



The Hadassah  
Research Institute  
on Jewish Women

---

WORKING PAPER SERIES

NO. 1

May 1998

**I of the Beholder:**  
*Jews and Gender in*  
*Film and Popular Culture*

*By Sylvia Barack Fishman, Ph.D.*

HRIJW  
Brandeis University -mailstop 079  
Waltham, MA 02254-9110

Tel. 781-736-2064 • Fax 781-736-207  
email: [hrijw@brandeis.edu](mailto:hrijw@brandeis.edu)  
[www.brandeis.edu/hrijw](http://www.brandeis.edu/hrijw)



This essay is adapted from "Picturing Jews and Gender," my analysis of eight focus groups conducted with Jewish and non-Jewish women and men under the auspices of the Morning Star Commission. Members of the Morning Star Commission, created and funded by Hadassah Southern California, chaired by Joan Hyler, and facilitated by Dr. Mara Fein, include film, entertainment, media, and advertising industry executives, artists, writers, and scholars, who have donated their time and expertise in the pursuit of the following goals:

- defining the depiction of Jewish women in television and film,
- demonstrating the impact of those depictions on viewers, and
- devising and implementing a list of policy recommendations which will promote a healthier diversity of images of Jewish women in film and popular culture.

Morning Star Commissioner Claudia Caplan and her Focus Group Committee planned the focus group discussions during Fall 1997 and Winter 1997-98, and consultant Barbara Goldberg of Responsive Research implemented eight focus groups in December 1997 and January 1998. I served as the Commission's Research Consultant during this process.

Stage One of the Morning Star Commission project created an overview of images of Jewish women and men in film and on television. As part of this overview, I assembled "Reinventing the Cinematic Jew: Portrayals of Jewish Women and Men in Film," a one-hour reel of clips comprised of images of Jews ranging chronologically from films of the late 1920s to contemporary film and television in the 1990s. This reel, prepared under the auspices of the International Research Institute for Jewish Women established by Hadassah at Brandeis University (IRIJW), was accompanied by a written discussion of developments in cinematic depiction of Jews.<sup>1</sup> "Reinventing the Cinematic Jew" examined the actual images of Jewish women and men—rather than exploring their impact on the viewing audience.

"Reinventing the Cinematic Jew" suggested a theoretical framework for understanding the evolution of Jewish images in film, asserting that many images of Jews in American films echoed unflattering stereotypes of Jews in earlier historical periods. It also presented a working hypothesis (detailed below) about the ways in which viewers might react to these images.

Stage Two of the Morning Star Commission project explored the impact of media images of Jewish women through focus group research with actual audiences. The Morning Star Commission planned to conduct a series of focus group discussions exploring the ways in which women and men, both Jewish and non-Jewish, of varying ages and levels of religious affiliation, experience images of Jews on film and television. Claudia Caplan and Barbara Goldberg wrote analyses of the focus group discussions for members of the Commission,<sup>2</sup> and I wrote "Picturing Jews and Gender: How Women and Men Perceive Each Other" a new analysis based upon the hypotheses suggested by "Reinventing the Cinematic Jew."

"I of the Beholder" further contextualizes and expands this analysis, placing the focus group data into several frameworks, including cultural representations of Jews, recent research on the sociology of American Jews, cultural representations of ethnic women, and the roles of image and gender in ethnic identity construction.



From "The Jazz Singer" to "A Stranger Among Us"

The seventy-plus years (1927-1998) of American commercial films about Jews can be viewed as bracketed by "The Jazz Singer," (1927) and by Sidney Lumet's 1992 thriller, "A Stranger Among Us," at the contemporary pole. Stretched unevenly between these two films, whose radical difference is dramatically underscored by striking similarities, are decades of acculturation in American Jewish life and changes in depictions of Jews on the cinematic screen.

Following "The Jazz Singer," by the mid-1930s English language films were nearly devoid of overtly Jewish material. Instead the Jewish experience was encoded in stories about other ethnic groups or translated into a generic American experience. During those years in which few ethnic characters or motifs appeared in Hollywood films, "Jewish ethnicity and notions of gender and sexuality were almost entirely de-coupled," as Sonya Michel points out.<sup>3</sup> After World War II, a few cautious explorations of Jews and Jewishness appeared, such as "Gentleman's Agreement," (1947) Elia Kazan's adaptation of Laura Z. Hobson's novel. By the early 1960s a variety of Jewish characters and themes were sympathetically and carefully presented in films such as Otto Preminger's film of Leon Uris' "Exodus" (1960) and Sidney Lumet's film of Edward Lewis Wallant's "The Pawnbroker" (1965). Norman Jewison's cinematic version of the Joseph Stein's hit stage musical "Fiddler on the Roof" (1964) did not appear in film until 1971, but it is faithful to the stage production and the ethos of the 1960s in its Americanized, universalistic translation of Sholom Aleichem's serialized stories.

The decade which spans the late 1960s to the late 1970s--a time of enormous changes in general American society--is a critical transformative period for the cinematic image of Jewish women and men. In the films of 1968 to 1978, Jewish men and women are often pictured attempting to buy themselves American identity by swallowing American material culture whole. After the watershed release of "Goodbye, Columbus" in 1969, films of the



1970s frequently feature vivid, schematically gendered portrayals of Jews. Especially notable are "The Way We Were" (1973); "The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz" (1974); and "Annie Hall" (1978).

In these biting satiric films, the normative public image of Jewish women and Jewish men was transmuted into a series of negative stereotypes. The competence and patience of the ideal Jewish mother seen in Yiddish films such as "Mirele Efros" (1938) underwent a sea change and became bossiness, nosiness, and unending demands. Jewish men were transformed from the nuanced piety, humor and deep compassion of Maurice Shwartz's "Tevye" (1939) to dishonest hustlers or tense, neurotic, overly analytical urban creatures; both caricatures of Jewish men appear together in Mel Brooks' early film "The Producers," (1968) with Zero Mostel playing a conniving theatrical producer who preys on the romantic yearnings of rich, elderly women, and Gene Wilder playing a hyper-anxious accountant at hysterical pitch. In subsequent years some films portraying Jews took a more flattering direction, culminating in the hagiographic, warm, community and family oriented images of "Crossing Delancey" (1988) and "A Stranger Among Us." Nevertheless, the stock types of Jewish men and women presented in earlier films remain prevalent today.

Both "The Jazz Singer" and "A Stranger Among Us" are constructed around a triangular constellation of main characters: on one side, a pious, bearded patriarch who represents Jewish tradition; on the other side, a seductive non-Jewish woman who represents modernity; and in the middle, the patriarch's son, pulled between the paternal authority of traditional values and the lures of modernity and a beautiful woman's arms. Despite these overt similarities, the two cinematic interpretations of the comparative values of tradition and modernity emerge in total opposition. Released at a time when ethnic immigrants were expected to acculturate as completely and quickly as possible, "The Jazz Singer" presents the view that in order to become a real American, the Jew must translate his talents into the American idiom. In Alan Crosland's "The Jazz Singer," Jewish tradition--and Warner



Oland as the bearded Jewish father, a cantor--are portrayed as parochial, anachronistic, self-absorbed and vindictive. May McAvoy as the modern, non-Jewish woman shimmers sympathetically with the promise of creativity, universalism, and fulfillment. Al Jolsen, as the cantor's son, Jack Robins, can hardly be blamed for being alienated by his father's forbidding, repressive civilization.

In contrast, Sidney Lumet's "A Stranger Among Us" appeared after most American Jews had long since acculturated, at a time when ethnic difference was celebrated in American society. Both America and its Jews had undergone radical transformations since the days of "The Jazz Singer." "A Stranger Among Us," brings actress Melanie Griffith as a tough, super-modern blond policewoman into the seemingly archaic Jewish world of Williamsburg, (Brooklyn) New York; however, in this film the bearded Jewish father, a Hasidic rebbe, is the personification of empathy, wisdom, and indestructible human values, while the modern, non-Jewish woman has been bruised by a dangerous world typified by profanity, violence, selfishness, and exploitation. Modernity and traditionalism have been reversed, with tradition now portrayed as offering more human values than unmediated modernity.

### **A Cinematic Tradition of Stereotyped Jews**

When viewers recognize characters in film or television as "Jewish," their reference point is a cultural, literary and cinematic tradition of Jewish stereotypes, rather than their own actual experience. Viewers are not comparing Jewish characters to real Jews they know. They are, instead, drawing on cultural stereotypes created by modern Western writing and decades of Hollywood films and television comedies and dramas. American cultural stereotypes, in turn, often echo stereotypes of Jews which developed during earlier historical periods and settings.



