

Conference Report

Title: Judaism and Jewish Religiosity on Screen in the 21st Century: New Approaches to the Study of Productions, Representations & Discourses

Organiser: Junior Research Group „What is Jewish Film?“ Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF and the Post-Doc Network Brandenburg

Location: Online, Zoom

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Introduction:

Judaism and film are deeply intertwined and studies of their various entanglements have been published worldwide (Chyutin & Harris 2021, Aharoni 2021, Peleg 2016, etc.). Given the increasing centrality of religion in Israel, and the growing number of conservative, orthodox and ultra-Orthodox (Hared) Jewish communities in Western countries including the USA, Canada, UK, France, Australia and South Africa since the turn of the 21th century, the subject of Judaism on screen (since when?) is likewise characterized by major shifts in presentation and treatment. Recent years have seen a steady increase in depictions of Haredi and national-religious Jewish communities in Israeli cinema and television (Peleg 2016). In North America and Western Europe, the representation of ultra-Orthodox Jews has gained popularity, accelerated by new SVOD platforms. For example, the Netflix series *Shtisel*, *Unorthodox* and *My Unorthodox Life* have prompted discussions about a new “golden age of Haredi television.” Beyond orthodox denominations, liberal and progressive Jewish religious life has increasingly featured on screen in recent televisual productions, such as Amazon’s *Transparent* or Comedy Central’s *Broad City*. Since the early 2000s, parallel to the developments in mainstream TV and cinema, a new religious “Jewish filmmaking” has emerged with centres in Israel and the USA: Haredi gender-specific film productions – cinema made by women for women and girls only. These new trends around depicting Jewish culture and religious practices in film are, one can surmise, influenced by three key factors: 1) the increased commercialization of Judaism, especially in its orthodox forms, as a commodity to be sold on a globalized TV and SVOD market, 2) the growing ‘religification’ of Jewish Israeli society, and 3) the newly-won access of religious filmmakers to the means of film

production and distribution, both in the cultural mainstream and within their own cultural bubble.

This workshop aimed to address multiple perspectives on the study of Judaism and Jewish religiosity in recent film productions. The following discussion questions formed the core of the workshop's aims: What counts as a film *about* Jewish religion? What methods are useful when examining Jewish religion and film? How are different religious Jewish denominations represented, and in what genres? What customs, rituals, traditions, religious laws or gender relations are addressed and represented in films or TV productions that treat Jewish religious life? In what way do films that treat Jewish religious life create, reproduce, enforce or dismantle images of the various religious groups and denominations? How does contemporary film aestheticize Jewish religious life? What conflicts are found in the interpretation of Jewish religious practice and its political, economic, and social representations in film/ television/ SVOD?

The workshop took place over two days from July 5-6. Participants, senior and junior scholars, attended from universities in seven different countries. The panels consisted of two to three speakers and were concluded by an open discussion.

Topics and ideas:

In his keynote "Religious imagery in Israeli Cinema and TV, Past, Present, Future", YARON PELEG (University of Cambridge) spanned three phases of Jewishness in contemporary Israeli film: 1) the esoteric phase up to the 1990s, 2) the political phase of the 2000s, and the 3) popularization phase from the 2010s onwards. Peleg argued that in the past, Israeli movies like the Kuni Lemel-trilogy or the 1990s *The Appointed* depicted religious Jews as something exotic, pieces of museum exhibits, „alien,“ a „tribe we don't know.“ This changed in the watershed year of 2000, when Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* and Joseph Cedar's *Time of Favor* critically addressed Haredi and settler societies. Above all, TV series in the years to come made these two – formerly marginal communities in Jewish-Israeli popular culture – more relatable, likable, identifiable and familiar to wider audiences. The political intentions of these fundamentalist groups could be disguised by the genre of (romantic) comedy, such as in *Shtisel*, *Srugim* or *Shababnikim*. Via financial aid from the religious Avi Chai Foundation and others, the radical religiosity of the two Jewish orthodoxies in Israel appeared softened. Still, recent productions like HBO's *Our Boys* or the mini-serial *Autonomies* handled them rather

critically and painted dystopian – in a sense realistic – visions. In the future, argued Peleg, we might see a further convergence of settler and Haredi Judaism in society and in media as such, dependent on the filmmakers. With rising authoritarianism in Israel, he judged the prospects for artistic output as poor.

