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Outsiders as Insiders: Jews and the History of American Silent Film

By Dr. Tom Gunning

This publication is dedicated to Lew and Edie Wasserman in honor of their 50th wedding anniversary by their friends Arnold and Ruth Picker with deep appreciation for their exemplary contributions to the film industry, cultural and political activities, and Jewish life in America.

The National Center for Jewish Film is an archive and study center created to preserve the pictorial records of the Jewish experience. The Center is:

An Archive . . .

to ensure the preservation of films and photographs of Jewish subject matter;

A Repository . . .

to collect and catalogue all such extant materials;

A Study Center . . .

to provide facilities for scholars, filmmakers, and students to view films and conduct research;

A Resource Library . . .

to provide materials for educational institutions, community groups, and the public.

Established in 1976 and located on the Brandeis University campus, the Center's library now contains over 3,000 films, including the largest extant collection of Yiddish feature films. The collections focus on European Jewry, Nazi antisemitic propaganda, the Holocaust, Israel, and American and Soviet Jewry. They also include the archival collections of ORT, JNF, JDC, UJA, and other organizations, as well as a substantial amount of footage related to the American Jewish immigrant experience.

The following unique collection of early American films containing various images of Jews has been gathered together and preserved through the assistance of scores of people: Patricia Erens ("The Jews in American Cinema") and Lester Friedman ("Hollywood's Image of the Jew."), who graciously shared their extensive research with our Center; Jean Firstenberg, Audrey Kupferberg and Joe Empsicha of the American Film Institute; staff at the Museum of Modern Art, UCLA AND LOC; Lew Wasserman and Ernst Goodman at MCA/Universal; David Brownlow, and dozens of private collectors. Dr. Tom Gunning, a scholar of early American film, prepared this catalog, bringing to it his years of expertise. John E. Allen and Bob Summers have painstakingly helped us preserve the bits and pieces. Our hope is that this collection can be augmented by additional items. We would welcome information about the existence of any relevant materials and hope that this publication will provide a useful guide to the creative utilization of these rare film documents.

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Introduction

In recent years historians and critics have begun to look at American films from a new perspective: what do the films from our past tell us about the social assumptions of our history? While literature and drama can answer these questions as well, the mass popularity of the movies gives them a special place in revealing broad-based attitudes. Attitudes towards minorities or oppressed groups are an area of particular interest in this regard, and the study of the image of Jews in American films joins that of Blacks and women. A number of recent works have looked at “Hollywood’s Image of the Jew”¹ such as Lester Friedman’s book of this title and Patricia Erens’s *The Jew in American Cinema*².

However, films are not as easily obtainable as books or plays. And for the crucial early period of the development of film, the silent cinema, the majority of films have simply disappeared through neglect. The National Center for Jewish Film has undertaken to guarantee the preservation of a number of early American silent films dealing with Jews and make them available to scholars and the general public. This unique collection throws light on the attitudes toward Jews found in early American cinema as well as providing a remarkable insight into American film history. It contains significant but rarely seen works by some of America’s most important filmmakers – Edwin S. Porter, D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett, and the unfairly neglected Edward Sloman. The development of film as a narrative medium is evident here, as are evolving attitudes towards Jewish themes. The role of the Jew in the American film industry is somewhat different from that of other minorities, posing a basic paradox. In many ways the Jew was subjected to the same sort of stereotyping as Blacks and women, but in contrast to those groups, who were generally excluded from film production, Jews were involved in this aspect of American cinema from a very early period. The movies of the silent era form part of a new phenomenon, the creation of a mass culture that would represent America to itself and to the world in the twentieth century. Jews played important roles in the creation of this new popular American culture, not only in film but also as entertainers in vaudeville and radio and as songwriters for Tin Pan Alley. Rarely has a minority played such an important part in forging a country’s popular art, and thereby its image of itself.

