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# Hidden: Jewish Film in the United Kingdom, past and present

## ABSTRACT

*Abrams provides a preliminary survey of the representation of Jews in British cinema both in front of and behind the camera from the beginnings of the UK film industry to the present day. In doing so, he outlines the reason for the relative lack of films in Britain that can be considered 'Jewish'. While there are a variety of factors for this, the main reason he argues is the type of identity that British Jews have developed as a response to their context. However, since 1990 there have been signs that this is beginning to change, and more films reflective of the British-Jewish experience are appearing.*

## KEYWORDS

United Kingdom  
cinema  
film industry  
Jews  
Jewishness  
anti-Semitism

## INTRODUCTION

Jews have resided in England since their readmission in 1656, and although Anglo-Jewry has been explored from a variety of perspectives, beyond literature its cultural output has been virtually ignored. As a consequence, there is almost no scholarship on the subject of Jewish cinema in the United Kingdom. Despite the growth of Film Studies and Jewish Studies, to date, no extensive study with Jewish film as its primary focus has been published even in light of the increased visibility of Jews and Jewishness in public and mass cultures. In contrast to the story of the Jewish contribution to American

cinema, both in front of and behind the camera, which is very well known, in terms of academic research, very little has been written on discussing the representation of Jews in British film. Indeed, it seems that Jews have been written out of the histories of cinema in the United Kingdom and its constituent nations. For example, when studies have looked at 'Jewish film' in the United Kingdom, they have tended to focus on individual films, which are then treated in isolation, almost to the point of ahistoricity, divorced from the British-Jewish context from which they derive/d. The scholarship surrounding Sandra Goldbacher's 1998 film *The Governess* is a case in point, as little of the scholarship about the film situates it in either a British industrial or Jewish community context (Felber 2001; Ascheid 2006; Lewin 2008). Conversely, when books have looked at British-Jewish history, they have ignored film and cinema. It is striking yet illustrative that in his chapter on 'Art and Intellect' in his survey of British-Jewish history, Stephen Brook (1989) completely ignores the film industry. Possibly the only piece to devote itself to this subject, in its entirety, is Kevin Gough-Yates' 1992 article 'Jews and Exiles in UK Cinema'. In the following article, I build upon Gough-Yates' work in order to produce a corrective and contextual study, which analyses film-making in the United Kingdom reflective of the Jewish experience.

### **A TALE UNTOLD: BRITISH-JEWISH FILM, 1908–1991**

Just as in the United States, a story well told, Jews in the United Kingdom have played a major role in the development of the British film industry from the very beginnings of cinema, being prominent in all its branches. The reason for this was primarily due to the fact that it admitted them. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* provides a helpfully succinct explanation of the industry's lure:

The motion picture industry was created at a time when the Jews were seeking entry into the economic and cultural life of their host countries. Their involvement with motion pictures was due to a number of factors: the film business had not developed a tradition of its own and had no vested interest to defend: participation in it required no intimate knowledge of the vernacular; and films were not yet the realm of businessmen, entrepreneurs, or professional entertainers, but rather scientists, such as Edison and Lumière, who had no idea of the economic and industrial future of their inventions. In addition, the motion picture was initially regarded as a low-grade form of entertainment – suitable only for the immigrant or the uneducated masses – rather than a valid art form, and those connected with films were held in contempt. New immigrants, therefore, found it relatively easy to enter this field, and Jewish immigrants used the opportunity to transform the media from a marginal branch of entertainment into a multi-million dollar industry.

(Ingber 1971: 446)

While the numbers of Jews involved in film were smaller than in the United States, just as significant a contribution was made, and many Jews were pioneering forces in the industry. One of those included a Hungarian-Jewish émigré, Alexander Korda, who, having worked in his native country, Austria, Germany, France and America, moved to Britain in 1930, where he established London Film Productions and later Denham Studios, the only British studio to model itself on its American counterparts. Under Korda's direction,

