno and Borat. Cohen's own Jewish identity is cancelled by Bruno's and Borat's anti-Semitism; yet their racism is cancelled by Ali G, who often argues for the superiority of black people, claiming that even God is black (and that the rapper Tupac Shakur is the messiah).

According to Saunders, Ali G ‘is interesting because he is simultaneously white and black, a form of hybridity which makes him the perfect postmodern hero.’³⁹² Unlike the Hebrew Hammer, who moves from being a “sissy” Jew victim (as a boy) to become a “black gangsta”-like tough (and sexy) man, Cohen is everything at once – a black macho (Ali G), a “sissy” or a queer man (Bruno), an anti-Semite (Borat) and more. Moving beyond the realm of binary identifications, Cohen is a multiplicity which blurs the lines which separate identities, a hybrid of races, genders and sexual orientations (Borat is even a zoophile). Who is, then, the “real” Baron Cohen? According to Saunders, Cohen is “a semantic void.”³⁹³ Like Zelig and even more, he is the ultimate embodiment of a question.

³⁹² Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 67.

³⁹³ Saunders, *The Many Faces*: 19.

Conclusion

We have encountered various Jewish chameleon figures throughout this work; Jews that become: Nazis (chapter 3), martial arts warriors (chapter 4), a cowboy in the Wild West (chapter 5), “black” (chapters 6 and 7), and all of the above and more (Zelig and Sacha Baron Cohen). Many of the films discussed not only mixed Jewish characters with non-Jewish identities, but are themselves products of Jewish hybridization of cinema.

The Jewish figures discussed here present different modern variations of the stereotypical image of the Wandering Jew as a figure that does not have an identity of its own except what it borrows from others; an exiled, nomadic, rootless and parasitical Jew that infiltrates other identities to destroy them from within. This figure was often portrayed by anti-Semites (as well as Enlightenment thinkers and Zionist Jews) in a negative way, representing hybridization or bastardization which threatens the integrity of racial, national, cultural and sexual identities. Yet in contemporary times, the chameleon Jew also holds an alluring, subversive power which corresponds to a philosophical, ideological and representational shift this figure underwent after the Second World War, specifically in French philosophy, and feminist and postcolonial theories.

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe described the Jewish chameleon figure as the ultimate anti-type, the hybrid par excellence: “not an opposite type, but the very absence of type, a danger present in all bastardizations, which all are parasitic.”³⁹⁴ Derrida described it as *différance* itself, and called for Jews to reclaim this position as true Jewish exemplarity, which is actually, a form of self-dismantling: “The more you break up self-identity, the more you are saying ‘My self-identity consists in not being identical to myself, in being foreign, the non-self-coincident one,’ etc., the more you are Jewish!”³⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari similarly argued that “even Jews must become-Jewish”, that is, to replace the dominant territorial Jewish identity with a deterritorialized “minoritarian” stream of Jewishness which triggers a becoming-other among Jews and non-Jews alike.³⁹⁶

Feminist and postcolonial positions that were discussed here reclaimed the image of the Jew as a hybrid race and a queer gender figure. Many of the cinematic characters we met

³⁹⁴ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Nazi Myth*: 307.

³⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “A Testimony Given...”: 41.

³⁹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*: 321.

here have gender problems emanating from the stereotype of the Jew as a “sort of a woman”.³⁹⁷ These characters adopted other identities to become more “manly” - for example - by becoming black (Mordechai in *The Hebrew Hammer*), a tough (Zionist) Jew (Fishke in *King of Beggars*), even a Nazi (Danny in *The Believer*), or as in Zelig’s case – by trying to simply become a man (which for the chameleon Jew is a becoming-other). Yet we also encountered a character like Rabbi Avram (in *The Frisco Kid*), who takes a “feminine” position as a positive Jewish difference and means of resistance to phallic forms of power.

This research further incorporated Jewish traditional texts into its film analysis; sources which in different ways support the reevaluation of the chameleon Jew in positive terms. More than asking to give the discussion a deeper Jewish context, I attempt to highlight the relevance of Jewish sources to three central issues: First, suggesting possible points of contact between pre-modern Jewish thought and postmodern thinkers (showing, for example, how Hassidic thought can support self-dismantling philosophy). Second (following Boyarin’s example), to show a way to embrace Jewish queerness from a positive inner-Jewish perspective; and third, to counter Jewish nationalism and its rejection of the diaspora with a spiritual conceptualization of the diaspora as an ideal breeding ground for chameleon Jews.

The question “who or what is the chameleon Jew?” relates here to the philosophical issue of how to represent or think difference. The chameleon Jew takes the appearance of other identities. He looks the same, but is still different. How, then, to represent a figure which is different from itself? Different chapters of this work explored this question with regard to different philosophies and ideologies: Enlightenment (in chapter 1), Anti-Semitism (in chapters 2 and 3), and Zionism (in chapters 4, 5 and 7). Although very different from each other in their position to the “Jewish question”, they all basically reject the difference of the Jew, disavowing it by means of assimilation, extermination, or nationalistic “conversion”. Post-structural philosophy offers a different path, as in general it prioritizes difference, supplying ways for a positive reevaluation of the chameleon Jew.

While my research shares the contemporary endeavour of Jewish studies of cinema to discuss Jewish identity beyond the common binary opposition (of, for example, “sissy”/“tough” Jew), it differs in its theoretical position. Abrams’ research (as a prominent

³⁹⁷ Boyarin, *Unheroic*: 3.

contemporary example) was based on the assumption of “the end of diaspora” and offered “a reconstruction of identity”; whereas this research offers a perspective *from* the diaspora which is motivated by a deconstruction of Jewish identity.³⁹⁸ The “Jewish question” becomes in this sense a questioning of identity itself.

Chameleon Judaism doesn’t offer an easy path. As we have seen, many chameleon Jewish characters end badly. As Deleuze and Guattari warned (with regard to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*), becoming can be a dangerous, destructive and a potentially deadly process that risks “a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established.”³⁹⁹ The chameleon Jew risks becoming marginal, not only with regard to gentiles, but even with regard to Jews and mainstream Jewish identity. The chameleon Jew threatens to destroy other identities because first of all he destroys himself. Self-dismantling can lead to great difficulties or even death (as in the case of Danny in *The Believer*), and is often degraded. And yet it can also be a joyous, spiritual, and funny path, as shown by figures such as Rabbi Avram and Sacha Baron-Cohen.

Zelig was eventually cured from his lizard state and became a man. Today the chameleon Jew doesn’t necessarily need to be “cured”, as the world itself has become more hybrid or multicultural (the anti-Semitic paranoia materialized). However, the dark forces of reterritorialization are still present... This work intends to offer a small contribution to a larger call for Jews to resist their own colonial enterprise and to become exemplary as Derrida meant – by “a universal and disproportionate responsibility towards the singularity of every other.”⁴⁰⁰ For non-Jews, it is a call to “become-Jewish”, that is, to open to difference and to the other, whoever or whatever it may be.

³⁹⁸ Abrahams, *The New Jew*: 9.

³⁹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari: *Thousand Plateaus*: 272.

⁴⁰⁰ Derrida, “Abraham”: 13.

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