The contemporary changes in the representation of Jewish religiosity on screen were the subject of several papers at the workshop. RACHEL CROSBY (Bangor University) discussed the image of religious Jewish Women in American Sitcoms of the 21st century. She argued, that in series from *Big Bang Theory* to *Transparent*, negative portrayals of female Jewish religiosity prevail. Andreas Jacke (Berlin) remarked how in the US-series *The L-Word*, one of television's first queer production with an ensemble cast of lesbian and bisexual female characters, the figure of the orthodox Jewess Jenny Schecter became highly controversial. KLAUS DAVIDOWICZ (University of Vienna) illustrated how the mythological female character of Lilith has undergone changes in cinematic representation over the last 60 years or so. His talk treated exploitation of this figure in erotic B-movies to examples in new Jewish horror genres such as the 2012 production *The Possession*.

LORENZI LESCHI (Université Paris Cité) demonstrated how the US-movie *The Believer* presented the rejection of religious Jewish masculinity and the motif of Jewish self-hatred. Traditionally, both antisemitism and (secular) Zionism have been denouncing Jewish religious masculinity as feminine, passive and victimlike. The film illustrates how the protagonist Daniel „Danny“ Balint turned into a Neo-Nazi. At the end of the movie, Judaism in the form of the Torah reminds Danny of humanity and the pointless efforts to avenge the Shoah through violence, Leschi explained. The utopian merger of secular Zionist masculinity with modern Haredi yeshiva masculinity in the Israeli TV series *Shababnikim* was topic of the paper of EIK DÖDTMANN (Film University Babelsberg).

New trends were also detected in the reactions of non-Jewish audiences to religious Judaism on screen. MICHAELA WÜNSCHE (University of Marburg) asked whether the wave of representation of Jewish Orthodoxy in *Unorthodox*, *Our Boys* or *Rough Diamonds* actually damaged the image of Jewish religion or Jewish-Israeli society. The discussants reached the conclusion that this discourse – also in the special case of Germany – needs further examination. In contrast, VERENA HANNA DOPPLINGER (University of Vienna) showed that productions which use the topic of either ethnical or spiritual *passing*, like *The Attachée* or *Unchained*, provide space for rethinking religious Jewish identities and open new perspectives.

As for the new approaches, several participants introduced anthropological methods and perspectives in the field. When examining the action movies of confessional female US-Jewish filmmaker Robin Saex Garbose, CELIA ROTHENBERG (McMaster University Hamilton) exemplified how within the framework of Jewish religiosity filmmaking itself becomes „material religion.“ Rothenberg illustrated the tension between the suspension of entertainment in Orthodox Judaism and the long history of story-telling within the Jewish religious tradition. She further argued, that the emergence of a Jewish „Holy-Wood“ can be considered as the formation of a new counter-counterpublic. By applying the ritual theory from Anthropology, NAFTALI COHEN (Concordia University Montreal) examined the usage of the of Bar/Bat Mizwah ritual in recent English speaking productions like *Touch by an Angel*, *Sydney to the Max*, *Being Erica*, or *Orange is the new black*. Cohen illustrated how the TV series show patterns of infelicitous events that hamper the realization of the Jewish rite of passage. In all examples, though, the ritual was ultimately performed in new, diverse ways. Cohen argued that the TV series indicate that Jewish religious identity, especially in the US, remains essential to Jewish Americans.

In the concluding roundtable, OLGA GERSHENSON (University of Massachussets Amherst) asked panellists to consider the present and future of Judaism and film. Celia Rothenberg noted the media-turn in Jewish Studies and religious studies, with its focus on the material aspects of film that create contemporary religion. NATHAN ABRAMS (Bangor University) asked us to take a closer look at the industry behind the films and urged us to analyse sound, i.e. music and voice, more intensively. He pointed out that the explosion of Jewish content on digital streaming platform is yet to be fully accounted for. Abrams also criticized that studies on Jewish films remain largely resistant to mainstream theory, just as mainstream TV and film studies remain largely resistant to what scholars in the field of Judaism and film do. With reference to film theory, DAN CHYUTIN (Tel Aviv University) pointed at his own „Judaic film theory,“ which is currently in the making. Chyutin is not so much interested in what film can teach us about Jewish representation or Jewish reception, but how certain Judaic traditions influence the basic traits of the filmic medium in terms of cinematic language, aesthetics, affect, and also anthology. Following on from this, KLAUS DAVIDOWICZ (University of Vienna) stressed that much research on Judaism and film has been done from a Christian point of view. Research should ideally be conducted in interdisciplinary groups, he argued. Davidowicz also stressed how Jewish films, especially in Europe with its small Jewish population, shape the image of Jewish life and culture for a mainstream non-Jewish audience. Finally, YARON PELEG (University of Cambridge) suggested that a workshop on

Judaism and Jewishness in film could not have included many Israeli productions until a few decades ago. He noted that Israeli culture is increasingly coming into the orbit of Jewish Studies.

