



Adult Ed February 6th, 2011

“You Oughta Be In Pictures”

The History of Jews in American Cinema

Welcome to the JCS Adult Education. If you don't recognize the title of today's class, “You Oughta Be In Pictures”, the reference is to a song by the same name that was first used in the The Ziegfield Follies of 1934. The lyrics go:

*You oughta be in pictures,
You're wonderful to see,
You oughta be in pictures,
Oh what a hit you would be!
Your voice would thrill a nation,
Your face would be adored,
You'd make a great sensation
with wealth and fame your reward.¹*

Our class today will discuss the history and contributions of Jews to the American cinema and of how many Jews found wealth and fame as their rewards. It follows our last class on the Dot Com Billionaires and I think that you will find many similarities.

History is often an inexact science. In previous classes we have discussed events of the distant past; often we are unsure of when these events took place or even if they happened at all. The Exodus from Egypt is one example. We are unsure if the going forth from Egypt happened in the 13th Century B.C.E or the 14th Century B.C.E. or if it even happened at all. In contrast we can point to a specific event that happened on a specific day and say “This is the beginning of the modern era of the American cinema.”



The date is October 6, 1927. On this date audiences come to the Warner Bros. flagship theater in New York to see something new, the first full length movie with audible dialog. The movie is, of course, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson². There had been other movies with sound and even short films with dialog, but *The Jazz Singer* broke new ground. In 1921, D.W. Griffith's short film *Dream Street* had a single singing sequence over crowd noises. Two earlier Warner Bros. films, also using the Vitaphone

¹ <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/y/yououghtabeinpictures.shtml>

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_\(1927_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_(1927_film))

technology, *Don Juan*, which premiered in August 1926 and *The Better 'Ole* which premiered in October 1926 synchronized instrumental scores and sound effects. But the *Jazz Singer* not only featured synchronized musical numbers, but synchronized dialog. People thrilled to hear Al Jolson say (and this dialog was carefully chosen for ironic effect): "Wait a minute, wait a minute! You ain't heard nothing yet!" before breaking into "Toot, Toot, Tootsie (Goo' bye.)"

I am going to offer to you that in the long history of Hollywood there has never been a movie more Jewish in every aspect than *The Jazz Singer*. The movie is based on a short story entitled *The Day of Atonement* written by Samson Raphaelson³, a Jewish author and playwright born on New York's Lower East Side. The title is, of course, a reference to Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holiday that figures in the plot. The movie's opening date, October 6th, was chosen deliberately. The next day, October 7th, 1927, was Yom Kippur. This was a deliberate choice intended to heighten suspense for the opening.

The inspiration for the book came when young Samson Raphaelson, then an undergraduate student attending the University of Illinois, attended a performance of the musical *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.* in Champaign, Illinois. The star of the show was a thirty-year-old singer, Al Jolson, a Russian-born Jew who performed in blackface. Seeing Al Jolson in this role inspired the young man to write a story about a fictional character named Jakie Rabinowitz. Jakie defies the traditions of his devout Jewish family by singing popular tunes in a beer hall. Punished by his father, a cantor, Jakie runs away from home. Some years later, now calling himself Jack Robin, he has become a talented jazz singer. He attempts to build a career as an entertainer, but his professional ambitions ultimately come into conflict with the demands of his home and heritage.

The book *The Day of Atonement* was first adapted into a play which ran on Broadway. The show opened on Broadway in September 1925 with George Jessel in the lead role, and became a hit. The stage version was a straight drama, with all the singing taking place off stage. Warner Bros., the studio founded by Harry Warner and his three brothers, bought the rights to make the play into a movie. They sign George Jessel to play the lead. There is trouble immediately. George Jessel would recall that when he read screenwriter Alfred A. Cohn's adaptation "it threw me into a fit. Instead of the boy's leaving the theatre and following the traditions of his father by singing in the synagogue, as in the play, the picture scenario had him return to the Winter Garden as a blackface comedian, with his mother wildly applauding in the box. I raised hell. Money or no money, I would not do this."⁴

The studio next turned to Eddie Cantor to take the lead. Cantor was a friend of Jessel's and offered to help negotiate a settlement that would bring Jessel back into the production. Instead the studio turned to established star, Al Jolson, who was in fact the inspiration of the original story. In a sense his portrayal of the role was almost autobiographical. Jolson was also a much bigger star than Jessel.

Continuing on with the Jewishness of the movie, Jolson would perform *Kol Nidre*, the song traditionally performed before evening service on Yom Kippur. In addition to Jolson, the film

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samson_Raphaelson

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_\(1927_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jazz_Singer_(1927_film))

featured a cameo appearance by the famous Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, who would sing *Kaddish*.