many notable films were produced in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, he was described as 'Britain's only movie mogul' (Drazin 2002). Other significant figures in those early years included Korda's brother Zoltan, Michael Balcon, Harry Saltzman, Anatole de Grunwald, the Samuelsons (George Berthold, Marc, Peter and Sydney) and the Grades (Bernard and Leslie). Yet, despite the prevalence of Jews in the British film industry, not only has very little has been written about them and their contribution, other than biographies of some of the above individuals, but also up until the last decade of the twentieth century, there have been very few films overtly reflective of the Jewish experience in the United Kingdom. While the image of the Jew has not been excluded from UK film, as is the case in Australia (Freiberg 1994) until very recently, a list of films that either reflect the British-Jewish experience or dedicate a significant role to a Jewish character is not very long, even if Jews have been represented in films from the beginning of cinema in the United Kingdom itself. As the *Jewish People Policy Planning Institute Annual Assessment 2007* noted, 'Up to the 1990s, significant [UK] Jewish films are hard to find' (Tal 2007: 84). Not only is the list short, but also the range of representations, particularly in the early period, was very limited. According to Jan Epstein, whose entry in *The Encyclopedia of British Film* is one of the few other pieces of scholarship on this topic, the earliest films portrayed Jews as either dishonest, avaricious and greedy – *The Robbers and the Jew* (Jack Smith, 1908), *A Bad Day for Levinsky* (TJ Gobbett, 1909) and *The Antique Vase* (HO Martinek, 1913) – or as subversive rebels – *The Invaders* (Percy Stow, 1909) (2005: 366).

During the 1920s and 1930s more sympathetic representations appeared, possibly as a response to anti-Semitism (Epstein 2005: 366), including *General Post* (Thomas Bentley, 1920), *Motherland* (G.B. Samuelson, 1927), *Loyalties* (Basil Dean, 1933), two versions of *The Wandering Jew* (Maurice Elvey, 1923; 1933), *Jew Süß* (Lothar Mendes, 1934), *Mr. Cohen Takes a Walk* (William Beaudine, 1935), *Car of Dreams* (Graham Cutts and Austin Melford, 1935), *The Prime Minister* (Thorold Dickinson, 1941) and *Mr. Emmanuel* (Harold French, 1944). Significant amongst these films was *Jew Süß*, about which Epstein comments, 'this was a condemnation of anti-semitism at a time when few films world-wide dared to broach political issues or speak the word "Jew"' (2005: 366).

Following the Second World War, however, matters began to change and Jews were portrayed both more frequently and realistically. Epstein comments that apart from Alec Guinness's 'gross' portrayal of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (David Lean, 1948), 'Jews in English films have been shown with increasing realism since WW2 [sic]' (Epstein 2005: 366). *The Rake's Progress* (Sidney Gilliat, 1945), *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947), *Make Me an Offer!* (Cyril Frankel, 1954), *A Kid for Two Farthings* (Carol Read, 1954), *The Bespoke Overcoat* (Jack Clayton, 1955), *Expresso Bongo* (Val Guest, 1959) and *The Barber of Stamford Hill* (Caspar Wrede, 1963) 'all show Jews as equal members of a pluralist society' (Epstein 2005: 366). Moving into the 1960s and 1970s, Epstein comments that '[d]ifficult themes such as racial hatred and religious bigotry are treated with maturity' (2005: 366) in *Conspiracy of Hearts* (Ralph Thomas, 1960), *Reach for Glory* (Philip Leacock, 1961), *Ulysses* (Joseph Strick, 1961), *Sparrows Can't Sing* (Joan Littlewood, 1962) and, most notably, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (John Schlesinger, 1971), whose exploration of homosexual relationships and Jewish identity in trendy North London was not only 'an important breakthrough in the normalising of a Jewish character in a major film' (Epstein 2005: 366), but also a rare example in which a

British-Jewish director dealt with personal and autobiographical issues. By the 1980s, *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981) was 'a significant attempt to show how social mistrust and dislike of the Jews is bound up with class prejudice' (Epstein 2005: 366). Nonetheless, the major Jewish directors of this period, namely Schlesinger, Mike Leigh and Michael Winner, did not tend to insert any Jewishness into their films in any direct or explicit fashion – *Sunday Bloody Sunday* being the conspicuous exception to this rule.

This list should also include literary adaptations (many of which were often made for television) in which Jewish characters feature, most notably George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (W. Courtney Rowden, 1921), Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (adapted as *Oliver!* in 1968 by Carol Read), Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Walter West, 1916; Anson Dyer, 1919; Widgely R. Newman, 1927), Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (Leedham Bantock, 1913), George L. Du Maurier's *Svengali* (Noel Langley, 1955) and John Le Carré's *The Deadly Affair* (Sidney Lumet, 1966).

