

MEDIA JUDAICA

***Jewish Film and Jewish Studies: Proceedings of a Conference held at Harvard University on November 13-14, 1989 on the Role of Jewish Film in Teaching and Research in Jewish Studies.* Edited by Charles Berlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, 1991.**

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Introduction

In late 1989, Charles Berlin, Lee M. Friedman Bibliographer in Judaica of the Harvard College Library, called together archivists, librarians, museum professionals, educators, filmmakers, and others for a conference to promote the integration of Jewish film into Jewish Studies classrooms and research programs. The conference was scheduled to coincide with the publication of *Guide to Judaica Videotapes in the Harvard College Library* (1989), a catalog of more than 1,000 titles held by that repository.

The publication of the *Guide* is a welcome addition to the growing number of bibliographic resources available on Jewish motion-picture holdings in the United States. As any archivist or librarian who regularly deals with researchers of Jewish film can attest, information on archival film holdings is scattered and sometimes out of date, making the locating of Jewish film footage difficult for the researcher, who must often rely entirely on the knowledge of the archivist to whom he or she turns. The success or failure of film research objectives also depends largely on the functioning of a loose network of Jewish film professionals who informally keep each other aware of new acquisitions and of other news related to Jewish footage. The Harvard conference provided a valuable opportunity to broaden that network.

The motion picture is a type of artifact which hardly existed a century ago. The accumulated experience of librarians and academics in the conceptualization, interpretation, classification, and care of textual documents such as books and manuscripts is only partly applicable when it comes to the scholarly and bibliographic treatment of film. (Even an appropriate vocabulary for this task is

lacking, though recent years have witnessed the coining of new terms such as *filmography* and *discography*, as well as new usage of existing words, such as *media*.) But the past decade or so has given rise to the increasing use of visual media such as photographs and film as objects of study and tools for instruction, helping to confirm their value as documents, while posing new problems for librarians, archivists, and scholars.

For example, technical and conceptual factors inhibit the full use of pictorial documents by scholars and teachers. The viewing of film and videotape requires expensive machinery that is often unavailable in the average college classroom. Brittle old films must be treated as restricted materials in archives, requiring costly restoration and transfer to tape as preconditions for public access. Videotape, while easier to use than film, has perhaps the shortest shelf life of any type of cinematic document and thus poses the greatest preservation problems. Then, too, the lack of established bibliographic standards for classifying motion pictures impedes both interlibrary information-sharing and the accessibility of the materials.

Most educators have had little experience in grappling with the issues of presenting film in the curriculum. For instance, should film be presented in the classroom as a primary or secondary source, as historical evidence, or as literary construction? What methodology will the instructor use in the contextualization of film for the classroom? How much will Jewish Studies turn to other disciplines, such as anthropology, literary criticism, and social and cultural history, for direction in interpreting the filmic document? And what is "Jewish film"? While a strict definition of the term may not always be relevant to the use of

Jewish film in the classroom, the formulation of realistic collection policies for libraries and archives requires some examination of the issue. The Harvard conference and its proceedings represent a tentative first step towards dealing with these questions and concerns.

Israeli Film Archives

In "Jewish Film Archives in Israel: The State of the Field," Marilyn Gold Koolik, Director of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, provides a survey of the history of film production in Israel and of the development of Israel's various archives for this medium, plus a summary of the types of film held in Israeli institutions and of advances in the preservation and cataloging of visual materials.

Koolik's report calls to mind the diversity embodied by the term "Jewish film." She notes that while the history of filmmaking in Israel dates back to the 19th century, pre-statehood Palestine lagged behind the West in the development of cinema as an entertainment medium. The production of entertainment films in Israel was a rarity until 1948, with earlier films tending to be documentaries and newsreels produced as propaganda by Zionist organizations for local audiences. Film productions in Israel are still by and large the products of state enterprise or of various political and social welfare organizations.