To recap, we have a series of Jewish actors cast to play a Jewish character in a story of a rebellious Jewish youth, who is ultimately assimilated. The original short story was written by a Jewish author, the movie adaptation was written by a Jewish screenwriter. The movie was produced and distributed by a Jewish-owned studio and the opening was before a predominantly Jewish audience in New York City, America's most urban area, on *erev Yom Kippur*, the holiday which plays an important part in the movie. It features Jewish religious music, including a song performed by arguably the most famous Jewish religious singer of his day. *The Jazz Singer* is the ultimate Jewish movie.

The importance of *The Jazz Singer* from a technological perspective is clear. Movies with sound tracks or "Talkies" as they were called were the future. But the financial success of *The Jazz Singer* is often exaggerated. It was probably the third most successful picture made

that year, trailing the movies *Wings*, a World War I fighter-pilot movie, and the Cecil B. DeMille New Testament film, *King of Kings*⁵. As with the modern movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, there were Jewish protests about the latter film, which I find both silly and sad. Beginning with the year that the movie *King of Kings* was released, 1927, and continuing on for more than a decade, the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation league would campaign against the movie for perpetuating negative Jewish stereotypes and for promoting the idea that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus⁶. By 1928, DeMille tells the Jewish Daily Bulletin that he regretted making the movie. By 1937 an edited version of the movie is being shown. Omitted are the scenes where Judas accepts a bribe, where Judas betrays Jesus, the trial before the Sanhedrin and the actual crucifixion. The issues of morality in the movies, the portrayal of various groups and censorship have been around since the movie business started.

I mentioned that Warner Bros. was a Jewish-owned studio. The studio was founded by the four Warner brothers, who had changed their name from Wonskolaser. **Harry**, who was born Hirsch, was the oldest. He was followed by **Albert**, born Aaron, **Sam**, born Szmul, and **Jack**, born Itzhak. The brothers had emigrated from Poland, which was at that time part of the Russian Empire, to London, Ontario, Canada. The three elder brothers began in the movie theatre business, having acquired a movie projector with which they showed films in the mining towns of Pennsylvania and Ohio. They opened their first theater, the Cascade, in New Castle, Pennsylvania in 1903.⁷

In 1904, the Warners founded the Duquesne Amusement & Supply Company, based out of Pittsburgh, to distribute films. By 1912, they were distributing films across a four state area. By the World War I era, they had begun producing films, and by 1918 the brothers opened the

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_King_of_Kings

⁶ Hollywood & Anti-Semitism, Steven Carr, Cambridge University Press, 2001

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warner_Bros.

Warner Bros. studio on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. Their success mirrors that of other Jewish filmmakers. Let us examine this early era.

“Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon...”

The concept of projecting moving pictures to create a facsimile of the real world dates back at least as far back as the invention of the "magic lantern" in the 17th century by Athanasius Kircher in Rome.⁸ Throughout the 19th century there were various attempts. But the concept doesn't really take off until the development of the motor-powered camera by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, a young British assistant working for Thomas Edison. This camera is developed in 1890 and in 1894 Edison opens the Edison Manufacturing Company, which Edison Studios.

The Dickson camera's unique quality was a synchronized shutter and sprocket system that could move the film through the camera by an electric motor. Called the *Kinetograph*, the camera used 35mm film, with sprocket holes along the side, which allowed the film to be advanced. Film shot using the Kinetograph camera could be shown on the *Kinetoscope* projector. The early Kinetograph/Kinetoscope technology would set the standards for today's film industry.

To create content to promote the new technology, Edison opened America's first film studio, dubbed **The Black Maria** because it is covered in tar paper to block out the light, on February 1, 1893, at a cost of \$637.67. Early films included a 34-second film entitled *Blacksmith Scene* which showed three people pretending to be blacksmiths and *The Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* (aka *Fred Ott's Sneeze*) which showed an Edison assistant sneezing comically for the camera. Soon the topics for early films were expanded to include segments of magic shows, plays, vaudeville performances with dancers and strongmen, acts from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, various boxing matches and cockfights, and scantily-clad women. Even then they knew that sex sells.