### ACCOUNTING FOR THE LACK

Overall, then, the number of British films representing Jews and Jewishness is not large. What accounts for this relative paucity of British-Jewish films? Partly it is a question of numbers. There are currently approximately 270,499 Jews in Britain out of a population of approximately 60,776,238 (0.45%) compared to the 5.5m Jews in the United States out of a population of approximately 301,139,947 (1.8%). Even at its peak the Jewish community in the United Kingdom never totalled more than 350,000 – simply not a large enough body of experience, it is argued, to produce the same range of films. It is further contended that Jews in the United Kingdom never achieved the levels of urban concentration to make a significant impact in the film industry, as compared to their co-religionists in New York and Los Angeles. Jews may have stayed away because the state of the British film industry reveals that it is hard to make a regular living in it – that it is an insecure livelihood. Consequently, 'Jews have tended to gravitate towards other occupations and livelihoods: retail trading, secondary and tertiary industry (the garment industry, manufacturing, the building, hotel and entertainment industries) and the prestige professions (the law, medicine, dentistry and accountancy). There are some Jewish men and women in the business side of the film industry – exhibitors, distributors and executive producers – but few Jewish writers and directors' (Freiberg 1994). However, this belies the fact that, as in the United States, British Jews have made a contribution to the film and television industries way out of proportion to their actual numbers, even if this has not been proportionally represented on-screen, which, in turn, led Gough-Yates to ask, 'Why is it that UK cinema, which has continued to have a large number of Jews working within it, should have produced so few films with Jewish themes?' (1992: 540).

There are various answers to this question. The first is the small and perennially economically fragile state of the UK film industry, which, certainly since the end of the Second World War, has never been able to match its US counterpart in terms of funding, distribution and popularity. Such restrictions placed limitations on the number and type of films that have been produced in the United Kingdom. Consequently, popular British film has tended to stick to a limited range of genres that have more box office appeal, whether it is the iconic heritage film as manifested by (ironically non-British) Merchant-Ivory

franchise, BBC-style literary and costume drama adaptations (most notably Jane Austen), the James Bond series, the kitchen-sink drama, or the wave of 'mockney' gangster films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) and its inferior rip-offs. Since many of these films reinforce myths of the British landscape and character, they effectively discourage projects with Jewish subject matter or Jewish characters (Freiberg 1994).

Freda Freiberg's study of the absence of Jews in Australian cinema is instructive in this respect. She gives a variety of reasons in explanation. First,

In the postwar post-Auschwitz era, non-Jewish writers and artists in Australia have been understandably hesitant or reluctant to represent Jews and Jewish issues, because of the sensitivity of the Jewish community, if not their own sensitivity, to the politics of representation. Jewish artists and writers too have to negotiate a minefield if they represent Jews and Jewish issues: the community is only too quick to attack them if their images of Jews are not 'positive' [...] they are expected to dignify and romanticise Jews and Judaism, to confine themselves to ennobling or sentimental portrayals of Jewish characters, actions and beliefs.

(In early postwar USA, both Philip Roth and Robert Warshaw noted the hazards of Jewish writers writing about Jews, because of the censoring and self-censoring agencies operating on them.)

Second, Jewish subject matter and characters have been associated with Hollywood cinema and American films, rather than British products. This is because the United States has a well-established body of Jewish literature or drama to adapt to the screen to the effect that tales of urban and suburban Jewish life have already been well covered by Hollywood. British audiences, then, Jewish or otherwise, are oblivious to an absence, because they are able to see Jewish experience represented on-screen in numerous imported films, whether American or from elsewhere (other European countries, in line with the United Kingdom, have also witnessed a revival of Jewish film-making in the post-1990 period). In recent years, the institution of the annual UK Jewish Film Festival has brought a collection of recently completed overseas films with Jewish content (documentary and fiction) to British audiences. Thus, the topic may be deemed to have been exhausted by foreign cinemas; the dominance of Hollywood products, which (as noted above) include many films with a Jewish flavour, may make a British-Jewish counterpart seem a poor economic choice given the competition it faces, further complicated by the seeming similarities in terms of language and culture that make it difficult to mark the difference between British Jews and American Jews in order to produce something artistically and commercially distinctive.

The most significant factor in explaining this lack of Jewish films is that British-Jewish film-makers have traditionally been unwilling to expose their own stories in the way that Woody Allen, Mel Brooks and others helped to create American Jewish film archetypes. In fact, many British-Jewish film-makers have been content to remain hidden in a way that resembled Hollywood from the 1930s until the late 1960s. This is for a variety of reasons, but primarily it was most likely because such individuals did not want to draw attention to themselves in such a way. As a result, many of these directors and/or their work were not publicly recognized or labelled as Jewish, largely because many of them did not deal with explicitly Jewish subject matter. And even when they did, it is not acknowledged. 'Only in Britain', pointed out Gough-Yates,

'could a film on the life of Benjamin Disraeli, *The Prime Minister* (Warner Bros. 1941, dir. Thorold Dickinson), a film indirectly of the Nazi-Soviet pact, be made without a mention, and barely a hint, of his Jewish background' (1992: 540). It is surely no coincidence that Stanley Kubrick, one of the most hidden Jewish directors of them all, chose to make his films in Britain from the 1960s onwards. In doing so, he not only explicitly ignored specifically Jewish themes, but also suppressed any overt allusion to Jewishness in the stories adapted, systematically writing Jewish characters out of his screenplays, including those for *The Killing* (1956), *Paths of Glory* (1957), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and most notably *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) (Cocks 2005: 29; Raphael 1999: 150).