The state appears to have recognized the importance of organizing and preserving its film legacy, and archives in Israel are heavily subsidized. Israeli efforts at bibliographic control of film material include the computerized catalog of the Steven Spielberg Film Archive, which is part of the ALEPH information retrieval system of the

Institute of Contemporary Jewry's Bibliographic Center. (The ALEPH program is used in all Israeli universities, which are linked online through the DECNET communications network.) Another project of the Spielberg Archive is the Israel Filmography Database Project, which will incorporate all Israeli and Jewish film held in Israel. One result of this project has been the recent publication of *Films of the Holocaust: An Annotated Filmography of Collections in Israel*, by Sheba Skirball (1990).

The cooperation between Israeli film archives and their efforts to move towards bibliographic standardization might serve as a model for Jewish film archives in the United States. However, American Jewish institutions must deal with many issues that are not faced by their Israeli counterparts. Most Jewish libraries and archives lack the governmental funding enjoyed by Israeli institutions, and are thus forced to rely on the vicissitudes of fluctuating private and public funding. In the United States, Jewish film collections reside in all sorts of institutions, including the Library of Congress and the National Archives, making a national network of Jewish film information a complicated undertaking. Standardization of cataloging format and terminology for film material has still not been firmly established – for motion-picture collections in general, to say nothing of Jewish film. The use of ALEPH as a model may be inappropriate for film collections in American repositories, which must consider the benefits of designing systems that are compatible with the widespread Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN).

Sephardic Film in Israel

Government support of film production brings to mind other issues. Any classroom presentation of Jewish film must take into account the *context* of the work under study. Israeli films, with their Zionist and Hebraic predilections, present quite different images of Jewish history and reality than do films made in the United States, which have their own political biases. Neither can be utilized as value-free primary sources. While this topic was not extensively discussed at the Harvard conference, another speaker, Haim Shiran, a Senior Producer-Director at Israel Educational Television, provides examples of how politics shape film production in his lec-

ture, "The Role of Educational Television in Israel: The Sephardic Heritage – A Case Study."

A filmmaker with a commitment to building identity among members of the Sephardic community in Israel through educational TV productions, Shiran admits that he has chosen to make films about the cultural past of Sephardim, rather than documentaries about their lives in present-day Israel, because the latter would "require evaluating their situation from economic, cultural, and social points of view [which cannot be done] without transforming the film into a political one – leading to potential conflicts with his employer, the Israel Television Network (ITN).

While Shiran has managed to complete and broadcast several TV programs on Sephardic themes, he complains that Israeli critics dismiss Sephardic films as "folklore" on the grounds that "they are too slow, naive, unsophisticated, and that the music is monotonous." He notes that, in contrast, "a 'naive' film that comes from Peru or Czechoslovakia, preferably by way of a film festival in Europe or the United States, receives praise." Shiran's comments remind us that the production of culture and the presentation of history are often shaped by dominant political ideologies. This is especially the case with film productions, which have traditionally required financial resources not usually available to those outside of, or at odds with, the dominant power structure.

Shiran does not neglect to place his relative success as a maker of Sephardic films in the context of Israeli political and social unrest in the 1970s. As he points out, Israeli policymakers blamed the increasing militancy of disadvantaged Oriental Jews on the failure of the state's post-1948 "melting pot" ideology. "Pluralism" became the new rallying cry of establishment intellectuals, and the ITN was one agency enlisted to promote brotherhood and cultural understanding among Israel's different ethnic groups. Shiran's projects fit in with the new agenda and were therefore given support.

But Shiran reminds us that there are other avenues of cultural self-expression which can be employed on the grassroots level. He points to the influence that homemade cassettes of Sephardic music (sometimes known as *muzikah*

taḥanah merkazit, or "Central Bus Station Music," because its main distribution outlet was originally the flea market that surrounds Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station) has exerted on mainstream Israeli culture in the last decade or so. The music has "infiltrated" Israeli radio and has had an impact on other Israeli popular music.

In the film world, the availability of magnetic-tape cassettes of another kind has revolutionized public access to the motion-picture medium. Video has rendered the home-movie camera obsolete for the recording of communal and family events, which are increasingly documented. Archives and libraries have barely begun to collect this "raw" documentary footage, to formulate the ways in which it might be used by researchers and educators, or to grapple with the special preservation problems posed by video. While 8mm and 16mm black-and-white home movies from the 1920s and '30s almost always need restoration of some sort, they have often survived the decades in relatively good shape. The prognosis for videotape is much bleaker: most videotape shows signs of deterioration within ten years, and only state-of-the-art cold storage may ensure its permanence beyond that time frame. The public, the motion-picture industry, and the archival world have yet to seriously face the fact that many of the world's current events are now being visually recorded on a highly perishable base.