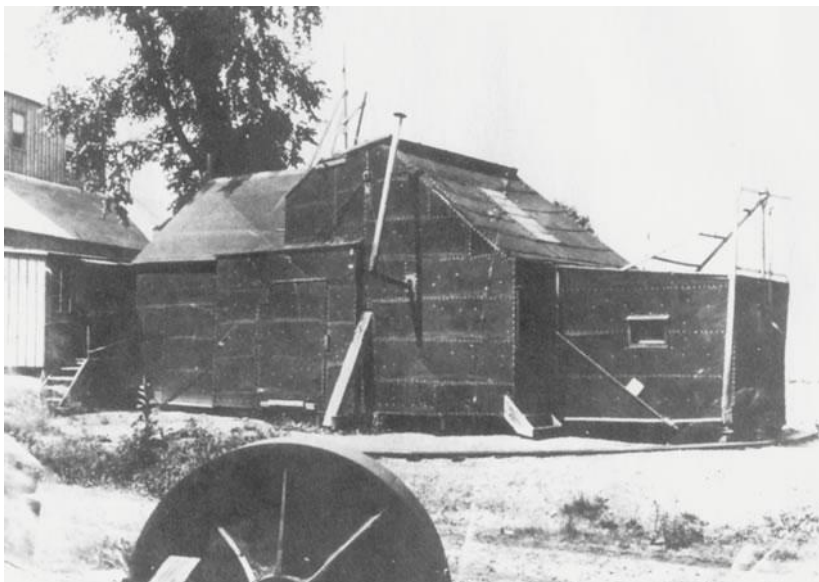


Figure 1 Edison's Black Maria studio

⁸ <http://www.filmsite.org/pre20sintro.html>

In April 1894, the Holland Brothers opened the first Kinetoscope Parlor at 1155 Broadway in New York City and for the first time, they commercially exhibited movies. *Young Griffo v. Battling Charles Barnett* was the first 'movie' to be screened for a paying audience. The 4-minute film was made by Woodville Latham and his sons Otway and Grey. On May 4, 1895 a staged fight between Australian boxer Albert Griffiths (Young Griffo) and Charles Barnett had been filmed on the roof of Madison Square Garden. Patrons paid 25 cents as the admission charge to view films in five of Edison's Kinetoscope machines placed in two rows. Movies had become commercial. Kinetoscope Parlors sprang up in other cities including San Francisco, Atlantic City and Chicago. By 1896, it became clear that more money could be made by showing movies that were projected onto a screen. Edison would adapt a projector made by Armat and Jenkins called the "Phantascope" and rename it the "Vitascope."⁹ Films were now being shown to paying audiences as large as 500 people at each showing. And now movies had become a big time industry.

As movie theaters became businesses, they naturally built on what had come before: stage theater and burlesque. Both theaters and burlesque houses had traditionally had a high percentage of Jewish owners. This would carry over to movie theaters. One of the first theaters to be designed from scratch exclusively to show movies was the *Edison's Vitascope Theater* in Buffalo, New York, owned by Jewish brothers Mitchel and Moe Mark. The theater opened in 1896. Terry Ramseye, in his book, *A Million and One Nights*, describes the theater as "one of the earliest permanently located and exclusively motion-picture exhibitions"¹⁰. The projection technology was licensed from Edison.

The term "nickelodeon" had originally been used for Austin's Nickelodeon, a museum in Boston. It began to be used in connection with movie theaters when Harry Davis and John P. Harris, used the name for their small, storefront theatre located on Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on June 19, 1905. Soon "nickelodeon" became a description for a theater that showed movies. A young man named Louis B. Mayer converted the Gem Theater in Haverhill, Massachusetts into a "nickelodeon" in 1907, renaming the theater The Orpheum.¹¹

"Go West Young Man..."

Through the use of patents, Thomas Edison hoped to keep control of every aspect of the new industry. There were two justifications for this. First, Edison either himself or through his employees was responsible for a lot of the technology. He hadn't exclusively invented the camera or the projector, but he certainly had done a lot to popularize and standardize the means by which movies were made and shown. Secondly the question as asked, and this would continue to be an issue to the modern day, without control how could you assure that only "moral" movies would be shown? "In my opinion, nothing is of greater importance to the success of the motion picture interests than films of good moral tone," Edison declared.¹²

From 1903 until 1908, Edison fought a series of patent battles. But the market, national and international, was too big for only one company to have control. In 1908, Edison would

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_film

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movie_theater

¹¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nickelodeon_\(movie_theater\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nickelodeon_(movie_theater))

¹² <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2010/09/thomas-edisons-plot-to-destroy-the-movies.ars/2>

reluctantly align with the Biograph Company and other major players to form the Motion Picture Patents (MPP) Company, which was intended to be the final authority. The Authority, as the MPP came to be known, demanded licensing fees from all film producers, distributors, and exhibitors. Because of their stance on moral content and because of their ostensible opposition to “cheap and inferior foreign films” the movie industry was excluded from protection under the First Amendment, a decision that would be supported in the courts until the 1950s.

A January 1909 deadline was set for all companies to comply with the license. The deadline came and went and unlicensed outlaws, who referred to themselves as *independents*, carried on business without submitting to the Edison monopoly. In the summer of 1909 the independent movement was in full-swing, with producers and theater owners using illegal equipment and imported film stock to create their own underground market.

