



Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, eds. *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013. viii + 270 pp. ISBN 978-0-8143-3482-9; ISBN 978-0-8143-3807-0.

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Romance of a People

Anthologies spun from the scholarly papers delivered at academic conferences generally take two forms. The chapters can faithfully reproduce the versions that were delivered on campus, with all the capriciousness of scope, method, and quality that such occasions seem destined to invoke. Or the editors of the revised essays can demand rigor and focus; publishers of anthologies tend to prefer such specificity and unity as more marketable. The former option is scattershot, and dangles the hope that readers might be attracted to at least a few of the chapters. The latter choice runs the risk of narrowness, but offers the advantage of cohesion and a discernible thesis. Inspired by a conference at Arizona State University, the editors of *Hollywood's Chosen People* have opted for eclecticism. Spoiler alert: their book has no common theme or purpose, no shared appreciation of how film studies and Jewish studies might best be reconciled, and no reassurance that the century-old romance of a people with movie-making in America can be put in maximal historical perspective.

Though some parts of this volume are illuminating, a review is bound to be ambivalent. No scholar interested in what "the Jewish presence brought Hollywood specifically and American popular culture broadly" (p. 1) ought to neglect a volume that ranges from a scrupulous analysis (by Lester D. Friedman) of Edward Slobin's poignant film about the emotional penalties of assimilation, *His People* (1925), to the social meaning that Sumiko Higashi draws from the scandal that crooner Ed-

die Fisher caused in leaving Debbie Reynolds for Elizabeth Taylor (Hebrew name: Elisheva). *Hollywood's Chosen People* also addresses the history of Jewish persecution, whether as represented in the improbable career of Oskar Schindler or as envisioned on native grounds in David Mamet's police procedural *Homicide* (1991). When ethnic studies and film studies interact, stereotypes are of course an inescapable object of scrutiny. Only two examples are provided in the introduction to *Hollywood's Chosen People* of antisemitic stereotypes. In Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), a pair of nightclub owners, brothers whose surname is Flatbush, are shown exploiting black musicians. The editors do not however quote Lee's apt response to the accusation, which is the defense of an artist who wasn't commenting on the misbehavior of Jews as a group but of these two particular fictional characters. (And not even the Anti-Defamation League would deny the plausibility of such exploitation.) The editors even object to the portrait of Les Grossman (Tom Cruise) in the Ben Stiller parody, *Tropic Thunder* (2008), as though no Jewish film producer in the history of the industry could ever have been so avaricious a vulgarian. The movie is, after all, a comedy; and Wheeler Winston Dixon's chapter on censor Joseph Breen offers plenty of confirmation. The moguls who ran the studios in their heyday were "a filthy, dirty lot.... To attempt to talk ethical value to them is time worse than wasted," Breen argued (quoted on p. 58). Moreover the enforcer of the Motion Picture Production Code regarded the studio chiefs as "a rotten bunch of vile people.... These Jews seem to think of nothing but

money making and sexual indulgence” (quoted on p. 68). Such remarks were rancid. But were they demonstrably false? Not even Dixon makes an effort to rebut such charges.

His essay draws too heavily, incidentally, upon Thomas Doherty’s biography, *Hollywood’s Censor* (2009), and upon Neal Gabler’s social history of the moguls, *An Empire of Their Own* (1988), to constitute a fresh contribution to the study of how Jewish “paganism” (quoted on p. 68) collided with the sensibility of a God-fearing nation. An aura of staleness also marks Catherine Portuges’s piece on the immigrant directors of the 1940s and 1950s in particular; for a fuller, richer account, the reader is directed to the 2009 book by another contributor to this volume, Vincent Brook’s *Driven to Darkness*. Peter Kraemer’s “The Good German: Oskar Schindler and the Movies, 1951-1993” is informative. But it should be considered a pendant to the anthology that Yosefa Loshitzky edited, *Spielberg’s Holocaust* (1997), a volume that is based on a conference at the University of Pennsylvania and that exhibits a cogency that *Hollywood’s Chosen People* forsakes. Two of its chapters reveal a certain aimlessness. The inclusion of William Rothman’s tribute to George Cukor, “an assimilated Jew,” is puzzling (p. 96), because his deftness as a director of actresses was matched by his utter indifference to the portrayal of the “Jewish experience” (p. 7) on screen. Rothman’s considerable analytical gifts would have been far better deployed by reflections on the Jewishness of, say, Woody Allen. (Though *Annie Hall* is mentioned once, fleetingly, a still from that movie appears on the cover of *Hollywood’s Chosen People*.) No figure in the history of Hollywood embodies more strikingly both feminist consciousness and ethnic pride (which emerged simultaneously) than Barbra Streisand, who is not ignored even in a book as surprising in its topics as this one. Now that her movie stardom seems to be winding down, a salient question is why so radiantly gifted a performer has left so modest a cinematic legacy. (Will any films besides *Funny Girl* and *Yentl* endure?) But Vivian Sobchack poses a different-

and quite eccentric-question: “Why do so many people in our culture ... *hate* Barbra Streisand?” (p. 211). Surely sellout concerts and best-selling albums suggest that a better question might be why so many more Americans admire her.

Who is a Jew is a conundrum that in contemporary society defies consensus, and this book cannot evade the obligation of an answer. In listing the Jews whose careers are part of cinematic history, the editors err on the side of inclusiveness. Their list identifies actors and actresses who were born to only one Jewish parent, for instance, presumably on the theory that if, say, the son of a white mother like Barack Obama is black, then Helena Bonham Carter (one Jewish grandparent!), Paulette Goddard, Paul Newman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Peter Sellers, and Ben Stiller are of course as Jewish as Lauren Bacall and Dustin Hoffman. Others on the list are even more distantly of Jewish ancestry, and were certainly not raised as Jews. The editors seem to think that actors, simply by having the benefit of a Jewish parent (or even grandparent), are not merely showing their talent as performers, but are also personifications of “Jewish experience” itself. How Joan Collins or Scott Glenn or Jean-Pierre Aumont (among the editors’ examples) somehow managed to convey that experience to audiences is left unexplained. Of course casting choices can complicate the quest to discern the implications of Jewish identity; and the response of comedian Mort Sahl was hardly unique, as when he wondered why the protagonist of Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* (1967) was “a Jewish kid with Gentile parents.” Do Jews subscribe to a common faith? Of course not. Yet the editors also strain at finding a single political or ideological position that they can ascribe to Jewish filmmakers. The tendency to make “politically progressive films that balanced social commentary with cinema’s commercial demands” (p. 10) may be accurate up to a point—but that point ought to stop short of two Mel Brooks movies that the editors carelessly include: *The Producers* (1968) and *Blazing Saddles* (1974).

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