The case of Alexander Korda is instructive. He desired to downplay, even conceal, his Jewishness; as Greg Walker, in his study of Korda puts it, 'Korda [...] was Jewish by birth, and spent much of his early life in a Jewish domestic, educational and artistic environment. Only later did he decide to distance himself from his origins and adopt a personal and biography that, while they did not overtly deny his Jewishness, did everything possible to obfuscate and elide it' (2003: 6). He then set about becoming 'more British than the British themselves' (Korda 1980: 92), insisting on making 'British' films rather than 'Jewish' ones. Nevertheless, 'although Korda was, in public at least, already beginning to shed his own Jewish identity, his private and professional lives were facilitated and sustained by a profoundly Jewish milieu' (Walker 2003: 16). The historical reasons for Korda's hidden Jewishness, in public at least, will be examined below, but it must surely also have been motivated by simple business concerns. As Korda stated in an interview conducted in 1933, 'to be really international a film must first of all be truly and intensely national [...] In my own case, if I may say so, it is because *The Private Life of Henry VIII* is English to the backbone I feel it will appeal and succeed abroad' (Walker 2003: 21). Korda's success, then, unwittingly perhaps, provided the model to be copied in order to gain future Jewish success in the British entertainment industries.

Certainly, Mike Leigh is symptomatic of this trend. The son of Jewish doctor whose father had come to England from Russia, all of Leigh's grandparents were Yiddish-speaking immigrants. He grew up in a kosher and Zionist home yet his parents strived 'to be as English as possible' (qtd. in Bochenski 2008: 18). He was a member of the socialist Zionist youth group Habonim, but he left the movement in 1960 after becoming disenchanted with Israel's policies towards the Arabs. He only returned in 1991. Despite his ambivalence towards Israel, Leigh is proud of his Jewish heritage, but he only began to speak about it openly in the mid-1990s. Ray Carney and Leonard Quart explain how Leigh was neither

traditionally religious nor, as an adult shown any interest in or formal identification with Jewish communal and cultural organizations. Despite these feelings, his Jewish roots are an undeniable part of who Leigh is, though they are a private rather than public aspect of his life. Those roots are also a factor that, he admits, has contributed to his being an outsider and rebel. Jewishness, however, has never been the subject of his art (excepting the unpleasant, middle-class Jewish characters in *Hard Labour* [1973], who live in a house only two doors from where he grew up), although he has talked vaguely of making a film about the world of his parents and grandparents. Still, the shouting and general tumult of a certain type of Jewish family life has affected how he depicts family

interaction in his work. Further, Leigh holds that there cannot be anything more Jewish than the tendency of his films both to posit questions rather than provide answers and to take pleasure in both lamenting and laughing at the human predicament.

(2000: 1–2)

In fact, to date, Leigh has made, with the one exception mentioned above, no overt reference to his or anyone else's Jewishness for that matter in his films. Where he did so, onstage in 2005 in *Two Thousand Years*, this play has not made it onto either the big or small screen. While Leigh feels 'it's possible to see a certain kind of Jewish influence', he thinks 'it would be wrong to label these films "Jewish"', as 'it could be distracting and distorting' (qtd. in Movshovitz 2000: 76). Thus, it seems that Leigh has taken the route offered to many Anglo-Jewish writers before him, namely, to universalize his Jewishness out of the public sphere (Cheyette 2008: 95).

These film-makers are part of a wider tendency among Jews in the arts in the United Kingdom in general, who often had 'no interest in dealing with, or even alluding to their own Jewishness' (Brook 1989: 320). Stephen Brook's 1998 book *The Club* is instructive in this respect, for it highlights the disdain that many of Britain's Jewish writers, artists and other intellectuals have felt and still feel towards their communities of origin. They are likely to perceive the British-Jewish community as they do Golders Green: comfortable, complacent, materialist, mercantile, middle-class, suburban, more interested in the colour of the kitchen paint than in ideas. Thus, they do not feel part of their community and in turn are not embraced by it. Brook's own feelings are illuminating:

philistinism and intolerance within the fold have persuaded countless gifted Jews to direct their energies away from their community; and British Jews loyal to their religious and cultural tradition have always sought to adopt the lowest possible profile. It is certainly respectable to be Jewish in Britain, but it's neither exciting nor chic. To express your Jewishness is perceived as embarrassing [...] it isn't done in Britain to proclaim your Jewishness.

