

The Image of the Jew and Israel in Contemporary Media

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The medium . . . is the most powerful communicator, influencer, impacter—salesman and propaganda and information dispenser.

We hope that this brief article will attempt to probe for answers to a number of important questions.

How do we see the image of the Jew and Israel in film today? What is your definition of a Jewish film? Is there a successful commercial market and are there audiences for Jewish and Israeli firms? What is the scene among young Jewish filmmakers? What are they up to? What does the future spell?

On a recent NBC-TV special, Orson Welles made a significant and startling observation that one showing of a theatrical feature on TV is seen by more people than would see almost 500 showings in theatres all over the world for the past 50 years.

The recent NBC-TV series on the Holocaust amplifies this powerful role of TV. It is estimated that over 100,000,000 persons watched this drama-documentary.

The audience for television, the ultimate mass medium is not *one* audience but many. Four such audiences are women, blacks, the poor and the elderly. We can conclude from many studies of TV entertainment and commercials that for the past 25 years portrayals of women, the poor, minorities and the elderly have been relatively few, except for stereotypes. Perhaps "the new television" of the past few years may herald a different pattern for the future. Heavy viewers have been found to be more likely to perceive the world as resembling TV drama more than real life.

We live in an age of terrifying technological achievement. If we contemplate the vast changes in our society during the past half century from the wagon to the supersonic

planes, from the gas jets to the laser beam; from coal-burning to atomic energy, we must gasp at the implications. We no longer live in closed, protective societies.

Satellites in the sky. Radar and dark light; sonar in the deepest of oceans; unbelievable instruments that see and hear us without our knowledge. Our personal events are no longer sacred. The very events of life; its tragedies, its joys, its heartbreaks and its loves all reveal themselves on the TV screens, on the movie screens right in our very homes, right before our eyes. Our families, our children, our grandchildren—all of us—are the captives of the media: film and TV and radio.

The medium is no longer the message. It is the most powerful communicator, influencer, impacter-salesman and propaganda and information dispenser.

In a recent study of the United States, it was determined that 97 percent of all homes have TV sets; 41 percent have two or more TV sets; 64 percent have color TV sets. An article in the *New York Times* states that most children are happy at home but fear the outside world. The Institute for Survey Research at Temple University surveyed 2,220 children 7-22 years old. One quarter of the children were frightened of TV programs where people shoot and fight. And heavy viewers were twice as frightened. TV violence must be checked by more than *Sesame Street*.

A *Variety* survey on 3/2/77 reported that TV violence is up at the highest level since 1967. At the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania researchers found the big jump in violence during the family hour. Non-whites and

women are the most likely victims of violence.

The average American household spends more than seven hours watching TV. By 9:00 p.m. 70 percent of all Americans are watching TV.

The average American child will have viewed 15,000 hours of TV by the time he or she has been graduated from high school as compared to an exposure of 11,000 hours of formal classroom instruction.

They will have witnessed some 18,000 murders and countless detailed brutal incidents of robbery, arson, bombing, forgery, smuggling, mugging, beating, and torture—averaging approximately one per minute in the standard TV cartoon for children under the age of ten. There is an average of six times more violence during one hour of children's TV than there is in one hour of adult TV. Twenty-five percent of the TV industry's profit comes from children's programming which is seven percent of the total.

More than \$400,000,000 is spent on TV advertising directed at children. The Code of Hammurabi in 2250 BC made selling something to a child or buying something from a child without power of attorney punishable by death. Our children are exposed to more than 350,000 TV commercials by the time they reach age 18.

Cinema also has a heavy influence on the adolescent and young adult. Commercial theatrical films have grossed more than \$2.3 billion dollars in 1977—*Jaws*, 150 million; *Towering Inferno*, 55 million; *Benji* and *Young Frankenstein*, 30 million and *Godfather II*, 29 million. *Star Wars* will reach an estimated gross of 250 million plus. More than 25 million persons paid to see film in theatres in 1977, each week; every week.

The power of TV and films is growing by leaps and bounds and its glorious future grows rosier and more lucrative as super productions are mounted and produced.

Home video discs will allow the average home to purchase a unit for several hundred dollars plus individual metal discs that will house an entire, full length film for \$10-15. Just conjecture what this means, added to

public service TV, cable TV and home subscription TV.

We are in the midst of the most profound media-cultural revolution. The American Jewish community will have to recognize these revolutionary facts and face up to the great challenges of communication technology. If we don't we will be swamped, literally drowned, in other kinds of sights and sounds.

During the past two years there has been a significant rise in the production and showing of films that relate to Jewish life, Jewish characters and Jewish concerns. Among these have been a number of positive films projecting honest and objective images of Jewish life, values and history. Some of the better feature films are:

Lies My Father Told Me, starring Yossie Yadin of Israel, dramatizing the warm and touching relationship between a seven-year-old Jewish boy and his 75-year-old grandfather; set in the Montreal immigrant community of the 1920's.

