

Films figure with increasing frequency in Jewish studies—as teaching tools, as subjects of research, or as points of entry, often arising serendipitously in conversations with students and colleagues. Feature films and documentaries not only provide a source of widely shared information on the Holocaust—easily the most frequently filmed chapter of Jewish history—they also deal with Israeli life, the place of Jews in modern societies around the world, and sometimes touch on issues of religious practice or even Jewish mysticism. Whether or not scholars are happy with the images and information in these films (often they are not), these works’ prominence at the very least demands scholarly attention as phenomena of Jewish vernacular culture and as points of reference in public discussion. Therefore, our students’ literacy in film, which is often more developed than their fluency with the kinds of texts that scholars in Jewish studies typically deal with, should not be disparaged; instead, it should be seized as a strategic opportunity for engaging students in analytic exercises.

Consider, for example, two French films portraying shtetl life on the eve of the Holocaust: *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* (*Ivan and Abraham*), directed by Yolande Zauberman (1993), and *Train de Vie* (*Train of Life*), directed by Radu Mihaileanu (1999). Their subject has, of course, been a primary locus of Jewish memory culture since the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Jews began leaving small market towns both geographically and ideologically. In addition to an extensive corpus of literature, the shtetl has also been treated in memoir writing, works of visual art, music, theater, and—especially in the decade preceding World War II—film. The interwar Yiddish cinema in the United States, Poland, and the Soviet Union

facilitated multiple vicarious journeys to the shtetl, whether in stagings of literary classics (e.g., the 1928 film *Durkh*

*trern*, based on Sholem Aleichem’s Motl stories) or in escapist musical comedies (*Yidl mitn fidl*, filmed on location in Kazimerz na Wislu in 1936).

The two recent shtetl films in question are something quite different. Whether made in situ or on sets erected in the New Jersey

# THE SHTETL ON THE SILVER SCREEN: TWO RECENT FILMS

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into the shtetl. As is often the case with memory projects, their analysis ultimately tells us more about the rememberer than the remembered.

Indeed, despite their shared topic, these two films offer divergent conjurings of the shtetl. As its title intimates, *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* offers a multicultural view of the

shtetl. The film’s plot centers around the friendship of its two eponymous characters—Ivan, a Russian Roma (Gypsy) boy apprenticed to a Jewish family, whose youngest member is Abraham. Characters in their anonymous shtetl variously speak Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and Romani; these languages delineate ethnic divides and class tensions as well as evince cultural hybridity and social

fluidity. Ivan, for example, speaks Yiddish with his Jewish employers.

The film’s image of shtetl life is gritty, brooding, and earthy. Characters are repeatedly shown clinging to one another and are often sitting or lying on the ground or floor, suggesting their rootedness in the shtetl milieu. Filmed in black and white, *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* recalls interwar photographs such as the work of Alter Kacyzne or Roman Vishniac, which presented the shtetl through the eye of an observer from outside, drawn to its exoticism and decadence. The aura of decay—crumbling buildings, shabby clothes—pervades the shtetl of the film.



Production still from *Moi Ivan, Toi Abraham*, directed by Yolande Zauberman, 1993.

countryside (e.g., *Yankl der shmied*, 1938), Yiddish films of the interwar years draw on living memory, however attenuated, of Jewish life in Eastern Europe’s small towns, where millions of Jews still resided. A half century after World War II, efforts to set a film in the shtetl face the daunting task of reenacting a lost quotidian. Moreover, they are works of memory that rely not so much on recollections of actual experience as on the received remembrances of others, encoded in narratives and images produced by previous generations. By virtue of their elaborate scale, these films epitomize postwar efforts to imagine one’s way back

The vulnerable marginality of its setting is established at the beginning by a title locating the action “somewhere at the Polish border during the 1930s,” culminating with the shtetl’s destruction by antisemitic vandals at the film’s end.

*Train de Vie*, set in another unnamed town, also deals with the shtetl near its demise. The action takes place during the summer of 1941, as Germans are murdering the Jewish populations of small towns across eastern Europe. Despite this grim setting, *Train de Vie* offers a light, whimsical shtetl; colorful, playful, and almost exclusively Jewish in its population, it is as indebted to *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), as *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* is to the fiction of Isaac Babel or Isaac Bashevis Singer. And like *Fiddler*, *Train de Vie* offers postwar audiences a more accessible shtetl. Rather than simulating its complex multilingualism, the characters in *Train de Vie* all speak French, inflected with the occasional Yiddishism. One of a spate of “Holocaust comedies” made in the late

1990s (including *La Vita e Bella* [*Life is Beautiful*, 1999] and *Jakob the Liar* [1999], the English-language version of the film, *Jakob, der Lügner* [1975]), *Train de Vie* relates a fantasy of Jewish ingenuity and pluck in outwitting Nazi persecution,

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in which the town’s Jews flee en masse on a train they acquire, masquerading as Germans. At the film’s center is Shlomo, the self-proclaimed village idiot who concocts the escape plan. Whereas *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* is defined by the dynamic of its two youthfully naïve protagonists, *Train de Vie* has at its center an adult naïf. Both films thus facilitate an innocence of the imminent consequences awaiting their towns, providing audiences entrée to the shtetl as if they were unaware of its fate.

While ostensibly transporting viewers back to the same time and place, these two films offer complementary visions of the shtetl on the eve of the Holocaust. *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* evinces a desire to remember the shtetl as a site of doomed Jewish

indigeneity, imbricated among other east Europeans. *Train de Vie* offers a vision of the shtetl as playful, transcendent, a mythic locus of guileless Jewish resilience.

Watching these films together, or comparing them with prewar, Yiddish-language shtetl films or works of shtetl literature (from Sh. Y. Abramovitch to Jonathan Safran Foer), provides rich opportunities to consider the range and dynamics of shtetl remembrance, demonstrating the mutability of memory in response to the changing relationship between the shtetl and those who wish to recall it.

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