(1989: 411)

So when Leigh is described as 'culturally bilingual', or in his own words, 'an insider and outsider, all at once', it is not entirely clear – possibly deliberately so – whether he is referring to the wider British society or the Jewish community in particular that he feels excluded or excludes himself from (Carney and Quart 2000: 1).

## HIDDEN IDENTITY

The main reason, however, I would argue, for the lack of Jewish representation in film is the nature of British-Jewish identity. In general, Jews mirror the prevailing model of citizenship in their country of residence. In the United Kingdom, where citizenship has not warmly embraced the notion of the hyphenate identity as in the United States, one is not and perhaps cannot even be an Irish-Briton, a German-Briton, an Indian-Briton and thus a Jewish-Briton. Indeed, even writing the terms seems clumsy. Where it could be argued that Jewish immigrants to the United States in the 1880s encountered a process

of American national identity-formation in flux, Jewish immigrants to Britain seemed to face a fully formed, historic, erstwhile and organic 'British' identity. Furthermore, once the United States had begun to 'fix' its notion of itself by the 1920s, its model was forward-looking and inclusive, seeking to embrace difference. British identity, on the other hand, was backward-looking and exclusive, seeking to efface diversity. Where America sought to rally its peoples behind its symbols – the flag, the anthem, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Britain focussed its identity around the monarchy and the Empire, exclusivist symbols that rejected more than accepted. Thus, 'English' identity, in particular, was very much restrictive, believed to consist of a single closed lineage to be conserved against any challenge. English identity is still primarily perceived to be white, Protestant and based on Empire and, more recently, on the children of Empire, such as the Windrush generation. In all respects, this model has historically denied Jewish entry.

Certainly, the Jewish respondents in Nick Lambert's study of British-Jewish identity in the twenty-first century described Englishness as 'closed and native', 'regional and ethnic'. Furthermore, its

roots [are] planted deep in local earth, while the ancient, local, religious and cultural histories of the island's Jews are viewed as alien to 'English history' by 'the English'. Recalling their postwar childhood, some in England recount the moments in which their parents spoke of native gentiles as 'the English', demonstrating a gulf they noticed, later in life, among the mainstream population. Jewish linguistic or cultural artefacts, they say, may be incorporated into Englishness, but only if their origins and 'sharp edges' are first polished away and rendered subservient to the mainstream culture within which they are to be situated [...] One of the reasons for the exclusiveness of Englishness, say many British respondents, is that it is not pan-ethnically owned, and is thus less subject to the three main, externally sourced forces which influence Britishness today, namely: European integration, globalisation and immigration. Englishness is depicted as more stable, but also as more closed to the Jews than Britishness. Englishness lives inside cricket results, village teas, soap operas, pub culture; 'the English' are emotionally distant, no-nonsense, understated, practical people, who are socially-correct, upright, sporting and gentlemanly.

(Lambert 2007: 174–5)

In contrast, respondents described their Jewishness as 'ethical, warm, belief-led, emotional, loud and impractical' (Lambert 2007: 174–5). Consequently, in response to this 'dominant, oppressive Englishness, which is fixed and culturally rooted in the past', according to Lambert, Jews have 'faced pressure to universalise their Jewishness out of the public sphere or to particularise it in archetypal or apologetic images' (2007: 174).

Another factor that has hindered Jewish self-assertiveness in film has been anti-Semitism. While political anti-Semitism was not always as evident as it was in continental Europe, everyday anti-Jewish prejudice has always been a feature of British life, in existence for almost as long as Jews have lived in these isles, and which was not lessened by their almost 600-year expulsion. When Jews were readmitted in the seventeenth century and their numbers inflated by the mass immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historical hostility continued and Jews were subject to certain discriminatory practices in