Summary:

The workshop brought together senior and junior scholars from the field of Jewish Studies, film and media studies, history, and anthropology. While to a large extent the emphasis in the papers was placed on the representation of Jewish religiosity in film, participants also presented fruitful approaches from the fields of the anthropology of religion and religious study. This produced a surprisingly rich range of the material, which inspired many to conduct further research. Overall, attendees concluded that future research should emphasize the effects of film culture – including the context, production, funding, distribution, reception of films – on Judaism. A publication of the papers is planned for 2024.

Conference overview:

Wednesday, July 5

3:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. CET

Address of welcome Lea Wohl von Haselberg, Film University Babelsberg

Introduction Eik Dödtmann, Film University Babelsberg

3:30 p.m. to 3:55 p.m.

Keynote: Yaron Peleg, Cambridge University

"Religious imagery in Israeli Cinema and TV, Past, Present, Future"

4 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Panel 1 „Religious Jewish femaleness & sexual identities“

Rachel Crosby (Bangor University): *Representations of Religious Jewish Women in 21st-Century American Sitcoms*

Andreas Jacke (Berlin): *Trauma of Judaism and Lesbian Sexuality: The (orthodox) character of Jenny Schechter in The L-Word (2004-2009)*

Celia Rothenberg (McMaster University Hamilton): *Confessional Jewish Film Production: Action Adventure Films produced by and for Women only*

Chair: Dan Chyutin (Tel Aviv University)

5 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Break

5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Panel 2 „Religious Jews encountering alterity“

Michaela Wunsch (Philipps-Universität Marburg): *Being-in-the-world as ‚Ultra-Orthodox‘ in Shtisel and Unorthodox*

Verena Hanna Dopplinger (University of Vienna): *Encountering the Other: Constructing Jewish identity outside of Israel in contemporary Israeli TV series*

Ina Holev (University of Mainz): *Jewishness and affective ethnic spectatorship in Shiva Baby (2010) - cancelled*

Chair: Klaus Davidowicz (University of Vienna)

Thursday, July 6

3 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Panel 3 „Jewish ritual and Jewish law in audio-visual art“

Naftali Cohn (Concordia University Montreal): *B’nai Mitzvah in The New Golden Age of Television: Ritual Theory and Contemporary Understandings of The Impact of Jewish Ritual*

Matan Nahaloni (Tel Aviv University): *Koshering audio-visual art: Shtisel as a case for exploring the relationship between Judaism and photographic media - cancelled*

Chair: Celia Rothenberg (McMaster University Hamilton)

4 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Panel 4 „Jewish mythology in contemporary film“

Naomi Simone Borwein (University of Windsor): *The Jewish Vampire - cancelled*

Klaus Davidowicz (University of Vienna) *Lilith in Film*

Chair: Nathan Abrams (Bangor University)

5 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Break

5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Panel 5 „Concepts of religious Jewish masculinity“

Tal Malka (Tel Aviv University): *Judging by its End: Perpetrator Trauma in the Television Series Our Boys - cancelled*

Lorenzo Leschi (Université Paris Cité): *Jewish self hatred in The Believer (Henry Bean, 2001)*

Eik Dödtmann (Film University Babelsberg): *Haredi Comedy and the Yeshiva world of the Israeli TV series Shababnikim*

Chair: Yaron Peleg (University of Cambridge)

6:30 p.m. to 7:15 p.m.

Round table: Approaches, Trends, Discourses

Celia Rothenberg, McMaster University Hamilton

Nathan Abrams, Bangor University

Dan Chyutin, Tel Aviv University

Klaus Davidowicz, University of Vienna

Yaron Peleg, University of Cambridge

Moderation: Olga Gershenson, University of Massachusetts Amherst

7:15 p.m. to 7:20 p.m.

Final remarks Eik Dödtmann, Film University Babelsberg