Many nineteenth century Christians in sophisticated Western European cities such as London and Vienna and in the United States believed Jewishness to be essentially pathological, as Sanford Gilman has chillingly demonstrated. Jewish men were perceived as physically weak, hysterical beings, unmanly in their physiologies and psychologies. Reputable works described Jews as having harsh and unmusical, whining voices, large and fleshy facial features, and unathletic feet and legs.<sup>4</sup> Antisemitism created grotesque images--which Diaspora Jews internalized from Freud onward, precipitating the passionate conviction that Jewish men and their images must change.

Hollywood portrayals of Jewish women (which are usually created by Jewish men) are often reflections and vicarious re-enactments of American Jewish men's rejection of their alien status, their projecting of that alien status onto Jewish women, or at the very least their unresolved relationship with their own ethnic and religious identities. Riv-Ellen Prell suggests that "the stereotypical suffocating mother or whiny and withholding wife express ideas about how Jewish men understand their own place in American society":

These stereotypical women represent the anxiety, anger, and pain of Jewish men as they negotiate an American Jewish identity. Jewish women, in these stereotypes, symbolize elements of "Jewishness" or "Americanness" to be rejected. Jewish women represent these features precisely because of their link to Jewish men, whom they do and do not resemble.

As Jewish men worked toward becoming bona fide Americans, Jewish women were increasingly pictured both as the repositories of Jewishness and as obstacles to Jewish men's achievement of their goals. As Paula Hyman explains the dynamic:

Faced with the need to establish their own identities in societies in which they were both fully acculturated and yet perceived as partially Other because they were Jews, Jewish men were eager to distinguish themselves from the women of their community, whom they saw as the guardians of Jewishness. The negative representations of women that they produced reflected their own ambivalence about assimilation and its limits.<sup>6</sup>



Depending on the decade, Jewish women were portrayed as too loyal to tradition, or too materialistic, or too selfish, or too controlling. Many films about Jews have depicted the struggle of Jewish men to acculturate and succeed in America. In the ethos of many such films, when Jewish men can successfully throw off the yoke of their women, they can enter unencumbered into mainstream white American life.

The stereotypical portrayal of the putative Jewish American princess is shaped not only by internalized antisemitic images, but equally by general twentieth century American cultural misogyny.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the specifics of the princess image derive not from earlier Jewish stock characters, but from American cultural and cinematic prescriptions for female deportment. As Jeanine Basinger notes in her study, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, Hollywood films addressed women with "ambivalence" and "knowing pretense," as its films suggested "highly contradictory information" about women's lives: "husbands were the most important thing in the world," but "men apparently were not to be trusted"; "Women were supposed to be sexually desirable, knowing how to tempt and satisfy men, but they were also supposed to be innocent and pure"; and most of all

Women needed to be glamorous and lavishly dressed to gain the attention of men and the envy of other women (this latter being particularly important), but they were greedy little beasts if they coveted expensive clothes and jewelry. Instead of asking for things, they should create stunning outfits out of the draperies or produce a cookie jar crammed with about a million dollars' worth of egg money....<sup>8</sup>

Critical pictures of the bourgeois family, with father as driven wage earner, mother as conspicuous consumer and guardian of the faith, and daughter as the tender trap, were adapted to depictions of Jewish families. American Jewish ingenues in the late 1960s were increasingly described as demanding rather than dissembling, and thus, in Basinger's memorable words, "greedy little beasts." Jewish girls and women were portrayed in this voracious mode and the overarching cinematic portrayal of Jews and Jewishness was defined by materialism. As Riv-Ellen Prell notes, Jewish literary and cinematic heroes "fled



the triptych of Jewish life: hard work, personified by the father-producer; the creation of family, personified by the beautiful, sexual daughter; and the maintenance of Judaism, personified by the mother."<sup>9</sup>

Portrayals of Jewish women often serve another, even more insidious psychological purpose. Semiologically, Jewish women in film are often the signifying Jew, bearing many of the stereotypical "Jewish" characteristics assigned to Jews by antisemitic literature. When Jewish women serve as cultural decoys, Jewish men are free to aspire to mainstream American status. Thus, many films picture Jewish men gaining entrance to white American status through their romantic relationships with non-Jewish women, the gate-keepers to American society. Indeed, the necessity for male leads, Jewish or non-Jewish, to love non-Jewish women may be built into the structure of Hollywood films.

#### Here's [Not] Looking at You, Kid

Feminist film theory is a very useful tool for understanding the mythic power of patterns in film plots, characterizations and images. However, few film analyses focus on the intersection between Jewish ethnicity and gender. Applying feminist film criticism to films about Jews leads to the suggestion that when Jewish men play male leads in typical Hollywood films, their ability to provide mythic satisfactions and to fulfill audience expectations depends on their being paired romantically to objectified, sexual---usually non-Jewish---female icons.

As Laura Mulvey explains in "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," feminist film theory starts from Freud's definition of *scopophilia*, the pleasure of "a controlling and curious gaze," the action of looking which controls by reducing the other(s) to objects. Sitting in the darkened theater, the viewer gazes at the faces, forms, and actions of other people who cannot return the gaze. In a narrative film, the roles of men and women on the screen are divided: the lead male provides a heightened, ego-pleasurable "screen



surrogate," with whom the viewer identifies. The lead woman, on the other hand, is presented as an erotically stylized object potentially available to the male protagonist---and through him to the viewer. The lead male, often a policeman, lawyer, private eye, reporter, businessman or intellectual, is in a position to judge and control the eroticized female. When he finds her vulnerable or flawed in some way, he proceeds to demystify her through investigation, or to punish or "save" her, and/or to perpetuate her mystery through fetishistic scopophilia.<sup>10</sup> This formula is especially pronounced in films by Alfred Hitchcock, and continues in films such as "Dressed to Kill" (1980) and "L.A. Confidential" (1997).

For most of the twentieth century, identified minority figures seldom occupied the male lead slot. Although Jewish actors with non-Jewish names sometimes starred in films of this type, their film personas were usually deracinated. They were not identified as minorities. In narrative films, roles for identified Jewish men---like roles for African-American men---were auxiliary slots, included in order to carry a subtext of importance to the film or to provide a comic foil. In Rob Reiner's "A Few Good Men," (1992) for example, Kevin Pollak plays a Jewish assistant who bears the "Jewish" qualities of deep compassion and extreme caution, while Tom Cruise occupies the role of screen surrogate, opposite Demi Moore.

In order for a Jewish man to "get the girl" and play the male lead, the girl in question needs to fulfill the formula for an eroticized female. Very occasionally has such a woman been portrayed as a Jew (e.g. "Goodbye, Columbus"). Whatever her other flaws, Ali McGraw's Brenda Patimkin, heiress to the Patimkin plumbing fortune, was eroticized and pictured as desirable. And, working faithfully within the formula, Richard Benjamin's Neil Klugman does in fact demystify Brenda through supercilious observations about her materialistic family. He eventually "punishes" her for her failings, sneering at her tears as



the relationship winds to an end. Most often, however, if a Jewish male plays the screen surrogate, it is with an eroticized, objectified non-Jewish female.

Thus, when Woody Allen introduces a clearly and stereotypically ethnic Jewish male lead who pursues, judges, tries to save, but ultimately rejects the eroticized "Annie Hall," (1978) the brilliance of the film arises partially from the ways in which Allen subverts the Hollywood formula. Allen seems to be "passing" as a romantic lead despite his hyperbolic Jewishness. But at the film's memorable Easter Dinner in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, Grammie Hall looks at him and sees a bearded, black frocked Hasid with long red earlocks. She is symbolically "outing" the Jew who dares to stand in narrative shoes which should be occupied by a real American. Allen, Philip Roth and others usher in a wave of novels, films and television programs in which an eroticized "perfect, perfect-stranger, who is as smooth and shiny and cool as custard" kisses the Jewish male, who magically discovers his "nose" and "name" have "become as nothing."

As Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy muses in wonderment:

...for every Eddie yearning for a Debbie, there is a Debbie yearning for an Eddie---a Marilyn Monroe yearning for her Arthur Miller....Who knew, you see, who knew back when we were watching *National Velvet*, that this stupendous purple-eyed girl...on the horse with the riding breeches and the perfect enunciation was lusting for our kind no less than we for hers?<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the stereotyping of the Jewish woman in television and film comes her disappearance. As sweet but emphatically Jewish Paul Reiser looks at tall, lean, blond, lovable Helen Hunt and discovers that he is "Mad About You," the only Jewish woman the plot requires is the comic, vaguely unpleasant Jewish mother who underscores for audiences the hero's Jewish ethnic identity.