Hester Street. This outstanding full length film describes the effort and heartache of immigrant Jews in the early part of this century to adjust to the new life and problems in America.

The 81st Blow. A powerful full length documentary of the sadistic, brutal events that mark the Nazi step-by-step destruction of Jews and Jewish life in Eastern Europe and in the ghettos. It features the legendary heroism of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The Adventures of "Rabbi" Jacob. One of the funniest French films that devotes considerable footage to Jews and Jewish life in Paris.

Lacombe Lucien. Another of the great French films that deals with the Nazis and their French Fascist allies in the countryside. Jews play prominent roles.

L'Chaim — to Life. Produced by Harold Mayer for Women's Ort, this film succeeds in capturing the flavor and richness of early American Jewish immigrant life and leads us right to the birth of Israel.

Les Violons du Bal. A sensitive film; an autobiography translated into a fictional

account of the ordeals of a French family under the heels of Nazi occupation.

Black Thursday. The definitive film that describes the round up of the Jews in Paris by the Nazis and their French lackeys.

Der Martyr (The Martyr). A film about the life of Dr. Korczak, the dedicated Warsaw Ghetto doctor and his orphaned children.

Pouquoi L'Israel. A French film shown to packed houses in Paris. This three-and-one-half hour documentary is probably the best film about Israel.

My Michael. A New Dan Wolman feature based on the Hebrew classic.

A Memory of Justice, by the brilliant documentary filmmaker Marcel Ophuls (The Sorrow and the Pity), this excellent three-hour documentary about the Nuremberg trials and their aftermath has been distributed by Paramount Pictures.

Special Section, a new film by the distinguished producer director Costa-Gavras ("Z" and "Siege"). This is almost a "documentary" filming of the events in occupied France in 1941 when French Fascist collaborators and their Nazi bosses prostituted the legal-judicial system to serve the Nazi cause.

La Rue Haute (The High Wall), a Belgian product starring the French actress, Annie Cordy. This is a superb and little noticed Holocaust film.

The Dreamer, an interesting and sensitive art film by the young Israeli director-producer, Dan Wolman.

The Confrontation. A Swiss German film production based on the true story of the assassination of a Swiss Nazi gauleiter.

Madame Rosa. The Oscar award film starring Simone Signoret. A sensitive and eloquent "documentary" of a relationship between a Jewish holocaust survivor and an Arab street urchin.

Jacob the Liar. The East German production based on the story of Jewish life in the Nazi occupied ghetto of Lodz.

Number Our Days. The Oscar award documentary about Jewish elderly in California.

Do You Know Kappler? A new East German film about the Gestapo chief in Rome.

And Coming. A new Film Polski production, *The Life of Dr Janusz Korczak*, directed by Andrzej Wajda, Poland's most prolific producer.

Voyage of The Damned. It is a chilling retelling in fictional form of the historic voyage of the ship *The St. Louis* carrying hundreds of German Jews who were the pawns in the brutal game of the Nazis.

Idi Amin Dada. The authentic picture of the brutal Ugandan despot. If it were fiction, it would be acclaimed as a comic masterpiece, but it is all truth and terrifying.

Marathon Man. A confusing but chilling story of a chase for a master Nazi "biggie" filled with brutality and terror.

Operation Thunderbolt, Rescue at Entebbe. A dramatic reenactment of this historic event produced by Menachem Golan in Israel.

The Spy Who Came From Israel. A film story of the master spy from Israel caught and executed in Syria in 1965. (Eli Cohen).

Eagle In The Sky. A projected film based on a love story in an Israel setting.

21 Hours at Munich. Based on the Munich Olympic massacre.

Homage to Chagall — The Life of Marc Chagall. A Canadian film, a full length feature released in 1977 on the artist's 90th birthday.

But lest we become euphoric about these goodies on celluloid let us be reminded that there are those films that are problematic, bad and banal. These include:

A proposed film on *The Sex Life of Jesus*. Israel has refused permission to the Danish producer to shoot in Israel. Now brought to U.S.A. for production.

The Passover Plot, based on the Hugh Schoenfeld book. This film which we previewed with our Catholic and Protestant film colleagues is offensive to Christian sensibilities and disturbing to many of us in the Jewish community. Banned in Israel and offensive to the Christian community.

The other side of the coin includes the negative films about Jews. Some of these are:

Swastika, a film showing the "human" side of Hitler and his cronies.

Children of Rage, a film that features Arab and Israel relationships. Stiff, wooden and favorable to the Arab side.

Kfar Kassem, a Lebanese production. A pictorial distortion of what took place in this village in 1956.

The Messiah, a new Rossellini film-in-the-making about the life of Jesus. These films are always troublesome.

Land of Promise, a Polish prize-winning film by Andrzej Wajda. Recently won the top award in the Chicago Film Festival. Its Jewish characters are stereotypes from the classical anti-Semitic mold. Based on a Polish classic about life in Lodz. In today's political climate, this film adds fuel to the fire.