Israel and the Holocaust in Film

Both Shiran and Igal Bursztyn share an uneasiness with the notion of film as a medium for "the preservation of culture." Shiran professes distaste for "folk-style" films, in which plot and character development are subordinate to the portrayal of "exotic" customs. He appears to equate this somewhat outmoded style of ethnographic filmmaking with patronization and voyeurism.

In "Film in Israel and the Creation/Preservation of Jewish Culture," Bursztyn, a Lecturer at Tel Aviv University's Department of Film and Television as well as a film producer and director, speaks about the problematics of the term "preservation of culture," even as he struggles to formulate definitions of Israeli and Jewish culture. Bursztyn also equates the term with "folklore," which in his opinion has been

offered up as an "alternative to culture" to an Israeli public that has been distanced from their Diaspora roots by the exigencies of secular Zionist ideology.

Bursztyn was one of the few speakers at the conference who chose to draw a distinction between Israeli and Jewish culture. While the bias toward Israeli film in the work under review is understandable in light of the nature of Harvard's videotape collection, which constitutes the largest repository of Israel-related motion pictures outside the State of Israel, the elision of the distinction between Israeli and Jewish film as a whole reflects disturbing trends within the American Jewish community.

For many American Jews, ethnic identity is emphasized by a fascination with the two major events in twentieth-century Jewish history – the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. This exclusivity of focus has led to the neglect of other facets of Jewish culture and of the American Jewish experience. In this regard, the Harvard conference was no exception. Every major address but one was on the subject of Israeli Jewish film, and all screenings, with again one exception, were of Holocaust films. Perhaps future conferences will display more cognizance of the diversity of Jewish film, which includes imagery of Jewish life in Europe and the United States as well as Israel, and which encompasses other historical events besides the Holocaust.

Bursztyn's address is exceptional also for its consciousness of films as *artifacts*, as documents which must be studied not only in terms of content, but also in terms of context, as products of specific eras and milieus. Far from lamenting the fact that much of early Hebrew film consisted of propaganda, he compares the "sincerity" of the "film-speech" of the Israeli cinema (which, to quote Roland Barthes (1979, p. 190) "produces rare, threadbare myths: either transient, or clumsily indiscreet," which "by their very being ... label themselves as myths, and point to their masks") with the more artful and harder-to-decipher "metalanguage" of the slicker, Western entertainment film. Bursztyn goes on to chart one aspect of Israeli film – the handling of conflict – through six decades, by examining the styles and dramatic structures of several movies. His analytical, interdisciplinary approach is a valuable example of the

rewards that might be reaped by adapting the methodologies of anthropology, literary criticism, and popular-culture studies to the study and interpretation of Jewish film.

Film in the Classroom

The title of the fourth and final article, "The Uses of Jewish Film in Teaching and Research," is a misnomer, as it examines only the uses to which film might be put in the classroom, and does not explore its value as a research tool or subject. The author of the paper, Bernard Dov Cooperman, Louis L. Kaplan Professor of Jewish History at the University of Maryland at College Park, devotes most of his article to exploring the potential use of Hebrew-language film as an instructional device for language teachers. He eventually moves on to other areas, however, and makes the useful point that the study of films based on novels can lead to classroom discussions on "complex issues of literary interpretation." Cooperman uses Vittorio da Sica's dramatization of Giorgio Bassani's novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, as an example of how the distortion of a literary work can draw students' attention both to the structural devices of text and film, and to the ways in which political and social agendas shape cultural production.

Unfortunately, the author is less analytical when it comes to examining the use of film as a historiographical tool. Cooperman dismisses most documentary film as "superficial" and sees little application for this medium in the college classroom. We have all seen bad movies about Jews, Israel, the Holocaust, and other historical events which trivialize and distort these subjects. But there is no escaping the fact that, nowadays, most people are exposed to history and current events largely through the filter of TV movies and public-television documentaries. Except for the relatively small number of people who visit research libraries and archives, most people will see Jewish film footage only in repackaged forms such as documentaries and feature films. Even researchers find most archival films inaccessible and/or uncontextualized.