One of the reasons that independent film makers continued to flourish was that people were willing to pay for sexy movies. Filmmakers like William Fox continued to make movies featuring actress Theda Bara, for example. Born Theodosia Burr Goodman in 1885¹³, she was the daughter of a Jewish tailor who had come over from Poland to find his fortune in Cincinnati, Ohio. Theda Bara, also known as The Vamp, would make more than 40 silent movies, portraying roles such as Cleopatra, often scantily clad. The studios build up an exotic image of her, portraying her as the Egyptian-born daughter of a French actress and an Italian sculptor. She was said to have been raised in the Sahara desert, under the shadow of the Sphinx. This is more romantic than saying she was the daughter of a Yiddish-speaking tailor who took drama lessons at Walnut Hills High School in Ohio. She is generally considered America’s first sex symbol.



The attempt of Edison to monopolize the film industry pushed independent filmmakers like Harry Aitken and Adolph Zukor to take their operations to California, near the Mexican border, where it was rumored that it would be harder for Edison to sue them and they could flee the

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theda_Bara

country if they had to do so. The area around Los Angeles where most of the filmmakers congregated became known as Hollywood.

Harry Aitken and his brother Roy had started with a makeshift theater in their barn near Waukesha, Wisconsin. They made enough money from this to open their first theater in Chicago. The success from that venture led to a string of five theaters¹⁴.

As with the Warner Bros., Harry moved from theater ownership to distribution, founding the Western Film Exchange in 1906. In 1908, the business was halted due a series of lawsuits brought by Edison. Like other independent filmmakers, Aitken decided to make his own “underground” movies and 1912 he formed Mutual Film Corporation.

In 1913, Aitken would lure D.W. Griffith away from Biograph films with the promise of complete artistic freedom. Griffith would hold Aitken to his promise and set about to make a type of film never before made: a full-length feature movie. The film’s costs would be astronomical for the day, an unheard of \$100,000 or more. The movie was so costly, such an enormous gamble that the board of Mutual would fire Aitken’s over it. Aitken’s would then risk his personal wealth, as well as his reputation, and gambled everything on the film’s success. Aitken and Griffith would form the Epoch Producing Corporation.

In 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* premiered. Set during and after the American Civil War, the film was based on Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, a novel and play. Running an unprecedented 120 minutes in length, the movie premiered in Los Angeles, with ticket prices at \$2.00. It was perhaps the first true blockbuster. When the movie went on the road for extended engagements, accompanied by a traveling orchestra, no one had ever seen anything like it. At New York’s Liberty Theater on Broadway, the movie ran for 48 weeks.

Flushed with success, Aitken would form Triangle Pictures Corporation. He would hire directors Thomas Ince and Mack Sennett away from Mutual and strike deals with their top producers. However, Griffith’s next film, *Intolerance* would flop, basically bankrupting Aitken. The Culver City film lot would be sold to Goldwyn Pictures, eventually becoming part of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Adolph Zukor was another independent filmmaker¹⁵. Born Adolph Cukor to a Jewish family in Ricse, Hungary, he would come to the United States in 1889, at the age of 16. He began working in an upholstery shop in New York City. Three years later, a friend got him a job working for a furrier. In 1893 he took a trip to see the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, commemorating Columbus's discovery of America. He like the Midwest and decided to stay, opening up Zukor's Novelty Fur Company. Within two years, he was employing 25 men and had opened up a branch office. He would return to New York, living in an apartment at 111th Street and Seventh Avenue in New York City's wealthy German-Jewish section.

In 1903 Zukor’s cousin, Max Goldstein approached him for a loan. The aforementioned Mitchell Mark needed investors in order to expand his chain of theaters that had begun in Buffalo. Zukor agreed, but only on the condition that he be made a partner, along with another Jewish

¹⁴ <http://www.learnaboutmovieposters.com/newsite/index/countries/us/history/PEOPLE/HarryAitken/HarryAitken.asp>

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolph_Zukor

investor, Marcus Loew. Loew had been born into a poor Jewish family on the Lower East Side. Despite having had to go to work at a very young age and having virtually no education, Loew was able to save up enough money to buy first a penny arcade and then one of the first nickelodeons. He would expand thus into America's premier chain of movie theaters under the Loew's name.

Having made the loan that started him in the movie business, Adolph Zukor would quickly expand his holdings. He would form the Famous Players Film Company, which largely distributed French films. Among the notable films he distributed was *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth* starring Sarah Bernhardt. The goal of the Famous Players was to produce films with famous stage actors. After getting financial support from New York City theatre impresarios the Frohman brothers, Zukor was able to produce the hit movie *The Prisoner of Zenda*. In 1913 Zukor would buy the armory at 26th Street in Manhattan and convert into Chelsea Studios. He would later leave New York to make films on the West Coast. Zukor had a "natural talent" as a producer and director, meaning that he understood the business and knew what it took to make a film successful. He would grow the Famous Players into Paramount Studios.