The Serpent's Egg, produced by Ingmar Bergman based on life in Berlin in 1923, at a time when Hitler's Legions were street gangs.

The Black Banana, an independent film produced in Israel and not yet released in the U.S.A. It is banal and insensitive to Jewish life styles. A comedy which becomes a travesty.

Black Sunday, based on the Munich massacres. It poses uncomfortable imbalance between Israeli characters and the Arab characters.

Lieben-Camp, The Secret Records of the Mad Nights of Adolph Hitler. Two of an oncoming onslaught of sado-masochistic films based on the Nazi experience.

Shadows of the Angels, the film that caused Israel to withdraw from the Cannes Festival because it is virulently anti-Semitic.

The Confessions of Winifred Wagner, a compelling, chilling two-hour interview with Richard Wagner's daughter-in-law, an unrepentant, proud supporter of Hitler. Produced by Hand Jurgen Superberg. His new film, *Hitler*, a film from Germany, running 7 hours has already created disturbances and furor in Europe.

A flock of neo-Nazi and sado-masochistic films glorifying brutality and a growing list of Arab films filled with lies, distortions and anti-Semitism.

A Flock of Questionable Films out of West

Germany are on the way:

— *Death is My Trade* — the story of the

Commandant of Auschwitz

— *Hitler in US*

— *The Red Nights of the Gestapo*

— *Hitler — A Career*, based on the book Joachim Fest and playing to packed houses in Germany

New 16mm Feature Films

— *After Mein Kampf*, 45 minutes

— *The California Reich*, 60 minutes

— *Hitler Jungle QUEX*, 102 minutes

— *Al Fathe*, 80 minutes

— *Revolution Until Victory*, 52 minutes

— *We Demand Freedom*, 55 minutes

— *To Live in Freedom*

A new film, *Love Those Arabs*, 16mm, color, 28 minutes, comes with an Arab Case Packet. Its theme is: "Have you neglected the Arabs, too? After seeing this film, every stop at a gas station should be a reminder—yes, even a call to prayer for the Arabs."

What is on the Jewish Scene today in Media?

I. The Jewish community—that is the organized institutional Jewish community—seems not seriously interested or concerned with the powerful force of media.

We are reactive to the media, when it deals with Israel, Zionism, Holocaust and Jewish life, or if it is negative, like the PBS program on Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan.

Not only do we not have the structure, the national coordinating centers in media like those of Protestants and Catholics, we have even allowed those few media operations that have struggled to serve the Jewish community to disintegrate.

The National Council on Churches has a staffed Broadcasting and Film Commission. They publish an excellent Film Information bulletin with periodic, in-depth feedback inserts on such subjects as Israel, Disarmament, Humane treatment of Animals and most recently on the NBC-TV Holocaust mini-series.

The U.S. Catholic Conference is a well staffed, centrally headquartered operation. They also publish a periodic film and broadcasting review and maintain an excellent

network. In fact they are involved with the most advanced and sophisticated technology—even using satellite relays for their recent Bishop's Conference.

And the irony of ironies—the Jewish community from which sprang the innovations, the founders of the film industry, where are we?

— We have no national film and broadcasting center

— We have no real interest and involvement with the advanced, new technology: News on TV, Home Video, Disc, the Media Room Concept, Videotape and Cable TV and the use of the optical fiber.

— We published a *Film Review* but it dies after a year for want of a \$15,000 budget.

— We had a National Council on Jewish Audio-Visual materials

— We had Encounter Films, New Jewish Media, even Jewish Media and the NJCRAC Task Force all dead or at the threshold of extinction.

I have tried with the help of a handful of colleagues in the Jewish world, Joel Ollander, Mort Yarmon, Fran Rosenberg, Sam Elfert and Bal Brickner to keep the flame alive.

I maintain the only central library of information and publish special bibliographies on

Israel, Holocaust and a quarterly *Round-Up* of information. I see dozens of young filmmakers. I spend time with many, many Jewish media professionals. I provide information and aid to agencies, institutions, synagogues and even places like Germany, Belgium, France, England, Israel and South

Africa and Australia. I have been involved in Film Forums, Yiddish Film Festivals, and Middle East Film Festival, Israel Film Festivals, Bicentennial Festivals and advice to TV and Film personnel. Just recently CBS-TV called about film on Golda Meier; Nova of WGBH in Boston called about film about Einstein—March 1979 will be his Centennial.

I coordinate previews of commercial and 16mm films of Jewish content and interest, about Israel and related concerns. But obviously, this is not and cannot be a one-two-three and five-person responsibility.

The continuing crises: Israel, Soviet Jewry and the rise of neo-Nazism require a larger, centralized, well supported National Media Center with all the tools and outreach potential to support it.

The need is clear—the urgency is great. It needs will and affirmation and cries for our support and involvement.