British life. As George Orwell (1945: 169) remarked in his essay 'Anti-Semitism in Britain', published in 1945, 'prejudice against Jews has always been pretty widespread in England'. Tony Kushner called it an English 'anti-semitism of exclusion', describing how Jews were pressured into certain London suburbs and kept out of particular trades as well as the upper echelons of political representation (1990: 197). Even after the Second World War, which did much to discredit anti-Semitism and racial prejudice, discrimination did not decrease; indeed, Orwell suggested that the war 'accentuated' it (1945: 170). (Notably, where American Jews embraced the United States after the war, declaring America 'home' (Knox 1946: 408), an equivalent declaration by a British-Jewish intellectual in 1945 would have been unthinkable.) During the 1960s, Jews still suffered from the 'Gentleman's Agreement' genteel type of anti-Semitism in which they were barred from golf clubs and from employment in such sectors as the Civil Service and the City. The Arab boycott of the 1970s encouraged financial and business institutions to cut their ties with either Jewish banks or individuals. By the 1980s, quotas restricting the entry of Jews into the top independent schools still existed alongside glass ceilings in many companies and organizations, together with a tendency to highlight the ethnicity, specifically Jewishness, of anyone involved in financial scandals, which did not happen if the individual concerned was part of the white majority (Lambert 2007: 175). This hidden characteristic of Jews in Britain, therefore, clearly appears to be a reaction against what is perceived to be a hostile environment in which, to quote Orwell again, Jewishness was considered to be 'an initial disability comparable to a stammer or a birthmark' (1945: 167).

Historically, this Jewish response to anti-Semitism manifested itself in a twofold strategy. The first was to wholeheartedly embrace Britishness (often reduced to a perceived notion of 'Englishness'). As historian of English Jewry VD Lipman points out, 'the immigrant children and English-born children of immigrants, who flooded the schools of East London in the first decade of the twentieth century' were marked by 'their desire to become English, to identify themselves fully with English loyalties, to take up English sports and habits of life' (1954: 145). Various school headmasters at the time attested to this: 'The boys seem to me to be very proud to believe that they will become English. If you speak to the boys, their general idea is that once they are here they mean to try and be English in everything' and 'Jewish boys soon become anglicised and cease to be foreigners [...] the lads have become thoroughly English' (Lipman 1954: 145). Lipman shows how both the compulsory schools combined with the activities of the Jewish community itself all pushed towards the Anglicization of the Jewish immigrants as a means of merging the old and new immigrants into a single Anglo-Jewish community. By 1911, it was remarked, 'the forces of anglicization are now far stronger than the ties which still bind some of the older generation to Yiddish' (Lipman 1954: 148). The result of these impulses is, in the words of Colin Shindler, the tendency to 'anglicize ourselves to the point of non-existence, to become as far as possible like the people we're living amongst' (qtd. in Brook 1989: 412). Mike Leigh shows how this affected his film-making: 'at the most fundamental and obvious level it would be perfectly wrong to read my films as being primarily in any way about Jewishness [...] for years and years I shut up about the whole thing, because you don't want to be labeled and the whole thing has a different currency in the English dimension' (qtd. in Movshovitz 2000: 90).

The second, allied, response was to embrace humility as an assimilationist strategy, creating what is known as *minhag Anglia* (Hebrew: lit. 'the tradition

of England'). This was essentially a move to keep one's head down and to privatize religion by 'relocating Judaism in the private sphere and making it merely a matter of personal "conscience"' (Cheyette 1990: 98). As a result, according to Geoffrey Alderman,

Historically British Jews have viewed themselves as nothing more nor less than British citizens dissenting from the established Church and therefore as differing from the Anglican and Christian majorities merely by virtue of their religious beliefs. This view is neatly summed up in the saying that British Jews are merely Britons of the Jewish persuasion.

(1994: 189)

The result has been a 'self-effacement', which, in turn, has produced 'timidity' (Brook 1989: 411). Brook describes as 'the hallmark of Anglo-Jewry' the adoption of 'the lowest possible profile' in response to a 'combination of factors – notably, fear of persecution and gratitude for refuges such as Britain' (1989: 420, 419).

### **A SEA CHANGE, BRITISH-JEWISH FILM, 1992–PRESENT**

Beginning in the 1990s, however, a group of British films were released 'which sought to explore issues of national, cultural and ethnic identity in the form of narratives combining comic *and* dramatic plot developments, incidents and perspectives' (Mather 2006: 67). Among these was *Leon the Pig Farmer* (Vadim Jean and Gary Sinyor, 1992), the first in a new wave of films to come out of the United Kingdom, that 'meditated on what it meant to be Jewish [...] in contemporary Britain' (Mather 2006: 67). What followed was not so much a renaissance of 'new' Jewish film-making as a birth, for, from this point on, a slew of new British-Jewish films appeared on our screens, mirroring, albeit on a much smaller scale, a new and emerging trend in US cinema (Abrams 2011).