### Picturing Jews and Gender: A Working Hypothesis



Based on the preceding critical analysis of cinematic images of Jews over the past seventy years, I suggest the following hypotheses outlining the possible impact of these and similar images on the broad audiences who watch them.

1) Media images of Jews, like literary and dramatic images of Jews, affect the social construction of reality. Audiences perceive certain characteristics as Jewish because they "know" from television, film, literature, and popular culture that these characteristics are found among Jews. Having "learned" that this is what Jews are like, they "see" Jews acting according to these characteristics in real life and the media.

2) Portrayals of Jews in the media produce and perpetuate stereotypical perceptions. Although film-makers, actors, and audiences may be unaware of the fact, the ways in which Jewish women and men are imaged on film echo European antisemitic stereotypes.

3) Jewish and non-Jewish Americans who watch television and film are absorbing stereotypical images of Jews.

4) Jewish femaleness is pictured as a kind of pathology.

5) When Jewish women absorb negative images of themselves, their self-esteem is damaged. They may reject aspects of their Jewish identity in order to feel good about themselves.

6) When Jewish men absorb negative images of Jewish females, they see actual Jewish females through the aura of media portrayals. Jewish men may see Jewish women as unappealing, because they have learned from the media to interpret Jewish femaleness as unappealing.

7) When non-Jews absorb stereotypical media images of Jews, antisemitic stereotypes are increased, especially among populations who do not knowingly interact on a regular basis with Jews.

#### Using Focus Group Research



The Morning Star Commission investigated these hypotheses by implementing eight focus group discussions with Jewish and non-Jewish men and women. Focus group research is recognized as an effective way of examining hypotheses in the social sciences. As focus group scholar Richard Krueger argues, *"Focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry"* (his emphasis). Krueger asserts that when focus groups are designed and implemented properly, they "have high face validity" because "people open up in focus groups and share insights that may not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires, or other data sources." 12

While additional follow-up focus groups in different parts of the country would certainly be desirable, the Morning Star Commission Focus Groups were designed and implemented in ways that make them highly suggestive. Within each focus group, participants typically shared a particular characteristic. As they responded to a semi-structured "script" of questions, they discussed nuanced aspects of many issues which are difficult to probe through survey research. While focus group research generally, including the Morning Star Commission research, does not involve numbers large enough to be considered representative in the same way as quantitative surveys, it is efficient and effective for illuminating the emotions and attitudes of specific subgroups.

### **Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality**

The working hypotheses are based on the assumption that media images, like literary and dramatic images, affect the social construction of reality. Media images are absorbed into the interpretive frameworks of American Jews and non-Jews, and have a clear impact on the way in which Jews are perceived and "Jewishness" is interpreted. The focus group discussions did in fact clearly indicate that media images shape the realities which participants perceived. For example, a Jewish male focus group participant noted



regretfully that commercials slyly utilize anti-New York/ antisemitic images to sell a particular airline:

"You listen to a commercial that talks about an airline that doesn't have pre-assigned seats, and so they're talking about it and they say well those people from New York they'll grab you right out of your seat and take your seat from you. So the connotation that people from New York are pushy and arrogant and always trying to get their way...sometimes that wears off on the Jewish people."

The pushy-New-York-Jew-on-the-airline commercial image foreshadowed a comment in another group by one of the non-Jewish focus group participants. An African American woman said that observing a nineteen-year old Jewish woman on an airplane helped her understand and agree with her own mother, who had always told her that Jews were "totally negative, always bossing, always sharp-tongued." The focus group participant did not say how she "knew" that the young woman was Jewish, aside from her tell-tale behavior:

"She's sniffing and she's crying and had her headphones on...she's going on and on, talking and talking, and I noticed then she had to get up to get something out of the compartment up above, and instead of asking for help, all of this stuff is falling on people's heads. She didn't care. She just sat there doing all this stuff, and it's falling down, and she wouldn't say, 'I'm sorry,' not 'excuse me,' nothing. Then she goes and gets the flight attendant, and gets the help there, and bossing the flight attendant around. There was no consideration."

Over and over again, both Jews and non-Jews described particular Jewish looks and behaviors. These putative signs of Jewishness were repeated in their descriptions of Jews in daily life and in the media. Semiotic indicators of Jewishness included: 1) looking Jewish (noses and eyes); 2) sounding Jewish (voices); 3) acting Jewish (hysterical and domineering); 4) having Jewish attitudes toward money (men are stingy and women are compulsive consumers); 5) displaying Jewish modes of acquiring power (dominating and running things, lacking artistic creativity, but buying creative influence with their vast funds).



### Choosing to be Perceived as Jewish

With such common negative perceptions of Jewish identity, it is not surprising that Jewish participants talked about picking and choosing the situations when they wanted to be perceived as Jews. As Mary Waters points out in her groundbreaking 1990 book *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, "people have more and more latitude about how to self-identify and whether to do so in ethnic terms." Increasingly permeable boundaries in contemporary American society make ethnic identification a matter of choice for white Americans. Whether or not--and when--individuals choose to identify themselves as belonging to a particular ethnic group often depends on whether such identification is rewarded or punished by the people around them. Thus, some American perceive that "in contrast to families for whom there seem to be positive benefits in enhancing an ethnic identity--for example by calling themselves Irish, Italian, or Polish...there are negative social costs associated respectively with labeling children Jewish or Hispanic."<sup>13</sup>

The Morning Star Commission Focus Group data clearly illustrate the impact of environment on whether or not an individual chooses to be identified as a Jew. Jews who have grown up and/or currently live or work in largely non-Jewish environments perceive the outside world as being antisemitic. This perception of hostile surroundings makes them feel that they will be jeopardizing themselves in some way if they identify themselves as Jews. For some participants, like this Jewish male, the association of Jewishness with unpleasant sensations of *difference* began with childhood:

"I generally went to schools that there were very few Jewish students, so it was tough. I felt different, a minority, and the Christmas season was tough, because of singing Christmas carols and Christmas trees. When I was asked to talk a little about Hanukkah, I guess I had mixed emotions. One, it put some attention on me, which was kind of interesting. Everybody was asking me questions about it. On the other hand, I felt different."

Focus group participants were clearest about the negative impact of an antisemitic environment when it came from strangers. Many of the stories they told about being



subjected to verbal slurs occurred in situations in which they were not on their home turf, they were traveling, or participating in an unusual activity, which took them into contact with people they didn't know. One Jewish female participant in the age 18 to 34 group told about the special vulnerability one feels in this kind of situation:

"I was a youth group organizer for a Jewish organization, and we took all the kids to the World Wrestling....Here we were a bunch of little Jewish kids, and a couple of counselors. They found out we were Jewish. Some of the remarks that were coming out of their mouths....I should have said something, but I didn't feel safe."

Within this perception of a hostile environment, any stranger is potentially an antisemite, and unfamiliarity signals danger.

However, many participants also told stories about verbal slurs coming from friends or in-law family members. These comments created a type of cognitive dissonance: on one hand, they didn't like the things that were said, but on the other hand, they couldn't accept that people whom they wanted to like them were saying unpleasant things to them. The most common response to this cognitive dissonance was to explain it away by assuming that friends and family didn't--couldn't--really mean what they were saying. The same comments signalled hostility from a stranger, but didn't really mean anything when uttered by a friend. One Jewish woman in the age 18 to 34 group tried to explain how she differentiated between the actual racism of her boyfriend's 67-year old father and her "friends," who are "just kids." About the boyfriend's father she said:

"He called me a heathen one time....One time I kept peering into the house because I kept ringing the doorbell and I couldn't see. I was looking to see if anyone was home. He's like, 'I thought there was a little Jew peering into my house. He was just awful. He made nose faces when someone is cheap....'"

A listening participant agreed, "If it comes from your friends, and they know it's not true, but they're just messing around," comments were not offensive. Another Jewish woman in



the age 18 to 34 group first claimed that she has never experienced any hostile comments about being Jewish, but then recalled her non-Jewish mother-in-law's words:

"My mother-in-law once said to me, 'He Jewed her down.' I looked at her and I couldn't believe my mother-in-law said that to me. I don't feel that they're racist people."

