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### Abstract

Every scholar of modern Jewish history is familiar with the poet Judah Leib Gordon's 1862 exhortation to European Jewry: "Be a man in the street and a Jew at home" (as quoted in Ashkenazi, xv, 48). This motto takes on new relevance in the work of historian Ofer Ashkenazi, for whom public and private behaviors play out in the spatial terms of Weimar cinematic representation. Within the world of the street, Jews display only authentic bourgeois mannerisms and appearances; in private, the masquerade ceases to be necessary. According to Ashkenazi, we see this duality reflected in films made by Jewish directors and writers for whom public and domestic spaces are necessarily linked in the project of representing Jewish identity. [excerpt]

### Keywords

Weimar film, Jews, Ofer Ashkenazi, Jewish identity, Germany, Jewish talent

### Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | German Language and Literature | Jewish Studies

## On Ashkenazi's *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*

Kerry Wallach

*Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*. By Ofer Ashkenazi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 234 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-34136-4 (hc). US \$90.00

Every scholar of modern Jewish history is familiar with the poet Judah Leib Gordon's 1862 exhortation to European Jewry: "Be a man in the street and a Jew at home" (as quoted in Ashkenazi, xv, 48). This motto takes on new relevance in the work of historian Ofer Ashkenazi, for whom public and private behaviors play out in the spatial terms of Weimar cinematic representation. Within the world of the street, Jews display only authentic bourgeois mannerisms and appearances; in private, the masquerade ceases to be necessary. According to Ashkenazi, we see this duality reflected in films made by Jewish directors and writers for whom public and domestic spaces are necessarily linked in the project of representing Jewish identity.

In his innovative contribution to Weimar Jewish history and cinema studies, Ashkenazi compellingly argues that the urban and immigrant experiences of Jewish filmmakers—particularly their investment in becoming further integrated into German culture—shaped many of the films made in Weimar Germany. Moreover, he boldly asserts that even more than theatrical works, "film was the main contribution of German Jews" to Weimar culture, and that Weimar films to a large extent "promote the formation of a liberal, multicultural, transnational bourgeois society, in which 'the Jew' could be different, but equal" (14–15). By

making a case for film as the quintessential mode of creative expression for Jews in Weimar Germany, Ashkenazi insists that historians and other scholars consider film alongside literature, theater, art, and other forms of German-Jewish cultural production. This move follows recent turns in German and Jewish studies to explore cinematic works as an integral part of twentieth-century visual culture. It also connects arguments about “Jewish talent” and mastery of theater acting with Jewish film performances, thereby building on the claims of such early critics as Arnold Zweig as well as more recent work by scholars including Galili Shahar. As a way of grappling with the potentially essentialist (and often anti-Semitic) nature of claims about the link between perceived otherness and Jewish artistic talent, Ashkenazi notes that although it is “at best, problematic,” this portrayal “is, however, a fair depiction of an influential group within German urban Jewry” (21).

In *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*, Ashkenazi skillfully blends formal analysis of popular and lesser-known films with a broader discussion of Jewish acculturation. In five concise chapters, the book addresses genres key to his central argument that Jewish filmmakers “formulated and exploited” the conventions of Weimar genre film: urban comedies, domestic melodramas, horror film, and exotic adventure and war films (13). In chapter 2, Ashkenazi focuses on visual mimicry of Germanness and stereotypical representation of Jewishness in such comedies as Hans Steinhoff’s *Family Day at the Prellsteins* (1927), Reinhold Schünzel’s *Heaven on Earth* (1926–27) and *Hercules Maier* (1927), and Ernst Lubitsch’s *I Don’t Want to Be a Man* (1918) and *Meyer from Berlin* (1919). Changes of clothing serve as a coded mask for both gender and Jewish identities, the latter expressed fully only in private. Failed attempts to convey authentic (Jewish) identity in spaces including nightclubs lead alienated characters back to the safety of their apartments.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take up the genres of domestic melodrama, horror film, and exotic adventure and war films. In his readings of Karl Grune’s *Jealousy* (1925) and *The Street* (1923), Ashkenazi reiterates “that role-play can express authenticity (and efface individual ‘otherness’)” in melodramas as in comedies (46). Here he argues against Siegfried Kracauer’s reading of *The Street* as exemplary of the German psyche, suggesting instead that the film mirrors the Jewish immigrant experience of desiring not to be other. Additional sections focus on the tragic consequences of perceived difference in Paul Czinner’s *Nju* (1924) and Fritz Lang’s early films, and in F. W. Murnau’s *The Walk into the Night* (1921), from which Ashkenazi borrowed the title of his 2010 book on reason and subjectivity

in Weimar film (published in Hebrew). In chapter 4, Ashkenazi explores several adaptations of *Alraune*, Hanns Heinz Ewers's 1911 novel about a biologically other monster/femme fatale. As part of his persuasive claim that this tale "relates how genetic heritage determines personality and behavior," Ashkenazi considers the consequences of interpreting *Alraune* as a cipher for Jewish otherness, and thus potentially positioning Jews as biologically or racially different (81). Chapter 5 follows the (coded Jewish) stranger through psychologically and physically traumatic adventures in such films as Joe May's *Mistress of the World* (1919–20) and Richard Oswald's *The Transformation of Doctor Bessel* (1927), in which the protagonists struggle to adapt and integrate themselves into foreign environments.

His strong focus on cinematic analysis notwithstanding, Ashkenazi's thought-provoking arguments are rooted mainly in historical scholarship. He engages the ideas of select scholars of Jewish film (Neal Gabler, Omer Bartov, and, to a lesser extent, S. S. Prawer, Noah Isenberg, Valerie Weinstein), but relies more heavily on canonical works of German-Jewish history (especially David Sorkin, Marion Kaplan, Steven Aschheim). Missing from Ashkenazi's study is a deeper engagement with exciting recent work on Jewish film by scholars of German-Jewish cultural studies and Yiddish cinema (such as Darcy Buerkle, Lisa Silverman, and Warren Hoffman, to name but a few). Further, the book's bibliography in particular could have benefited from additional copyediting; also lacking from its limited filmography are details crucial to future scholarship, such as where rare films can be viewed.

Finally, Ashkenazi's approach to Jewish identity in Weimar film raises important and necessary questions regarding how we read cinematic texts for Jewishness. Ashkenazi proceeds from the assumption that the varied Jewish backgrounds of such directors as Ernst Lubitsch, Richard Oswald, Fritz Lang, and Joe May resulted in some common methods of portraying culture. Can we surmise that the Jewish heritage or shared experiences of these filmmakers sufficed to generate certain distinctly Jewish forms of cinematic expression? In addition, Ashkenazi's careful study deals more with "symbolism that invoked a conspicuously Jewish experience" than with films that treat explicitly Jewish topics, and he chooses not to integrate many sources that reflect Jewish perspectives on the critical reception of Weimar films (15). But did Jews interpret these dually encoded films differently from non-Jews? What roles did Jewish spectators play in the reception of Weimar films? And were cinematic constructions of Jewishness and Jewish desires—as well as Jewish difference—more prevalent, and for many filmgoers perhaps even

more “real,” than the realities they reflected? As a critical work that opens up these and other questions, Ashkenazi’s study provides a worthwhile examination of Weimar cinema in view of contemporary German-Jewish history.

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