In a little under two decades, almost half the number of films has been produced featuring either Jewish characters or significant Jewish plotlines than in the previous nine decades combined. For the period 1908–1981, there were 36; in the period 1990–2006 this figure is seventeen. These include *Leon the Pig Farmer*, *The Tango Lesson* (Sally Potter, 1997), *The Governess* (Sandra Goldbacher, 1998), *Solomon and Gaenor* (Paul Morrison, 1999), *Simon Magus* (Ben Hopkins, 1999), *The Nine Lives of Tomas Katz* (Ben Hopkins, 2000), *Esther Kahn* (Arnaud Desplechin, 2000), *Suzie Gold* (Ric Cantor, 2000), *The Man Who Cried* (Sally Potter, 2000), *Me Without You* (Sandra Goldbacher, 2001), *Liam* (Stephen Frears, 2001), *Wondrous Oblivion* (Paul Morrison, 2003), *Shem/Name* (Caroline Roboh, 2004), *Song of Songs* (Josh Appignanesi, 2006), *Sixty Six* (Paul Weiland, 2006), *An Education* (Lone Scherfig, 2009) and *The Infidel* (Josh Appignanesi, 2009). In addition, various Jewish characters have popped up in other British films, such as Jewish gangsters in *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000), as well as the recent adaptations of *Oliver Twist* (Roman Polanski, 2005) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Michael Radford, 2004).

These films generally fall into one or two, often overlapping, genres: historical and/or fantasy (*The Governess*, *Solomon and Gaenor*, *Simon Magus*, *The Nine Lives of Tomas Katz*, *Esther Kahn*, *Wondrous Oblivion*, *Sixty Six*, *An Education*), comedy (*Suzie Gold*, *Sixty Six*, *Wondrous Oblivion*, *Leon*, *The Infidel*), or semi-autobiographical (*Sixty Six*, *Wondrous Oblivion*, *Me Without You*). They deal with memories and conflicts of ancient and recent past and deep

contemplation of the present, but mostly 'with emphasis on the experiences of Jewish youth' (Tal 2007: 84). Some of them even deal with sensitive material such as incest (*Song of Songs*), anti-Semitism (*Solomon and Gaenor*, *An Education*, *The Infidel*) and Israel (*The Infidel*), previously a taboo topic in British-Jewish film. They meditate on what it means to be Jewish in contemporary Britain, and may be regarded as an attempt to establish an independent Jewish cinematic position, one that is conscious of the non-Jewish majority and seeks to locate its own authentic voice in the contemporary cultural cacophony. In these films, Jewish characters are examined in the context of their interaction with their non-Jewish environment. The films present a range of Jewish characters and plotlines, many dealing with experiences of racism and prejudice in Britain. Taken together, these films compare to Mathieu Kassovitz's landmark 1995 film *La Haine*, whose 'insistence on Jewishness counters the reductive view of a "white Republican Frenchness"' (Vincendeau 2005: 31). Similarly, a new generation of younger British-Jewish film-makers has thrown off the shackles of their older counterparts, to insist on their Jewishness as a rejection of historical, backward-looking, organic and exclusivist notions of British and/or English identity and one that is not purely focussed around notions of Empire. Yet, unlike the scholarly attention that Kassovitz's single film has attracted, for some reason, all of these films, with the exception of *The Governess*, as we have seen, have been ignored academically.

What led to this change? Factors external to the Jewish communities of Britain provoked this transformation. Brook highlights a number of reasons. 'The revival of Jewish assertiveness', he argues, 'has been aided by the arrival in Britain of other immigrant groups who have taken the spotlight off the Jews' (1989: 420). He then points to Thatcherite Britain's legitimization of confidence; in the words of Jewish writer Frederic Raphael, 'assertiveness has now become a licensed form of behaviour, and Jews, having got the licence, have no intention of not using it' (qtd. in Brook 1989: 420). Finally, Brook suggests that the awareness, as a result of education about the Holocaust, of the inescapability of Jewishness, convinced British Jews that a low profile was useless when anti-Semites are not so discerning in their discrimination. At the same time, hostility towards Jews was on the decrease, particularly towards the end of the twentieth century. In addition, what has been termed a 'Holocaust consciousness' has been inserted into British and Jewish minds by popular culture, landmark films such as *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) and *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), curriculum changes, the growth of modules and degree programmes at all levels in the subject at Higher Education level, the setting up of museums and memorials (Hyde Park, Beth Shalom, the Imperial War Museum), and finally the establishment of an annual and national Holocaust Memorial Day.

Furthermore, the Race Relations Act of 1976 arguably provided a friendlier context for Jewish film-makers in the United Kingdom to work. The arrival in the United Kingdom of a significant number of non-whites threw into relief the presence of minorities among whom there was not a wholesale desire for assimilation, made difficult by differences in skin colour (Alderman 1994: 189–90). Simply put, the newer arrivals in the United Kingdom from the former colonies and other commonwealth countries took the spotlight off the majority of Jews because, to all intents and purposes (the ultra-Orthodox aside), Jews looked *white*. Furthermore, in response to this new type of immigration, race-relations legislation was passed and anti-discrimination policies enacted from which Jews undoubtedly benefited. Not only did the law now protect the

observance of certain religious practices, but it was also recognized that the media had to cater for an ethnically and religiously diverse population.