Because negative feelings about Jews can emanate from friends and strangers alike, *not* looking like a Jew becomes a protective device. For many, a non-Jewish appearance places one into a different category of Jew--the Jew who can pass--and is experienced as a badge of honor. This is especially true for Jewish women. To be a Jewish woman who doesn't look Jewish is to belong to a superior caste, as noted by one of the younger Jewish female focus group participants:

"...my name is J--, my last name is N--, so no one thinks I'm Jewish...when you see me you don't necessarily think...I don't have the stereotypical...."

An individual may be inadvertently identified as Jewish by others if s/he (1) has a distinctive Jewish name, or (2) "looks Jewish." If either one of these conditions apply, *choice is taken away from the individual, who can no longer choose whether or not to identify as a Jew*. Looking Jewish diminishes personal autonomy, one of the most cherished conditions of American life, and can even be perceived to diminish the individual's status as an American.

### Looking Jewish

Focus group participants were quite clear about the details of what it means to "look Jewish": the ubiquitous "big" Jewish nose, "heavy" features rather than "chiseled" features, large amounts of dark and curly hair, striking dark eyes (either large or squinted) with big eyebrows, short, buxom (for women), somewhat overweight, an appearance often accompanied by a kind of physical ineptitude. Several Jewish men made comments to the



effect that Jewish women look like they have consumed "too many matza balls," and the image of sloppy, inelegant, undifferentiated roundness seemed to attach itself to the image of the women themselves.

Jewish women understood all too well that their own media images were usually not desirable. Among Jewishly affiliated women ages 18 to 34, perceptions of Jewish women on television were "outside of the mainstream of what is considered beautiful":

"They portray them as very educated, they're dorky, they're ugly."

"They're very serious."

"I'd definitely say that they're different."

"They're not glamorous."

Although most of the Jewish focus group participants insisted that Jewishness was a religion, not an ethnicity, clearly *looking Jewish takes Jewishness out of the category of religion, and places it instead in the category of ethnicity, bordering on race*. The stereotypical elements of Jewish looks articulated by Jewish and non-Jewish respondents alike are reminiscent of the antisemitic assumptions about the "inferior type" of "Jewish-Negroid" features, as catalogued by Sander Gilman, which flourished among nineteenth century non-Jewish intellectuals, writers, physicians and communal officials:

"...the contour is convex, the eyes long and fine, the outer angles running toward the temples, the brow and nose apt to form a single convex line; the nose comparatively narrow at the base, the eyes consequently approaching each other; lips very full, mouth projecting, chin small, and the whole physiognomy, when swarthy, as it often is, has an African look."<sup>14</sup>

From the 1927 "The Jazz Singer" onward, Jewish writers, film-makers and actors sometimes put on black face to tell a Jewish story.<sup>15</sup> This assumption that Jewish looks reveal the familial affinity of the Jewish and African "races" echoes eerily in the comment of one African American focus group participant:

"There is something about their eyes. They give off a certain emotional thing....You can see the same pain that we see."



Indeed, the "pain" conveyed by the Jewish gaze was commented upon as an important symbol of the Jewish "Anthropological Type" by a early twentieth century Jewish social scientist who had clearly internalized his age's vision of the Jew:

"...[Jewish] eyes themselves are generally brilliant, both eyelids are heavy and bulging, and it seems to be the main characteristic of the Jewish eye that the upper lid covers a larger proportion of the pupil than among other persons. This may serve to give a sort of nervous, furtive look to the eyes...."<sup>16</sup>

Because these "typical" Jewish looks identify a person as Jewish (and perhaps place one at a disadvantage) with or without individual choice, a hierarchy has developed in which Jews who do not look Jewish are perceived as being more desirable. Within this hierarchy, even a Jewish woman who is very beautiful cannot, by definition, be as desirable as a non-Jewish woman. As one male Jewish focus group participant struggled to explain this principle:

"...not to say that Jewish women are not beautiful, because they are...but they're not usually the tall, glamorous model types...."

### **Hearing the Sounds of Jewish**

Inadvertent Jewish identification can be assigned to characters not only because of the way they look, but perhaps even more so because of the way they sound, according to focus group participants. Over and over again, participants cited the "nasally" voice as a sure giveaway to Jewish identity. Many participants connected this nasal vocal quality to Jewish characters on television, especially Fran Drescher's characterization of "The Nanny," Franny Fine. However, all groups, including Jewish women, insisted that these women do not exist on television alone, and that they have encountered actual Jewish women who fit this image in real life. The ubiquitousness of the insistence among focus group participants



that certain kinds of Jewish women sounded different from other Americans, and are clearly identifiable as Jews, was relentless.

Female focus group participants saw Jewish women on television as "them," a group with a distinctive sound:

"They talk a lot, Jewish women."

"Annoying."

"Very obnoxious."

"Nasal."

"It's not the normal--"

"It's her voice that makes her--"

Another Jewish female participant asserted that "they"--the other, annoying Jewish women--exist in real life as well:

"A lot of the Jewish girls I've met in high school have really been like dorky and annoying and nasally....they're right on TV sometimes, a lot of it."

Jewish male participants also talked about the vocal quality of Jewish women:

"Jewish women I've gone out with have been pretty loud and obnoxious and boisterous, which doesn't really bother me that much, because I tend to be the same way sometimes."

Poet Adrienne Rich remembers that hatred and fear of the sound of Jewish woman's voices, when she was growing up in the South as the daughter of a genteel Jewish father and a gentile mother. She, her sisters, and even her Christian mother internalized a belief in the essential Jewish voice, and tried to make sure that they never sounded Jewish:

"With enough excellence, you could presumably make it stop mattering that you were Jewish; you could become the *only* Jew in the gentile world, a Jew so 'civilized' so far from 'common,' so attractively combining southern gentility with European cultural values that no one would ever confuse you with the raw, 'pushy' Jews of New York, the 'loud, hysterical' refugees from eastern Europe, the 'overdressed' Jews of the urban South....I suppose that even my mother, pure gentile though she was, could be seen as acting 'common' or 'Jewish' if she laughed too loudly or spoke aggressively."<sup>17</sup>



Contemporary Jewish writer and publisher Daphne Merkin similarly recalls in a recent *Esquire* magazine article, "Floating always among us was an awareness of the importance of avoiding, if one could help it, 'too Jewish' an appearance, the dread stigma of 'too Jewish' a voice."<sup>18</sup>

Worry about the Jewish voice betraying Jewish identity has a long history. Jewish languages were regarded with deep suspicion by European Christian clerics and peasants alike, who regarded them as hiding anti-Christian Jewish agendas and symbolizing the essential, ineluctable otherness of the Jew. Jewish accents were mocked in immigrant America at the turn of the century and in pre-World War II Germany. The Jew, with his or her unmistakable "hoarse, unmusical voice," was "never to be confounded with any other race."<sup>19</sup> In a world which now includes diverse Jewish public figures (with voices which differ greatly) such as Barbara Boxer, Diane Feinstein, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Barbara Walters, and Melanie Mayron, one must wonder why the only Jewish women invoked by the focus group participants were those whom they claimed had "Jewish" voices: Barbra Streisand, Bette Middler, and, of course, "the Nanny," Franny Fine, and her mother and grandmother.

### **Acting Like a Jew**

External environmental signals are perhaps most significant when it comes to perceiving what it means to "act like a Jew." Here there were important differences between the affiliated and unaffiliated Jews among the focus group participants. Jewish participants currently living in areas with Jewish population density, or who had grown up in Jewishly intensive environments, or who are highly affiliated at the current time, seem less affected by media images. They display a vivid sense of the diversity of real Jewish personalities. For such affiliated Jews, being Jewish often had a concrete positive valence. One Jewish woman remembered Jewish familial warmth:



"There was pride, there was something special about being Jewish...my grandfather was a rabbi and everything around the holidays was a real familial feeling."

However, even for these participants, Jewish self-denigration seems to live side by side with considerable self-esteem. Even the most positive, Jewishly aware women revealed their belief in the negative impact of certain "Jewish" characteristics. For example, one bright, attractive young woman who spoke eloquently about the intelligent, attractive, cultured, powerful Jewish women she had grown up with and still interacted with in real life, also revealed a level of self-loathing when she admitted that she sometimes makes anti-Jewish jokes about herself,

"If I catch myself doing something that reminds me of my parents, or my Czechoslovakian 100-year [old] nut-case grandmother, I'll [say], *that's the Jew* [in me]."