Meanwhile, Zukor's partner in the initial loan, Marcus Loew, would go on to found the People's Vaudeville Company, a theatre chain which showcased one-reeler films as well as live variety shows¹⁶. In 1910, he would reorganize the company into Loew's Consolidated Enterprises and devote himself almost exclusively to film. In the 1920s, he would reorganize again as Loew's Inc. and would buy the Metro Pictures Corporation, a film production company. Soon, he would acquire controlling interest in Goldwyn Pictures, which had been owned by theater impresario Lee Schubert. Perhaps the most recognizable trademark in the business was the "Leo the Lion" emblem. Once Samuel Goldwyn had left, the studio lacked capable management and was in financial trouble. Loew remembered that he had met a young man named Louis B. Mayer, who having begun with a single theater back east, was now managing a small but successful studio in Los Angeles. Mayer's studio was soon folded into Metro Goldwyn and his would be added to the masthead. Marcus Loew would never see how successful the company that he founded would become. Three years after finalizing the deal, Marcus would die from a heart attack while at his home in Glen Cove, New York and be buried at Maimonides Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Recap: Thomas Edison had a dream, a dream of controlling every aspect of the movie business, a business that in large measure he had created. He wanted to produce the movies and had founded the first movie studio in America with this goal in mind. He wanted to control distribution by controlling who had access to the means of showing movies. Had he been successful he would have controlled every aspect of the business from deciding what films were made to the technology used to make the bulb in the projector. Only in his way could he be sure that the movies shown would meet his moral standards.

But Edison's dream was not to be. Movie theater or nickelodeon owners, dissatisfied with what was being offered and the prices that they were being asked to pay left the East Coast and headed out West to be as far away from Edison and his partners as possible. The American West has always symbolized freedom and this case was no different. Besides, they could jump across the border just in case. Now they were free, free to make racy movies if they wanted, free to make or lose fortunes on the success or failure of key titles.

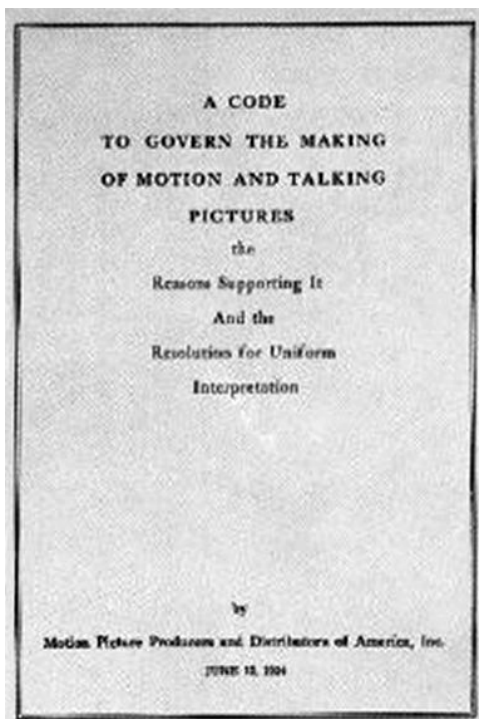
¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Loew

Many of these owners were Jewish, coming out of the New York based theater business or simply entrepreneurs who realized the potential of the new opportunity.

Ironically, once success was achieved, the studio owners imposed the same kinds of constraints as Edison had dreamed of. They called in “vertical integration” but they were really imposing their will on an industry that would shape America.

That Dirty Business

As far back as 1910, movies had come under attack for their licentious content. Pastor Wilbur Fiske Crafts in his book *National Perils and Hopes* had decried the “foul shows and corrupt literature” as the means “by which our youth are chiefly seduced.”¹⁷ Crafts would lead an early, unsuccessful campaign for federal censorship of movies.¹⁸ It was not until 1926 that the Hays Code would be created and not be formally adopted by The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America until 1934. The so-called Hays Code was named after its author, former Postmaster General Will Hays. An amendment to the Code, adopted on June 13, 1934, established the Production Code Administration (PCA) and required all films released on or after July 1, 1934, to obtain a certificate of approval before being released.



The Hays Code came in response to a series of Hollywood scandals, including the multiple and sensational trials of comedian Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle. Roscoe Arbuckle was a star in silent comedies including Mack Sennett’s Keystone Cops shorts and was a mentor to Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Bob Hope. Implicated in the death of actress Virginia Rappe, Arbuckle was accused in the press of having raped her, although there was no evidence of this. He was tried three times. The first trial ended in a hung jury, the second trial in a mistrial. Arbuckle was found innocent after the third trial. Despite this, his films were withdrawn, and for many Americans, he became symbolic of the moral turpitude of Hollywood.

