



Lawrence Baron, ed. *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. xiii + 442 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-208-3; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-199-4.



Reviewed by David Gillota (University of Wisconsin - Platteville)

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The Diversity of Jewish Film

The word “Jewish,” of course, can suggest many different things. It can refer to religious beliefs, cultural practices, ethno-racial identities, styles of food, clothing, music, or art. It can describe people living in Europe, the Americas, or the Middle East. Given the slipperiness of the concept of “Jewishness,” it comes as no surprise, then, that “Jewish film” is equally difficult to locate or define. Are Jewish films simply films written, directed, or produced by Jewish people? If so, then nearly every Hollywood production could qualify as Jewish. Jewish film, then, must refer to films that, in some way or another, address the idea of Jewishness in its many manifestations. In this enormous collection, *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema*, editor Lawrence Baron has compiled an impressive array of essays about Jewish films emerging from Europe, the United States, and Israel. In a way that a book written by a single author never could, *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema* does an excellent job of accounting for the diversity, complexity, and contradictory nature of Jewish film, and, by extension, of the “Jewish experience” in the modern

world.

In a brief preface, Baron explains that the goal of the book is to provide a survey of Jewish film that will be useful for students, particularly students taking courses in Jewish world cinema. This approach is reflected in the accessibility of the essays. While many of the selections are reprints from previously published academic articles, they have been, in Baron’s own words, edited “to be less technical, shorter, and more student-friendly” (p. xi). In the book’s introduction, Baron provides a broad overview of Jewish world history since 1700 and of the history of Jewish film. This information does a good job of contextualizing the material to come, and much of this background information is treated in more detail in the essays that follow. An instructor using this volume as a textbook in a Jewish cinema course could assign this introduction in the first week of class, and it would prove particularly useful for students who have had little contact with Jewish history or cultural productions.

The body of the book is composed of fifty-nine essays,

each of which focuses primarily on a single film. Of the films analyzed, twenty-eight were produced in the United States, and thirty-one were made in various other countries, including the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, France, Germany, and Israel. Since the book is intended as an introduction for students, most of the films analyzed are those that have already been canonized as important contributions to Jewish cinema. Predictably, there are essays focusing on *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *Yentl* (1983), and *Schindler's List* (1993). However, there are also contributions about films that have an undeniable Jewish element but that are not immediately thought of as Jewish, such as Maurice Samuels's excellent study of anti-Semitism in Jean Renoir's *The Grand Illusion* (1937). The book is also fairly up to date and contains essays on recent cinematic productions, including the Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005). Overall, the range of films represented is broad and impressive but certainly not exhaustive (this would be impossible). Individual readers will surely find gaps within their own areas of specialization. As an Americanist with a particular interest in Jewish humor, I was somewhat disappointed to find that neither Mel Brooks nor Albert Brooks made the cut, nor did some important current Jewish filmmakers, such as Sacha Baron Cohen or Judd Apatow. These gaps are admittedly minor, however, and do not detract from the impressive breadth of the volume.

Rather than grouping the films together by country of origin or by period of production, the book is organized by periods of Jewish cultural history, such as the rise of the Israeli nation, eastern Europe from 1881 to 1921, or postwar America. Films are assigned to each category based on their content rather than when and where they were made. Therefore, one may find some surprising juxtapositions, such as an essay on Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) in the same section (American Immigration) as an essay on *The Jazz Singer*. This organization certainly makes sense, but it may at first seem surprising to a reader who is looking for a group of essays that will suggest the development of Jewish representation in the films of a particular country or trends in a particular time period. At the end of the day, though, any quibbles about

the organization are moot. This is not a book that is intended to be read from cover to cover, and instructors using the book can easily develop their own sequence of reading assignments based on the organization of their own courses.

For the most part, the essays are easy to read and accessible. Baron chose and solicited essays that contextualize individual films in a broad historical and cultural perspective and that introduce students to the major themes of each film. Most of the essays also include important context about each film's production and reception. In other words, the essays—with a few exceptions, such as Samuels's discussion of *The Grand Illusion* mentioned above—represent the critical status quo of each film. For example, Sylvia Barack Fishman's contribution on *Annie Hall* (1977) provides context on the representations of American Jews after World War II and discusses the film primarily as a story of a doomed intercultural romance. For scholars of Jewish American cinema, none of this is new, but it is essential material for students watching the film for the first time, and Fishman presents the material clearly and effectively. In a course on Jewish cinema, the essays in this book could be paired with the films themselves and thus serve as great conversation starters, priming the pump for class discussion. Or, in contrast, the essays could serve as a way of providing necessary information about films that will not actually be screened in class.

Overall, *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema* is an excellent resource, and it is the perfect textbook for a course on international Jewish cinema. Furthermore it will be a welcome addition to the library of scholars working in film studies or Jewish studies. Any reader who hopes to educate him or herself about Jewish film will find the book to be immensely educational, and it can serve as an excellent gateway into Jewish films produced throughout the world. While working on this review, for example, my own Netflix queue grew substantially as I found myself wanting to see so many of the films under discussion that I had either not been aware of or had only read about in passing. It is a book that I am sure I will return to again and again.

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