Acting like a Jew meant, to many focus group participants, being obsessed with money. Male and female, Jewish and non-Jewish, participants spontaneously reported frequently hearing the phrase "Jewing him down," meaning bargaining relentlessly for financial advantage. Some of the Jewish participants had heard "Jewing him down" used by acquaintances, business associates, friends, and non-Jewish in-law relatives. Depending on how close they were to the person involved, many focus group participants were inclined to think that the person who said it had no antisemitic intent, "I know he doesn't really feel that way." Others were outraged by the same phrase.

Jewish male focus group participants at first tended to be rather cavalier at first about the impact of antisemitism in their lives. They tried to make light of stereotypes of Jews getting control of financial situations. Putting on a brave face, several suggested that these weren't such bad images. As one man laughingly put it, "We're rich and smart!" However, after they relaxed into the conversational dynamic of the focus groups, they shared, with evident sadness, pain, frustration and anger their feelings when they hear Jews described as



cheap, physically inept, argumentative, overly anxious or intellectual. They told stories in which Jewishness and stinginess had been linked in ways which degraded Jewish identity. Once the floodgates were opened, Jewish male participants spoke about insulting images which clearly cut to the bone:

"I was in high school, hanging out with my ex-football teammates. There was a night, I believe at the local Edwards Theater, which it was \$3.75 matinee night. They used to call it Jew night, playing up the stereotype that Jews were cheap."

"I remember I was very uncomfortable and my fiancée was very uncomfortable. One time we were coming back from Vegas and we stopped at a truck stop in Lynwood....one of the truck drivers was being very discriminating against Jews, using that phrase and talking to the cashier at the store there, and she said something to him that he was being rude and stereotyping and perpetuating racism, and it made us feel very uncomfortable."

Non-Jewish participants also struggled with trying to figure out if phrases like "Jewing him down" were truly antisemitic, or were just figures of speech. "Doesn't that mean being frugal?" "Isn't frugal a compliment?" suggested some participants.

But other non-Jewish participants were adamant that Jewish "frugality" was evidence of their "stingy" nature. Words like "Shyster" were used, although participants clearly had no sense of that phrase's ancestry in the character of Shakespeare's Shylock. One African American woman who grew up in Chicago placed Jewish stinginess into the context of Jewish family values. Jews, she asserted, teach their children to pursue and retain money at all costs, and they are especially careful to train their daughters to continue this behavior:

"They like to keep everything in the family. From the time a girl is small, five or six years old, they say, 'Okay Madison, you're going to marry so and so and he's going to be an attorney when he grows up.' And it's like they program them from a very small age to shoot for bucks. They will not allow, they will intercept in any way, if they think that a child is going to marry someone who they call commoner, or without money, that's a big issue with them."

Even when some participants in the group suggested that Jews were sometimes philanthropic, participants who perceived Jews as being obsessed with money insisted that



Jews always have an angle: if Jews are philanthropic, it is because they think they will get something out of it.

This conviction that Jews are stingy has a long ancestry in European antisemitic images of the Jew as usurious moneylender, immortalized in the aforementioned character of Shylock. In Philip Roth's recent novel, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, a scholar of Yiddish literature named Supposenik holds forth on the undestructability of this ugly stereotype of the Jew:

"I studied those three words by which the savage, repellent, and villainous Jew, deformed by hatred and revenge, entered as our doppelganger into the consciousness of the enlightened West. Three words encompassing all that is hateful in the Jew, three words that have stigmatized the Jew through two Christian millennia and that determine the Jewish fate until this very day.... You remember Shylock's opening line? You remember the three words? What Jew can forget them? What Christian can forgive them? *Three thousand ducats*.... The hateful, hateful Jew whose artistic roots extend back to the Crucifixion pageants at York, whose endurance as the villain of history no less than of drama is unparalleled, the hook-nosed moneylender, the miserly, money maddened, egotistical degenerate... this is Europe's Jew, the Jew expelled in 1290 by the English, the Jew banished in 1492 by the Spanish, the Jew terrorized by Poles, butchered by Russians, incinerated by Germans, spurned by the British and the Americans while the furnace roared at Treblinka."<sup>20</sup>

Equally striking, the image of Jews as stingy and self-absorbed is absolutely the opposite of the way in which most American Jews perceive themselves. Non-Jewish participants frequently used the word "conservative" to describe pictures of Jews, by which they often meant careful, cautious, conservative about money. When American Jews describe themselves, however, they often equate Jewish identity with liberalism and generosity. In a 1997 *Annual Survey of American Jewish Public Opinion* conducted for the American Jewish Committee by Market Facts, Inc., only 26 percent of respondents said they were "slightly conservative," "conservative," or "extremely conservative." Not surprisingly, 76 percent said they had voted for Clinton in the 1996 Presidential election. The respondents in this poll, as in other polls of Jewish opinion, strongly support legalized abortion and a generous immigration policy, and they reject the view that equal rights have



been pushed too far in the United States, feeling instead that special consideration in hiring and promotion for disadvantaged minorities is still justified.<sup>21</sup> The gap between the demonstrable attitudes of actual American Jews and some antisemitic images of American Jews is particularly striking.

Another commonly mentioned aspect of "acting like a Jew" devolved around "shrill" or hysterical behavior. Participants found this quality in both men and women, although it was mentioned more frequently in regard to women. Yet another related aspect of "acting like a Jew" was "domineering" or "manipulative" behavior. Jewish women were described as "always riding their husbands" by non-Jewish female participants. The combination of "hysterical" and "domineering and manipulative" behavior can, of course, be easily found in films, most notable Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, which hilariously defines both the hysterical--Gene Wilder--and the manipulative--Zero Mostel--Jewish males. The list of Jewish women in television and film who fit these stereotypes is lengthy, but the Mike Meyers Saturday Night Live "Coffee Klatch" lady, Linda Richmond, giving audiences discussion topics when she feels "farklemp" would fit the bill.

### **The Jewish Woman as Upper Middle Class Consumer**

Jewish women were repeatedly identified as conspicuous consumers by the focus group participants. Their careless hunger for and obsession with material objects was often tied into their manipulateness. Among the Jewish female focus group participants, stereotypes of Jewish women as materialistic consumers had been deeply internalized. Many expressed these images with a kind of cartoon-like directness:

"She's probably very Jappie. She probably likes to shop at Barneys and Saks, Neiman Marcus and Nordstroms. Nordstroms isn't even good enough for her."

"Jewish women, even the way Jewish men see them is that they want to marry somebody to support them. They don't want to work. But somebody who is not Jewish she's going to make a good wife and she don't care about money, but Jewish women all they want is nice clothes and nice rings."



They also permeated the messages many women remembered about growing up Jewish:

"You were supposed to marry a nice Jewish boy."

"Rich boy. Lawyer, doctor, accountant."

"At my house it was no chuppy, no shtuppy." [No marriage canopy, no sexual relations--Yiddish slang]

These negative self-images of materialistic, middle class Jews expressed by Jewish women, and expressed by Jewish men about Jewish women, have been a cornerstone of acceptable antisemitism from the time that Jews entered the middle classes after emancipation. Jews have repeatedly been singled out for moving economically in exactly the way their emancipators hoped they would. In novels, D. H. Lawrence noted with revulsion "the prosperous Jews," Edith Wharton made marrying a rich Jew only one step above prostitution for her genteel but impoverished heroine, and F. Scott Fitzgerald placed aggressive, monied Jews on the fringes of established society. In all of these cases, Jewish men, rather than women, suffered from negative portrayals when they used money to become part of upper class society.

Films written, directed, and/or produced by Jewish men often transferred the negative attention on Jewish upward socioeconomic mobility away from themselves and onto Jewish women. Thus, we have the well-dressed figures of the Natalie Wood's "Shirley" in *Marjorie Morningstar*, Ali McGraw's plumbing heiress Brenda Patinkin in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Goldie Hawn's spoiled "princess" Judy who becomes *Private Benjamin*, Bette Middler's hyphenated pseudo-intellectual professional who replaces personal relationships with passion for material possessions in *Scenes from a Mall*, along with numerous others. Gilda Radner's famous Saturday Night Live stint as a tongue-in-cheek advertising icon, "The Jewess in Jewish Jeans," and the materialistic three-generation matriarchy in "The Nanny"



are only the latest in a long line of Jewish women who live to spend, who love to shop, and always look marvelous.