There were two sections to the Hays Code. The first was a set of "general principles" which mostly concerned morality. The second was a set of "particular applications" which was an exacting list of items which could not be depicted.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Hollywood & Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II*, Steven Carr, Cambridge University Press, 2001

¹⁸ <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/56159528/Conservative-social-Christianity-the-law-and-personal-morality-Wilbur-F-Crafts-in-Washington>

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_Picture_Production_Code



The Hays Code banned nudity, even suggested nudity. So a 1932 publicity poster that suggested that Joan Blondell was not wearing any clothes for the photo, even though she was seated in a manner that showed only “modest parts” was banned. Another famous case of enforcement involved the 1943 Western *The Outlaw*, produced by Howard Hughes. The *Outlaw* was denied a certificate of approval and kept out of theaters for years, because it was felt that the film focused too much attention on Jane Russell's breasts. Supposedly, Hughes used a stopwatch to persuade Breen, the Hays Code's chief enforcer, that the amount of time focused on the breasts did not violate the code and the film could be shown.

The code was not just concerned with material, but with themes as well. No reference to homosexuality. No miscegenation, or racially mixed couples. But the code did not stop there.

We mentioned the phenomenal success of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of the Nation*, a racist movie by today's standards that glorifies the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. When the Southern family in the movie, the Camerons, are forced to flee from the African-American militia and receive aid from two white union soldiers, the movie shows the intertitle, "The former enemies of North and South are united again in defense of their Aryan birthright." Not only were white audiences not offended by the movie, it played to standing room only audiences throughout America.

But in 1927, Warner Bros. would release *Irish Hearts* and MGM would release *The Callahans and the Murphys*. Both movies were criticized for perpetuating ethnic stereotypes. The *Gaelic American*, an Irish newspaper, in criticizing the works, noted that “Warner Bros. are Jews” and took the movies as attacks on the Irish, the opening shot in an ethnic war. Articles would criticize “Jewish producers specializing in attacks on the Irish” while at the same time taking “special care not to caricature their own people – the Jews.” Never mind that the 1924 Samuel Goldman movie *Potash and Perlmutter* was a Jewish ethnic comedy. With the protests in mind years later, the Hays Code would be expanded to prevent religious, ethnic or national groups from being portrayed in an unfavorable light. This early “political correctness” would have some very odd consequences.



We previously mentioned how, after protests by the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, *The King of Kings* was edited for re-release without the crucifixion seen. In the 1930s, when Warner Bros. wanted to make a film about concentration camps in Nazi Germany, the production office forbade it, with threats to take the matter to the federal government if the studio went ahead.

The movie *Gentleman's Agreement* almost did not get made because of concerns over the Hays Code.²⁰ One of the first movies about anti-Semitism in America, Jewish studios would not touch the script, despite the fact that it was based on an award winning book by Laura Hobson. Finally, Darryl Zanuck agreed to produce the movie. Zanuck was not Jewish, but had recently been refused acceptance into Los Angeles Country Club because they thought he

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentleman's_Agreement

was. Samuel Goldwyn and other Jewish executives came to Zanuck and asked him not to make the movie because they were afraid that it would stir up trouble. This was in 1946, one year after the world had learned about the Holocaust. The film was made, released in 1947, won Academy Awards for best picture and best director and was one of the highest grossing movies that year. Darryl Zanuck was named "Man of the Year" by B'nai B'rith for 1948. Not everyone appreciated the movie, however, and the House Un-American Activities Committee would call director Elia Kazan, producer Darryl Zanuck, actor John Garfield, and actress Anne Revere to testify before the committee. Both Garfield and Revere refused to testify and were placed on the Hollywood Blacklist. Revere did not appear in another movie for twenty years. Garfield remained on the blacklist for one year, was called again to testify against his wife, and died of a heart attack at the age of 39 before his second hearing date.

Unfair Business Practices

There are many accusations leveled at the movie industry, now and then. One was "nepotism" which some authors, Steven Carr, for example, take as code for "anti-Semitism." Looking at the history of the movies, one can understand why this is.

Let's start with ownership of the studios, the Big Five studios²¹:

- **Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)**, purchased from Sam Goldwyn by Marcus Lowe with minority ownership by Louis B. Mayer.
- **Paramount Picture Corp.** purchased by Adolph Zukor.
- **Fox Film Corporation/20th Century Fox**, not Jewish owned, but headed by Daryl Zanuck, who many thought was a Jew and was a former Warner employee.
- **Warner Bros.**, owned by Harry, Jack and Albert Warner.
- **RKO Radio Pictures Incorporated**, the brainchild of David Sarnoff, a Jew born outside Minsk, who studied to become a Rabbi.