Other changes allowed 'younger Jews to become more assertive in declaring their Jewish identity' (Brook 1989: 417). The results of improved Jewish education, the distancing from the Holocaust with the growth of the notion that it will not happen (again) in the United Kingdom, the growth of the recognition of multiculturalism and race-relations legislation and anti-discriminatory policies, a feeling of greater comfort, changes in demography and increasing affluence have combined to produce a greater feeling than ever before that it is 'safe' to 'come out' as Jewish. The timidity of the Jewish establishment together with its anxiety that conspicuously Jewish behaviour might spark anti-Semitism has been rejected by a new generation of British Jews who recognize (or do not care) that how Jews act and appear is not in itself a direct cause of anti-Semitism.

Other Jewish cultural production attests to this change in climate. The slow creep of Jewish characters onto the small screen in the United Kingdom – Dorian in *Birds of a Feather* (1989–1998), Dr Legg in *Eastenders* (1985–), the series of British Telecom adverts in which Maureen Lipman portrayed, albeit gently and humorously, an anxious Jewish grandmother – is, according to Epstein, 'further evidence of a move towards the comfortable acceptance of Jews in British life' (Epstein 2005: 366). The greater cultural confidence and assertiveness exuded by Jews in the United States has slowly begun to filter over here, too. Magazines like *Heeb* and websites like *jewcy.com* have had their effect. New groups and organizations unrelated to the traditional religious denominations and synagogues have sprung up, particularly in London: the Spiro Institute, the London Jewish Cultural Centre, the Jewish Community Centre for London, the Spiro Ark, the Moishe House for London, Jewdas, Wandering Jews, Grassroots Jews and above all Limmud. It is possible now to lead a full and fulfilling post-denominational Jewish existence outside of and unrelated to the mainstream organizations and their institutions. One does not need to go to a synagogue to be Jewish anymore. Most notably, there has been a flowering of new Jewish literature: Naomi Alderman (daughter of Geoffrey), Linda Grant, Howard Jacobson, Reva Mann, Charlotte Mendelssohn, Suzanne Portnoy and Adam Thirlwell, to mention just a few, write on all sorts of *Jewish* topics, significantly sex. The publication and positive reception of the book *Jews & Sex* in 2008 attests to the strength of the change within the UK Jewish community.

Finally, changes in the film industry and to film funding, both of which helped to kick-start the careers of younger film-makers, cannot be ignored. A growth of schemes and shorts competitions, along with the proliferation of film production courses in the United Kingdom (Ogborn 2000) created a climate in the 1990s in which 'the British film industry displayed new-found energy, confidence and optimism' (Watson 2000: 80). Jewish film-makers obviously benefited from this context.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I hope to have pointed to some future directions for research. Given the overall lack of scholarship on British-Jewish film, just about every area is ripe for study from the involvement of Jewish directors, producers and actors to individual textual studies and close readings of all of the films mentioned in the course of this article. The involvement and representation of Jews

in British film is a complex subject, betraying many contradictory tendencies. While there has certainly been a change in the quantity and manner in which Jews have been represented since 1992, it is perhaps not as far-reaching as it first appears on the surface. Certainly, when compared to the United States, the volume and nature of the representations is quite tame. Even in contrast to other 'ethnic' film-making in the United Kingdom, Jewish film has not always pushed the boundaries. Robert Murphy compares *Leon the Pig Farmer* to Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), for example, concluding that it 'reverses the message' of the latter

to advocate sexual conformity and embodies a 'Majorite' ethos of mild, middlebrow conservatism. It lacks the subtlety of the Frears/Kureishi film, but it is uncannily prescient of future trends, beginning among smart but rather wacky young people in London and then moving up to Yorkshire for broad comedy.

(2000: 2)

Furthermore, *Leon* revealed the fact that once success has been achieved with a 'Jewish' film, then the directors of such films often abandon these themes in pursuit of a higher-profile Hollywood career. The case of Gary Sinyor and Vadim Jean following the success of *Leon* pays testimony to this trend, as neither of them, at the time of writing, went on to make another 'Jewish' film. As such, Britain is still some way from producing its own Mel Brooks and Woody Allens or even Seth Rogens and Judd Apatows. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the topic of Jews in British cinema will not remain hidden forever.

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