In contrast, Jewish women pictured non-Jewish women as being effortlessly attractive in a non-flashy, non-vulgar way:

"That whole delicate kind of features, not like gorgeous, but kind of pretty and kind of clean, and very nicely dressed, conservative..."

*The beauty of a Jewish woman is either purchased or acquired through tremendous effort.* This stereotype echoes the hoary antisemitic belief that Jews acquire excellence by working very hard for it, or by purchasing it. Nineteenth-century thinkers and ordinary men were frequently convinced that Jewish males achieve distinction by either buying it or struggling for it. The stereotype of Jewish success only coming through money or vulgar striving is brilliantly captured in the film *Chariots of Fire*, in which a dazzlingly fast--and strikingly semitic--track-racing competitor is scorned by the administrators of his English school because he is the "typical...son of a tradesman" who "tries too hard."

The habit of objectifying and degrading minority females by making them into consuming objects and objects for consumption can be seen in depictions of other racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, it is instructive to note that minority women have been treated in a symbolic fashion, particularly when the issue at hand is economic. Women are especially frequent symbolic characters in works describing the integration of groups who are perceived as being other-than-white into the white majority society, through the social laundering process of bourgeois identification. Hazel Carby, discussing "the quicksands of representation" of African American women, notes of one mixed-race character that she

"was represented as a consumer, a woman who defined a self through the acquisition of commercial products, consumer goods, and commodities. As a woman, she is as the center of a complex process of exchange.....money replaces kinship as the prime mediator of social relations....[she] was a consumer, but as a woman she was also potentially a consumable object....The black bourgeoisie was attacked on many levels: for its hypocrisy, for its articulation of the race 'problem,' for its moral and aesthetic code."



Ultimately, says Carby, this "use of the figure of the mulatto" facilitates "representation of both race and class...structured through a prism of black female sexuality."<sup>22</sup>

### **Jews Aren't Creative, They Only Buy Power**

Among non-Jewish participants, several talked about the Jewish lack of creativity. Jews were to be found only in positions which required money and power in Hollywood, they asserted, not in the creative arts. The assertion of Jewish essentialist non-creativity is an antisemitic charge which echoes some of the most virulent hatred of the Jews from the emancipation through proto-Nazi propaganda, which pictured Jew as living parasitically off the true creative genius of the indigenous folk living in their native lands. Philip Roth satirizes this attitude and testifies to its contemporary manifestations in his novel, *Operation Shylock*, as he puts the following diatribe into the mouth of his anti-Israel anti-hero, Moshe Pipick:

"The Jew came out of the ghetto in eastern Europe during Napoleon's time, he was liberated, and, Christ, he ran rampant. Once they get a lock on things, they keep it. The Jews got a lock on music with Schoenberg. They haven't produced any fuckin' music worth a shit. Hollywood. It's a piece of shit. Why is it? They got a lock on it. We hear about how the Jews created Hollywood. Jews aren't creative. What have they created? Nothing. Painting. Pissarro. Did you ever read Richard Wagner on the Jews? Superficiality. That's why all their art fails....it doesn't last, because it's not tied to the cultural roots of the society."<sup>23</sup>

### **Jewish Women and Men Perceive Themselves and Each Other**

One of the most intriguing aspects of the focus group discussions was the way in which the Jewish participants described the photographs they themselves had chosen as "typical" Jews. Men described their chosen Jewish men as embodying certain well-known but believable types.



(1) **The liberal schlemiel:** "From the clothes he is or isn't wealthy, he's probably not real wealthy, although I should talk. He's probably never been married. I would say he's a teacher, and if there's picketing he's probably there."

(2) **The macher-on-the-make** who is a closet mama's boy: "I think he's a student at N.Y.U...and studying to be a stockbroker or something....He's conservative [but] he's got a little wild streak in him, that's why he's got a five o'clock shadow going. He looks like he's kind of a mama's boy, so he probably has a very Jewish mother, always 'Eat your chicken soup.' I think he's probably a lifelong bachelor."

(3) **The intellectual and independent spirit:** "He's a writer. I think he was really shy and confused when he was a child, but now that he's kind of on his own and does his own thing...he found out who he is. I think he likes the rain...he has a jagged sense of humor, but I think he's really sincere, and sensitive too."

(4) **The Jewy Jew:** "He's had a very religious upbringing, might even have spoken Yiddish as a first language. He grew up in New York, or definitely the East Coast. He's a very sweet man, he's a family man. He has a kind of nasally voice. He likes to talk with his hands. He is a very modest man but he's very educated. He's also a spokesman for Jewish causes, Jewish community, and he takes that responsibility very seriously."

Interestingly enough, the Jewish male focus group participants did not mention two stereotypes which are quite prevalent in media portrayals of Jewish men:

(5) **The hustler/shark**, who steps on anyone to get where he needs to go (see Roth's Mr. Patimkin and Richler's Duddy Kravitz for examples of this type); and

(6) **the pathetic wimp**, consumed by anxiety (take your pick from roles by Gene Wilder and Woody Allen).

When it came to describing typical Jewish women, Jewish men tended less to specifics and more toward generalities. Jewish men tended to divide Jewish women into archetypical categories.



(1) **Yiddeshe mamas:** nurturing older women who know how to make "killer chicken soup" and care deeply and perhaps obsessively about others:

"This is Sophie, sitting here with her husband of 35 years....She's never worked outside the house. She got married at the age of 20. Her idea of exercise is hand to mouth. She'll die early because she probably a little overweight. She's a great cook. High school degree, that's it. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Has lots of knicknacks in the house. If her husband dies, she will never get remarried."

(2) **Americanized Jewish princesses:**

"Trendy. When it's Farah's hair, they've got Farah's hair. When it's Jennifer Aniston's hair, they've got Jennifer Aniston's hair. Whoever is in, they got the clothes. They follow pop culture."

Jewish men also described:

(3) **Career viragos**, Jewish women who are driven and ambitious, not particularly people-oriented, often younger women who "know what they want" and "don't take any guff from anyone," and

(4) **nice Jewish good girls**, seemingly sweet, ordinary, responsible Jewish women of varying ages. Interestingly, Jewish male focus group participants seldom mentioned two other Jewish female stereotypes of note:

(5) **The Jewish mother as terrorist** (a la Sophie Portnoy); or

(6) **the vulnerable Jewish girl as tragic heroine** (a frequent character in nineteenth century European novels, and more recently, the dark-eyed Jewish beauty eyed lustfully by the cold, blond Nazi beast....).

With these negative images of each other, it is hardly surprising that the *singles among the Jewish focus group participants often did not find themselves attracted to Jews of the opposite sex*. Among the affiliated Jewish women ages 18 to 34, three women talked about their dating patterns:



"I don't date Jewish men. My mother has a real problem with it, my family does. For some reason, I don't do it on purpose, but I don't wind up attracted to them."

"Same exact thing with me."

"I'm turned off by Jewish guys. They're so anal retentive, I swear."

Asked how they would like Jewish women to be portrayed in the media, Jewish men conjured up fantasies which seemed based on a reaction formation against their perceptions of Jewish women, which they had articulated earlier:

"Number 277, this is Amy. She is getting away from the urban scene....She looks not that complicated, just very straightforward."

"Number 469, also Amy. Very pretty, very sensuous, very sexy, very soft. She has a very soft voice. She doesn't talk a lot. She's not very shrill. She's a little on the quiet side, but she listens very attentively to who she is having a conversation with. Her thing is helping other people."

"Number 1415. Pure sex appeal. She'd give you a one-night stand, and not make you feel guilty in the morning for a commitment."

### **Jewish Women Seldom Seen or Heard**

In earlier historical periods, Jewish women were often silenced both within and outside the Jewish community because they were perceived as being so "other" as to be irrelevant. In the contemporary political climate, they are often silenced by being made invisible. Indeed, when Jewish male participants were asked to name and describe Jewish women on television, they could think of virtually no examples. Jewish female academics interested in Jewish women's studies have often struggled mightily, and frequently with little success, to get sessions dealing with their scholarship on to conference agendas. Many are told by "sister" feminists that Jewish women's studies should not be differentiated from other white middle class women's studies.

Feminist film theory can help us understand the role of film in the social construction of reality, and this understanding in turn can help us understand why Jewish women and men



perceive themselves and each other the way they do. As Laura Mulvey notes, "film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation" of sexual difference.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, there are few published analyses of Jewish women's roles in film. Even in the worlds of theory, Jewish women have been made invisible through the denial of the uniqueness and significance of their experience. One can learn from the words of African American female scholars and writers when they felt that the realities of their lives were being ignored by the critical and feminist intellectual establishments. As Deborah McDowell summarizes:

While black feminist criticism was asserting the significance of black women's experience, poststructuralism was dismantling the authority of experience....While black feminist criticism required that these interpretations be grounded in historical context, deconstruction denied history any authoritative value and truth claims and read context as just another text.