Adding in the so-called Little Three studios:

- **Universal**, founded by Carl Laemmle, a Jew who had migrated to the United States from Germany in 1884. After working for 20 years as a bookkeeper, he started buying nickelodeons.
- **United Artists**, not Jewish owned.
- **Columbia**, owned and managed by Harry Cohn, born to a German Jewish family in New York.

²¹ <http://www.umsl.edu/~gradyf/film/STUDIOS.htm>

Of the eight major studios, six were either owned by or founded and managed by Jews. The Jewish Movie Moguls, knew each other, they saw each other socially and people moved from one studio to another. It is easy to see why this could be seen as scary.

Most of these studio owners had begun as theater owners who resisted being told what films they could and could not show and how much they would have to pay. So naturally once they achieved wealth and power, they began to tell theater owner exactly what movies to show and how much they would have to pay. They called this “vertical integration.”

Run-zone-clearance was the system under which movies premiered in prestigious theaters, in select high-end districts and then gradually made their way out to the more remote (and poorer) areas. Want to show a first-run movie in your theater in the boonies? Not going to happen.

Want to pick and choose what movies you are going to show in your theater? Not going to happen. Theater owners had to rent “blocks” of movies, often sight unseen. This system was referred to as block booking and blind bidding. What happened when you found out that one movie was not suitable for your demographic? (Say that you wanted *King of Kings*, but found out that *The Jazz Singer* was also included in your block.) Tough, your contract said you had to show it anyway.

In 1936 testimony before Congress, Stephen A. Cabot, attorney for the Motion Picture Research Council argued that block booking and blind bidding “took away the freedom of our New England towns” as decisions that effected the local community were being made 3,000 miles away.²²

So you can see why these Jewish-owned studios were seen as a threat to the American way of life. But despite that, the movie studios and the moguls that owned them loved America and considered themselves assimilated.

What Was It Before You Changed It?

Jewish actors can broadly be broken into two groups: those who made a point of being Jewish and those who concealed or at least did not make a point of their Jewishness.

In the former group we have many Jewish comedians. Certainly the first place of honor has to go to Minnie’s boys, the Marx Brothers. They came up through vaudeville and never lost their Jewish roots. Even when they were appearing not to be Jewish (Chico as the faux Italian) they were Jewish. Listen to the fabulous word-play of the “Why a duck?” sketch from *The Cocoanuts* for example. Continuing in this tradition of Jewish comics who wore their Jewishness as a mark of distinction you have: Moe and Shemp Howard and Larry Fine, Curly Howard, Jerry Lewis, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Adam Sandler (by virtue of *The Hanukkah song*.) Jewish comics who didn’t make a make point of their Jewishness would include Danny Kaye, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Rodney Dangerfield. Are they less Jewish? No, it was simply a style choice.

²² *Hollywood & Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II*, Steven Carr, Cambridge University Press, 2001

But then you have actors whose Jewishness was unknown to much of their public. Leslie Howard, John Garfield, Rod Serling, Kirk Douglas, Paul Newman, Tony Curtis, Lee J. Cobb. How about Werner Klemperer? Harrison Ford? Ford's maternal grandparents, Harry Nidelman and Anna Lifschutz, were Jewish immigrants from Minsk. Yaphet Kotto's father, according to the actor at least, was, an observant Jew who spoke Hebrew, and Kotto's mother reportedly converted to Judaism before marrying his father. True or not, the actor was born in New York City and self-identifies as being a Jew. Good enough for me.

My point is not to list who you know and who might surprise you. Although the list is interesting and you can find it at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Jewish_actors

Those actors who changed their names did so to fit in, or to avoid prejudice or to fit their names on the marquee or because they had to. It depended on what era they came up in. Benjamin Kubelsky probably had to become Jack Benny to get hired. John Garfield had to change his name from Jacob Julius Garfinkle to work on Broadway. And mentioning John Garfield, who ironically played a non-Jewish role in Gentleman's Agreement, leads into one of the blackest periods in American Jewish history.

Garfield was married to Roberta Seidman, who had been a member of the Communist Party. While there is no proof that Garfield was himself a communist, his marriage as well as his life-long espousal of Liberal causes and membership in the Committee for the First Amendment would lead to his being called before the HUAC. His refusal to testify was enough to get him black-listed.

By and large, Jews are a paranoid people. I am not sure, but perhaps two thousand years of global persecution has something to do with it. The Jewish film studios voluntarily accepted the Hays Code because they were worried about anti-Semitism. And in part, because if it didn't affect profits, they didn't care. But what they were worried about came to pass in the 1940s and 1950s when Jewishness became linked to Communism.

