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Friedman: Hollywood's Image of the Jew

Lester D. Friedman. *Hollywood's Image of the Jew.* New York: Ungar, 1982. 390 pp. \$8.95 (paper).

Reviewed by John Stuart Katz
York University, Toronto.

As two Jewish men were walking through a rough neighborhood one evening, they noticed that they were being followed by a pair of toughs who started taunting them with anti-Semitic remarks. "Max," said the shorter one to his friend, "let's get out of here. There are two of them and we're alone."

There is a saying that to be successful in the movie business all would-be moguls must do two things: think Yiddish and dress British. Since the days of the silents, the American film industry has been studded with Jewish executives, directors, writers, and stars. From Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg, Harry Cohn, Jesse Lasky, and Jack Warner through David Begelman, Daniel Melnick, and Frank Yablans, to name just a few, the executive ranks of the industry have always prominently included Jews. But how, and how prominently, were Jews themselves depicted on the celluloid for which moguls were responsible?

That is the question with which Lester D. Friedman grapples in his impressively comprehensive and valuable book, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*. Unlike other minorities, such as blacks and native Americans, Jews in the movies have not been created by others, but by Jews themselves. So, examining movies about Jews and with major Jewish characters can shed significant light upon "what some Jews thought about themselves, how the image of Jews in the national consciousness changed over the years, and what Jews were willing to show of themselves to a largely Gentile audience" (p. vii).

Therein lie not just the book's strengths but also its weaknesses. Friedman divides *Hollywood's Image* into seven chapters, one for the silent era, and one for each decade from the thirties through the eighties. It's a convenient way to organize his material; it's neat, clean and concise; but it also tends to oversimplify and often gives the impression that the Silent Stereotypes suddenly gave way to the Timid Thirties, Fashionable Forties, Frightened Fifties, Self-conscious Sixties, and Self-centered Seventies. That the Eighties are Emerging, there is no doubt. And, because of its desire to be as comprehensive about the Jewish films of each decade as possible, *Hollywood's Image* often consists of plot summary after plot summary, inter-

persed with more thoughtful analyses of those films Friedman deems particularly relevant. Even so, this is not a major detraction from the book. The lists in themselves are valuable, as are the credits and his summaries. In fact, Friedman even gives us a chronological listing of Jewish American Films alphabetized in Appendix 1 and a list of those available in the United States in 16-mm, with their distributors, in Appendix 2. These are resources I will certainly use in booking and programming films in the future, but I can't help thinking that the whole book might have been even more useful if it had appeared as a monograph on the portrayal of Jews in the movies based upon the major films Friedman analyzes and followed by an annotated filmography of the multitude of films he summarizes in the text.

Within each decade Friedman isolates certain categories of Jewish images. For example, he stresses Jews in relationship to Gentiles, assimilation, Jewish parents (mostly mothers), and later the Holocaust and Israel. Despite the prevalence of Jewish talent in the film industry, as often as not the image that emerges within these categories is that of a stereotype—the "handler"—present in movies all the way from *The Cohens and the Kelleys* (1926) to *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974); the quintessential "Yiddishe Mama" from *His People* (1925) to *Portnoy's Complaint* (1972), *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), and beyond; and the bumbling "badken" or "marshallik" from the silent "Izzy" and "Mike and Jake" films to Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* (1977).

Even if the predominant feeling is that we're alone and there are two of them, Friedman does not neglect to point out the numerous strong, sympathetic, and compassionate Jews which Hollywood has created. In doing so, he charts the image of the Jew as one might chart the stock market. The silents were an era in which the Jew was depicted primarily as an exotic outsider, an immigrant at best ambivalent about the Gentile world into which he must assimilate. America was being made conscious of the Jew, and the Jew more conscious of how he differed from the mainstream. This was followed by the lean period of the thirties; Jews were either unidentifiable as Jews on the screen or ignored altogether. With the coming of World War II, the Jew returns to the screen, but now he is not only a Jew but a Jewish-American, defending what has become his homeland. Following the war, the prevailing image of the Jew remained bland and ethnically safe. Still under the influence of a few major studios, Hollywood was not willing to flaunt "Jewishness" until the independent producers of the sixties, seventies, and eighties took chances and were able to deal both with Jews being Jews of all sorts and with Israel and the Holocaust.