McDowell warns that despite the intellectual hegemony of poststructuralist theory in many circles, its tenets, while useful, are not necessarily friendly to dealing with cultural images of minority women. Indeed, "the critical language of black women is represented, with few exceptions, as outside the bounds of the acceptably sayable....heard primarily as an illicit and non-critical variety of critical discourse." Because of their critical focus on their own images and experiences, such black women critics are marginalized and delegitimized, and viewed as forces for conservative reaction.<sup>25</sup>

American readers and viewers look for a "universal typology," Shelley Sunn Wong comments, which depicts

the narrative of a "minority" culture growing into a recognition of its place within the majority culture. Thus intercultural conflicts can be resolved and reconciled through a naturalized pattern of development....What is at issue here is the way in which a set of ideological assumptions inscribes a vision of normative progress toward wholeness and American identity....<sup>26</sup>



Although Sunn Wong does not focus on the representations of intermarriage, her point is very salient to portrayals of intermarried Jews in the media: within films, television programs and fiction portraying American Jews, interfaith romance and marriage is the ubiquitous vehicle for *normative progress toward wholeness and American identity*. From the 1927 film "The Jazz Singer" through the 1990s, the Jewish character who journeys toward American wholeness is most commonly a Jewish male (witness "Mad About You," "Northern Exposure," "LA Law," "Murphy Brown," etc.) who resolves his ethnicity and becomes normal and wholly American through his love for and life with a real American woman.

Sunn Wong notes that when minority ethnic women focus on the intersection of gender and ethnicity, and urge diversity in the representation of this intersection, they are accused of breaking ranks with unified feminist sisterhood, on one hand, and blamed for Balkanizing American cultural life, on the other hand. She quotes the symptomatic lament of Evan Kemp, Jr., Head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in an interview in August 1991:

"We used to all be Americans. Now we're African Americans, Italian Americans, Hispanic Americans, etc. I think it's a bad situation."<sup>27</sup>

From the concerns of McDowell, Sunn Wong and others, we can be forewarned that our focus on the images of Jewish women in film and television, and our insistence that such images move from the stereotypical to the diverse, may well be met with resistance on many levels. We may be called reactionary, or divisive. We may be accused of not understanding the creative impulse, as when Salim Muwakkil accuses Black cultural nationalists of imposing "aesthetic judgments" which rest on "ideological or political criteria":

...the deadening effect such ideological requirements have on creative expression....It seems clear that efforts to subordinate the profound and penetrating creative process of black people to an ideological movement suffocates the community's creative vitality.<sup>28</sup>



The answer to these objections is that attention to true diversity does not deaden creative expression at all. On the contrary, it frees the artist from sliding into the easy but artistically unsatisfying path of clichéd expression.

### Creating Jewish Women's Voices

Jewish female focus group participants recognized full well that media portrayals of Jewish women create stereotypes which take the place of truthful diversity. When the social construction of reality teaches people that only women who match the stereotype are Jewish, one can talk to real Jewish women but assume that they aren't Jewish because they don't match:

"I would say that we know so many Jewish people, but if there's a person who really doesn't know a Jewish person, they're going to assume. That's why they're surprised when they say, 'Oh my gosh, you're Jewish? I didn't know,' because *their impression was what they saw on tv.*"

A more difficult objection is perhaps the honest acknowledgement that clichéd portrayals are in many ways easier to sell, because they are recognizable, and often eroticized. Analysts of images of minority women have identified a number of stock characters of African American women which help to make films which include these characters appealing to broad audiences. Thus, bell hooks argues that stereotyped black female characters tend to be successful because they match acceptable categories for minority women.

Hooks cites several examples: The character of Nora Darling in Spike Lee's film, *She's Gotta Have It*, seems at first strikingly independent, asserting her need for sexual variety and autonomy; in the end, however, Nora Darling slides into the male fantasy of a *failed-liberated-woman-type*, who first capitulates to monogamy after a near-rape (which she



enjoys), and then can only re-assert her independence by declaring that she will henceforth "be alone, with no sexual partner." The independent woman is finally desexualized, an unpalatable failure, and thus hardly threatening to male viewers.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, hooks cites the figure of Rachel Marron (Whitney Houston) in *The Bodyguard*, who, for all her glamour, is nothing more than the familiar "singer/ho" stereotype of the black woman, according to hooks. Sexy black women comprise a temptation, to which "vulnerable white males lose all will to resist." However, the film gives viewers the opportunity to feel both titillated and safe:

*The Bodyguard* assures its audiences that no matter how magical, sexy, or thrilling the love between Rachel Marron and Frank Farmer is, it will not work. And if we dare to imagine that it can, there is always the powerful theme song to remind us that it will not....Conventionally then, *The Bodyguard* seduces audiences with the promise of a fulfilling romance between a white male and a black female only then to gaslight us by telling us that relationship is doomed. Such a message can satisfy xenophobic or racist moviegoers who want to be titillated by taboo even as they are comforted by a restoration of the status quo when the film ends.<sup>30</sup>

The cinematic or literary image of the mulatto female, referred to earlier, resonates with its own problematic history, the eroticized "tragic mulatto," the girl who tries to cross over into white society with her appealing, near-white looks, but who is often discovered, degraded, and punished. This stereotype is brilliantly analyzed by bell hooks, who uses it to partially explain the popularity of the blonde-wigged Tina Turner.<sup>31</sup> Hooks and others have given names to the reductive but highly salable stereotypes of minority women in American films and books. This process of naming gives minority women a certain kind of power in recognizing and dealing with the problem. In order for Jewish women to deal with reductive but salable stereotypes of themselves, a similar kind of naming and analysis is a necessary first step for those who aim to diminish their power by facilitating other models.

Jewish women who participated in the focus group discussions were aware that in real life they have enormous diversity. In discussing what American Jews are really like, Jewish



women articulated the fullest spectrum of realistic types of Jewish women, often going into admiring detail about women with idiosyncratic Jewish interests, such as high energy, intellectualism, and cultural passions.

Asked about how they would like Jewish women to be portrayed in the media, women tended to draw on their knowledge of women in real life:

I picked two, because I had to. Number 104. I really like that kind of woman a lot. That's the kind of woman where if that's where my life went, I'd be fine with that. I think she's beautiful, sophisticated. I think she's funny and she looks warm and smart and has style and everything great. I think that's very Jewish.

"I think that may this might be something like what a woman like that would be like when she was younger—number 714. She playing pool, she's stylish, but she's a little bit kind of tomboyish, the short hair, simple makeup. She looks pretty intense. She looks smart, she looks tough, but she's also very beautiful. She has kind of an ethnic, Jewish kind of look to her, which I think is adorable."





"Number 277, this is Amy. She is getting away from the urban scene....She looks not that complicated, just very straightforward."