The House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC) had released a report as far back as 1938 claiming that communism was pervasive in Hollywood.²³ In 1941, producer Walt Disney took out an ad in Variety, the industry trade magazine, declaring that "Communist agitation" was behind a cartoonists and animators' strike. (Actually it was Walt's charm and personality that had led to the strike. Not even a mouse could love him.)

But it was not until after World War II that anti-Communist paranoia would take center stage. In 1945, Gerald L. K. Smith, founder of the neo-fascist America First Party, began giving speeches in Los Angeles assailing the "alien minded Russian Jews in Hollywood." In 1947, the HUAC began hearings into communist infiltration of the movie industry. The hearings began with testimony from Walt Disney and Screen Actors Guild president Ronald Reagan about how serious the infiltration was. Other conservative Hollywood figures also stepped into the spotlight. In response, director John Huston, actors Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall (Jewish) and Danny Kaye, organized the Committee for the First Amendment to protest the government targeting of their industry.

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollywood_blacklist

An unusually high percentage of those targeted by the hearings, and in particular those who had their lives ruined for refusing to testify against their friends and colleagues, were Jewish. Poor Sam Jaffe, who had been nominated for an Oscar for *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and was famous for roles in *Lost Horizon* (1937) and *Gunga Din* (1939), was reduced to teaching high school math and living with his sisters.

Six of the **Hollywood Ten** - John Howard Lawson, Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz and Samuel Ornitz — were Jewish²⁴. They had scripted or directed hundreds of Hollywood films. They would be cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to testify, to name their friends and co-workers as Communists. But it was the studios that voluntarily agreed not to let them work again. Others targeted by the HUAC included Zero Mostel, who was blacklisted, as was Herschel Bernardi.



The allegations that Jewish communists were behind Hollywood was nothing new. Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin both sang that song. It was just that this time action by the Federal government accompanied the rhetoric.

The fact that Hollywood created and marketed the American Dream didn't deter these madmen from accusing Hollywood Jews of trying to undermine it. I would offer to you that Jewish studio heads, Jewish actors, Jewish writers, often the children of immigrants and coming from poverty themselves, are more illustrative of the benefits that America has to offer than any of their accusers.

Summary and Discussion:

It is interesting to compare and contrast the Dot Com Billionaires with the Movie Moguls. The similarities: in both cases, Jewish Americans achieved success and with it wealth that seems out of proportion to their numbers as a part of the American population. Additionally, in achieving this success they contributed to and changed the fabric of American society.

But there are profound differences. Whereas the Dot Com Billionaires were scholars and had been recognized as excellent students early on, the Movie Moguls were largely uneducated. They were either immigrants themselves or one generation removed from immigrants. Jack Warner, Adolph Zukor, Marcus Loew, all had come from nothing, all had worked menial jobs before finding success in the movie business. They couldn't have had any training for the movie business because they were inventing it. It should also be noted that, like many Jews that came to America at the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century, they had arrived in the East Coast Cities.

²⁴ <http://www.thejc.com/news/on-day/41684/on-day-hollywood-ten-are-blacklisted>

Neal Gabler in his book "An Empire of Their Own" summarized things as follows: "The movie industry held out a number of blandishments to these Jews, not the least of which was that it admitted them. There were no social barriers in a business as new and faintly disreputable as the movies were in the early years of this [20th] century. There were none of the impediments imposed by loftier professions and more firmly entrenched businesses to keep Jews and other undesirables out. Financial barriers were low, too."

The Jews who went into the movie business found success because there was no one to stop them from succeeding. The movie business was new, like the Dot Com businesses and there weren't entrenched cliques to keep them out. As in the case of Zukor and Lowe, they knew each other from similar pasts or came to know each other from being in the same business. Does this mean that the Jews achieved success because of clannishness? No more so than J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie.

But the movies conveyed messages. They shaped the way generations of Americans would feel about love and war and race and religion and sex. The Movie Moguls operated by feel, by what they thought would sell, based on their own experiences. And those experiences were largely urban and East Coast and liberal and Jewish. No wonder much of America felt them to be jarring.

Let me leave you with one of my favorite quotes from *Gentleman's Agreement*, between Fred Lieberman, played by Sam Jaffe, and Phil Green, played by Gregory Peck:

Professor Fred Lieberman: Millions of people nowadays are religious only in the vaguest sense. I've often wondered why the Jews among them still go on calling themselves Jews. Do you know, Mr. Green?

Phil Green: No, but I'd like to.

Professor Fred Lieberman: Because the world still makes it an advantage not to be one. Thus it becomes a matter of pride to go on calling ourselves Jews.

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