The conference included a demonstration of the prototype of the "Interactive Encyclopedia of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust," which is planned as an installation at the Learning Center of the

Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. The "Interactive Encyclopedia," a videodisc and computer program that incorporates film and still images, is one example of how the increasing use of raw footage and vintage films in museum exhibits may provide ideas for the utilization of material now lying dormant in archives.

Cooperman makes the mistake of considering newsreels, propaganda, and documentaries mere purveyors of "historical footage," rather than as political and cultural *texts* worthy of interpretation and literary exegesis. Like many, he treats the motion picture as an *illustration* of history rather than as an artifact that deserves study on its own terms. Future conferences might address the issue of the diversity of the film form, as well as of its subject matter.

Jewish film encompasses many different *types* of documents. These variations are reflected in the collection policies of the major Jewish film archives in the United States. For instance, the Jewish Museum's National Jewish Broadcast Archives collects only material that has been broadcast on television, while the National Center for Jewish Film emphasizes the Yiddish feature films in its collections. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research possesses the largest collection of home movies of Jewish towns in Eastern Europe, and, in general, devotes most of its energies to the collection of raw, amateur footage. The Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University is building an archives of video testimonies of Holocaust survivors. While all of these types of documents share certain characteristics – they consist of visual sequences on an acetate, nitrate, or magnetic-tape base – they differ from one another as much as paper-based textual documents such as unpublished manuscripts, letters, books, and telephone directories.

These differences require different approaches in contextualization and bibliographic control. Perhaps the next conference in this field will use the precedent established by the Harvard conference to explore some of these issues and to strengthen the network of Jewish film librarians and archivists.

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Linda P. Lerman, *Judaica Curator, Yale University, is President of the Association of Jewish Libraries (1990-1992), and former Judaica Librarian at the HUC-JIR Klau Library (Cincinnati, 1976-1979).*

An Open Letter to the Members of AJL

August 8, 1990

Lest the point of this letter be lost in too many words, let me record right at the start my happiness and thanks at being selected for the AJL Life Membership Award.

At the banquet in Jerusalem, when the Award was presented so beautifully and eloquently, I was literally speechless; that is, on good advice, I had not prepared a speech. I could not have known ahead of time what would be said or how the official certificate would read. Now that I do know, it is still not easy to "respond."

I knew in advance, of course, that I had been chosen for the honor; and I suspected that there was to be a tie-in with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Association of Jewish Libraries because I had been a founder and its first president. I am inordinately proud of my involvement, as a catalyst, in the merger of two earlier organizations into AJL and of my activity over the years in the profession. But it must be said that much recognition is due those who founded and led those earlier groups, the many who helped to shape AJL twenty-five years ago, and those who have, through the years, turned AJL into the significant professional vehicle that it is today.

About all I was able to blurt out at the banquet – overwhelmed as I was with emotion – was thanks and a comment that suggested that I have a kind of parental feeling towards AJL itself and towards many of the younger people with whom I have worked in AJL, in the Libraries of Hebrew Union College, and in a large variety of professional undertakings. But I have also learned much from my "children" and colleagues, past and present, just as I learned from my mentors in my earlier years.

As we celebrate AJL's twenty-five years, I am delighted that you tendered me a Life Achievement Award, as I also celebrate my fortieth anniversary at HUC and my sixty-fifth birthday. I feel very comfortable about the future of our profession, as outstanding people like Linda Lerman, incoming President of the Association, take over leadership and build new strength in Judaica librarian-

ship. It has been heartening to be recognized for my life's activities, and it is heartening to feel hopeful about the future.

Sincerely,

Herbert C. Zafren

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(Continued from p. 134)

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Book Received

Constructive and Destructive Uses of Film as Propaganda: Case Studies from Jewish History, [by] Marilyn Gold Koolik, Director, Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, 1992. 25 p. (The Max and Irene Engel Levy Memorial Lecture, October 10, 1991.)

The author of this pamphlet is one of the contributors to the proceedings of the conference on Jewish film, which is reviewed above.