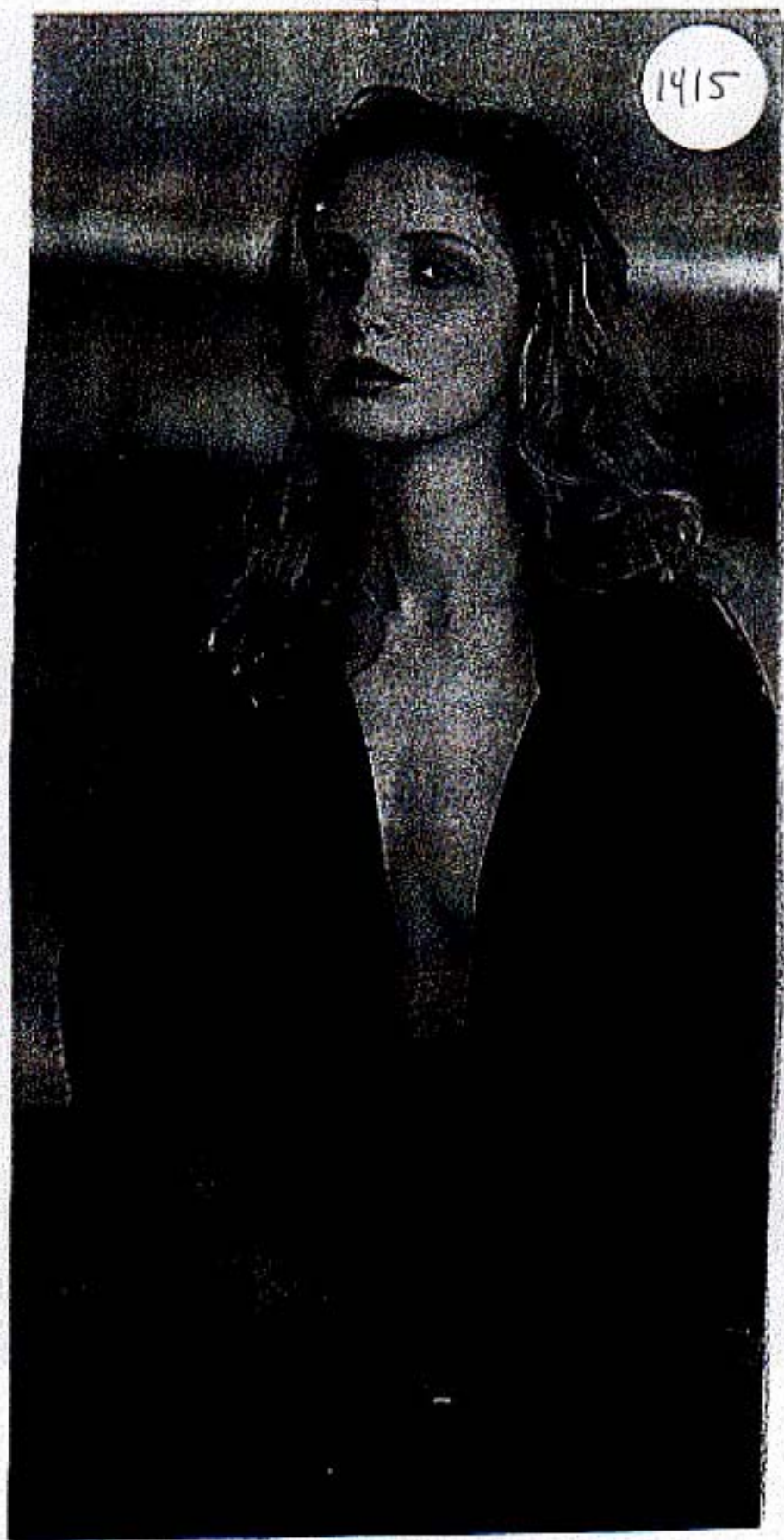




"Number 402 is a very pretty, very sensual, very sexy, very... has a very soft voice. She doesn't talk... she's not very shrill. She's a little... side, but she listens very attentively... who she is having a conversation with. Her thing... other people."



"Number 1415.  
Pure sex appeal.  
She'd give you a  
one-night stand,  
and not make you  
feel guilty  
in the morning  
for a commitment."







"Number 104. I really like that kind of woman a lot. That's the kind of woman where if that's where my life went, I'd be fine with that. I think she's beautiful, sophisticated. I think she's funny and she looks warm and smart and has style and everything great. I think that's very Jewish."



"I think that may this might be something like what a woman like that would be like when she was younger--number 714. She playing pool, she's stylish, but she's a little bit kind of tomboyish, the short hair, simple makeup. She looks pretty intense. She looks smart, she looks tough, but she's also very beautiful. She has kind of an ethnic, Jewish kind of look to her, which I think is adorable."





Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the Morning Star Commission focus group research was that Jewish women had a lively sense of the range and difference which they actually represented. Although they had clearly internalized many of the negative images of Jewish femaleness from the media, and although they certainly had a sense of themselves as "other," they also articulated a good deal of self-esteem and self-knowledge. Jewish female respondents understood that they were being invented in ways which do not match their own realities. Unlike Jewish male respondents' photographic image fantasies about deracinated Jewish women, the photographic images chosen by Jewish women to represent themselves in the media were often a positive articulation of qualities commonly thought to be Jewish. They liked themselves as warm, witty, urban sophisticates. One said, "When I think about Jewish women I tend to think of a little bit more elegance, a little bit more--maybe some kind of quirkiness, or some kind of character."

Their own words can provide useful guidelines for changing the culture of the screen, and giving true voices to images of Jewish women.



### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Reinventing the Cinematic Jew: Portrayals of Jewish Women and Men in Film," Report to the Morning Star Commission, (Waltham: International Research Institute on Jewish Women, Brandeis University, September 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Goldberg, "Jewish Women: The Mirror and the Media," Unpublished Manuscript prepared for Hadassah Southern California, The Morning Star Commission, January 1998, Job #1597, pp. 2-3. As detailed by Barbara Goldberg and Claudia Caplan in their reports to the Commission, these discussions took place on December 7 and 8, 1997 and January 7 and 8, in communities in and around the Los Angeles area. All participants were screened to determine that they fulfilled the following characteristics: They watch at least 10 hours of television a week; they watch situation comedies and/or dramas; they have seen at least one movie in the month before the focus group (theater or rental); they would feel comfortable talking about feelings and perceptions regardless of their "political correctness." Affiliated Jewish women and men were defined by their belonging to or intending to join a synagogue within the next five years or having a child in some type of religious schooling, or by the fact that they describe themselves as "very" or "somewhat" observant. In the non-Jewish focus groups, screening questions aimed for mixed religious and ethnic groups, with at least two African Americans and two Hispanics in each group. An attempt was made to ensure that the non-Jewish participants were not well acquainted with Jewish culture and religion and that most of their friends and co-workers were not Jewish. These screening questions were employed to maximize the impact of media images, rather than personal experience, on non-Jewish participants.

The focus group discussions took place in professional focus group facilities with one-way mirrors. All the discussions were video and audio-taped, and written transcriptions were produced from these tapes. Copies of the tapes and transcriptions are housed both at the Morning Star Commission/ Hadassah Southern California and at the International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University. A 30 minute tape of focus group highlights is also available for research and teaching purposes only.

At each session, the focus group moderator welcomed participants and explained that they would be discussing images and stereotypes of a number of differing ethnic groups. Discussants sat at a large, u-shaped rectangular table. The focus group moderator urged participants to be candid and open, and to feel free of concerns about political correctness and social acceptability in their comments. On the walls all around participants were photographs of men and women. As an effective technique repeatedly used as a springboard for discussion, the focus group moderator asked participants to each pick out a photo which looked to them like a particular ethnic group, and then to describe that particular individual to the rest of the participants.

<sup>3</sup>Sonya Michel, "Jews, Gender, American Cinema," in Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tannenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 244-269, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup>Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Riv-Ellen Prell, "Rage and Representation: Jewish Gender Stereotypes in American Culture," in Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds., *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), pp. 248-266, p. 253.



- 6 Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 169.
- 7 In works by prestigious writers such as Philip Wylie and Eric Erikson, American women were derided for dominated and emasculating their husbands and sons. See especially Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1942).
- 8 Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 4.
- 9 Riv-Ellen Prell, "Cinderellas Who (Almost) Never Become Princesses: Subversive Representations of Jewish Women in PostWar Popular Novels," in Joyce Antler, ed., *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), pp. 123-138, p. 127.
- 10 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 438-448.
- 11 Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 151-152.
- 12 Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1988), pp. 39-42.
- 13 Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 88-89.
- 14 Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, pp. 174-175.
- 15 See Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 16 Gilman, p. 69, quoting Jewish social scientist Joseph Jacobs in the 1904 *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.
- 17 Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago Press, 1986), pp. 110-111.
- 18 Gilman, p. 30, quoting Daphne Merkin, "Dreaming of Hitler," *Esquire* (August 1989), pp. 75-83.
- 19 Gilman, pp. 204-205, citing Robert Knox, *The Races of Men* (1850).
- 20 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 274-275.
- 21 1997 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion Conducted for the American Jewish Committee by Market Facts, Inc. (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1997).
- 22 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 171-173.
- 23 Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock*, p. 256.



24 Mulvey, p. 438.

25 Deborah E. McDowell, *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 169-171.

26 Shelley Sunn Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, Hyn Yi Kang, Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Lowe, and Shelley Sunn Wong, eds. (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), pp. 103-142, pp. 128-129.

27 Sunn Wong, p. 127.

28 Salim Muwakkil, "Art vs. Ideology: The Debate Over Positive Images," in *Black Film Review* 2, No. 3, cited by bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 135.

29 bell hooks, *Talking Back*, pp. 140-141

30 bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 58-59.

31 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 66-69.