The quintessential "Yiddische Mama," Mrs. Lapinsky (Shelley Winters), packs a lunch for her son, Larry (Lenny Baker), as he is about to go off on his own, in Paul Mazursky's *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976). Friedman views Mazursky's attitudes toward the Lapinskys in a more accepting and positive light than one might expect, given his assessments of *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* (pp. 269–273). (Property of John Katz)



Woody Allen as Fielding Mellish in Allen's *Bananas* (1971). Friedman's discussion of Allen's comic genius is pointed and comprehensive, even though he fails to mention that Allen's original title for *Annie Hall* (1977) was *Anhedonia*, a helpful clue to understanding Allen's persona (pp. 274–283). (Property of John Katz)



A sophisticated Jewish reporter (Sigourney Weaver) unwittingly gets involved with a murderous and overzealous Israeli diplomat (Christopher Plummer), in Peter Yates's *Eyewitness* (1981). Friedman spotlights this recent negative depiction of an Israeli as a significant and threatening precedent (pp. 291–293). (Property of John Katz)



A glimpse is all we get of Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman (Maureen Stapleton) in Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981) (p. 288). Although Emma Goldman played a major part in E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*, the 8-minute part in the Milos Forman film *Ragtime* (1981), played by Mariclare Costello, ended up on the cutting-room floor. (Property of John Katz)



Torquemada (Mel Brooks), the Grand Inquisitor, highlights the singing and dancing accompanying the torture of the Jews in Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part One* (1981). What Friedman calls an attack on "anti-Semitism through his blend of slapstick and scatological comedy" (p. 302), others call Brooks's bad taste. (Property of John Katz)

Jake (Steven Keats) greets his wife, Gittel (Carol Kane), and his son, Yossele, when they arrive in America from Russia, in Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1974). Although Friedman faults the film for sentimentality and for oversimplifying Abraham Cahan's original tale, to many critics *Hester Street* serves as a milestone in the portrayal of the Jew in fiction film (pp. 266–268). *Hester Street* is particularly indebted to the Yiddish language films of the thirties. (Property of John Katz)



Although Friedman's stated focus is the Hollywood fiction film, he neglects two important areas of American filmmaking which not only reflected different images from those of Hollywood but also served at times as alter egos to the blandness of Hollywood, and may indeed even have influenced the way Hollywood came to depict the Jew on celluloid. First, there were the Yiddish language films of the thirties and forties, the most famous of which are *Greenfields* (1937) and *The Light Ahead* (1939). Yiddish films played to large audiences in major cities and proved that issues and problems of real Jews could be dealt with on the screen, albeit to a very specialized clientele. Second, from the sixties on, there have been numerous documentary films that also have played to a specialized audience, but not just of Jews. These documentaries have honestly and intimately chronicled Jewish lives and problems. Highpoints of this tradition include (1) the autobiographical works of Lenny Lipton, Amalie Rothschild, Miriam Weinstein, Maxi Cohen, Jeff Kreines, and Ira Wohl in the seventies and eighties; (2) biographical films such as *Lenny Bruce without Tears* (1972), *I. F. Stone's Weekly* (1973), and *Chagall* (1979); and (3) issue films such as *California Reich* (1976), *Image Before My Eyes* (1980), *Memorandum* (1966), and *Sighet, Sighet* (1967).

Friedman opens and closes his book with examinations of *The Jazz Singer*, first the 1927 Al Jolson version (called by many the first talkie) and finally with the Neil Diamond 1980 remake. Both films epitomize Hollywood's obsession to show that the Jew has the capability, indeed, is compelled, to assimilate into the "American way of life," be it symbolized by jazz or rock and roll. Friedman frames his book in one of the most poignant images of the Jew Hollywood has yet produced. The son of a cantor must choose between show business and the synagogue. Jackie Rabinowitz (in the later version named Jess Robinovitch) is torn between the *shtetl* of his parents and his desire to become a jazz singer (in 1927) or its modern equivalent, a rock musician (in 1980). In the 1927 version, says Friedman, there was no doubt left in the mind of the viewer: Jackie must cut himself off from, if not completely reject, his traditional Jewish values. Just as this film reflects the attitudes Hollywood portrayed toward Jewish identity then, so the 1980 version presents, according to Friedman, director Richard Fleisher's message that traditional Judaism and American success are not contradictory. Friedman finds it significant that at the end of the film Diamond wears the traditional white and blue, a white *tallis*-like scarf when he performs on television Yom Kippur night, after having sung the Kol Nidre service in temple wearing a blue metallic *yarmulke*. Even if Friedman's interpretation is accurate, I see Fleisher's offering more as a sop to Cerberus than any indica-



Fred Baker's hard-hitting documentary *Lenny Bruce without Tears* (1972) is a far cry from the sanitized image Friedman describes of Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974). In the fictional version, Dustin Hoffman plays the comedian devoid of almost all ethnic overtones (pp. 247-248). (Property of John Katz)

tion of Hollywood's portraying a newly found harmony between tradition and assimilation. A truly radical departure in Hollywood's depiction of the Jew would be a film called *The Cantor*, in which a famous rock musician gives up the glamor of show business against the wishes of his father the manager, to become a *chazzen* at a small synagogue in Brooklyn.

Despite the few shortcomings of *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, anyone interested in the social history of the United States and of movies, or in the treatment of minorities in the media, will find the book an indispensable addition to his or her library. To paraphrase the slogan of a famous rye bread, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Friedman's."