Although vaudeville could not achieve the enormous audience of film, with its possibility of mechanical reproduction and low admission prices, it led the way for this new mass culture and set models for film to follow. In fact, the comedy of vaudeville was based on America’s identity as a land of immigrants. At the turn of the century particularly, nearly all vaudeville humor was ethnic, burlesquing the manners of America’s unassimilated minorities: the Irishman, the Black, the Italian, the German, and the Jew. There was an ambiguity in this phenomenon: on the one hand it represented the insiders ridiculing those they were keeping outside; however, it also acknowledged America as a land of ethnic variety which, though cruel, allowed sympathy and even admiration for immigrant types. The Jewish comedians Weber and Fields (who first began

as blackface performers) created in their characters Mike and Myer typical examples of this type of humor. They poked fun at immigrants unable to master the English language, and their slapstick routines (introducing the eye gouging later made familiar by the Three Stooges) were often cruel. But as Albert McClean has shown in his book on vaudeville, *Vaudeville as Ritual*, they also showed the immigrant overcoming obstacles and developing a new sort of personality, urban and rough, but decidedly emotional and enduring. When Mike would suddenly end their hostilities with “I loof you Myer”, some universal chord was struck. Jews in the earliest American films such as the two Cohens in Porter’s *Cohen’s Advertising Scheme* and *Cohen’s Fire Sale* were based on vaudeville caricatures. The images could certainly be described as antisemitic, although one suspects that some sympathy was generated for the cleverness of these merchants of the Lower East Side.

Although Jews have always been a minority in the American population, during the early period of film history they formed an important segment of the filmgoing public. Films were particularly popular in urban areas and among the poor. Jews in New York’s Lower East Side flocked to the nickelodeons and used the films as a means of acculturation into American myths and customs. Early filmmakers, generally situated in Eastern urban centers, were aware of this. D.W. Griffith in particular was fascinated by the ghetto and made a number of his earliest films there (*Romance of a Jewess*, *A Child of the Ghetto*). It is quite possible that such films were partly designed to attract a Jewish audience, given their sympathetic Jewish characters and positive attitude toward Jewish life. Sometimes they even presented a direct antithesis to traditional stereotypes, for example the compassionate pawnbroker in *Old Isaac, the Pawnbroker* and the generous *Yiddisher Boy* from Sigmund Lubin’s film.

With Lubin, a new aspect of the Jew’s involvement with cinema appeared. Movies were at this time a rather despised medium, cheap and popular, and consequently they remained open to immigrant groups excluded from working in other cultural media for social or economic reasons. Lubin, a German Jew, was the first Jewish film producer in America, though there is evidence that he concealed his Jewishness from other members of the film community to avoid being ostracized. Jews at this time were also important film exhibitors. A number of American Jewish fortunes were founded on the nickels of early film audiences.

When the Motion Picture Patents Company was founded in 1908 in an attempt to control the film industry through a patents monopoly, a number of film exchanges (distributors) and exhibitors felt that this “film trust”, as the conglomerate was known, was exerting too much control over their business. An independent film movement began to grow and found as its undisputed champion Carl Laemmle, a German Jew. Laemmle led the fight to supply the independent faction with quality films, eventually forming Universal Pictures. By 1918 the Motion Picture Patents Company had disappeared and Universal and the independents commanded the field.

The period immediately after World War I saw a complete transformation of the American film industry. Feature films of over an hour were now the norm rather than the short one-reel films on which the Motion Picture Patents Company had based its business. Production centers moved from the East Coast and Midwest to California, and particularly to Hollywood. Film stars emerged, drawing enormous salaries and even larger groups of fans. These new major Hollywood studio heads were often Jewish businessmen like Laemmle or Marcus Loew, who had started as small film exhibitors.

A number of these feature films dealt with Jewish subjects, and the tradition of ethnic comedians continued, with actors like George Sidney and Max Davidson somewhat toning down the caricatures of vaudeville but still presenting humorous Jewish stereotypes. Longer feature films, larger star salaries, and elaborate movie palaces led to higher admission prices and a change in audiences. Although films continued to be a form of mass entertainment, the middle classes now flocked to them as well. Something of the gritty realism of Griffith's Biograph films, made mainly for working class audiences, disappeared. During the twenties Hollywood discovered glamor and the audiences' fascination with the lavish and exotic. Although a great many Jews now held positions of power in the film industry, both as movie "moguls" and in creative roles as writers and directors, the Jew was probably portrayed on the screen less often than in the days of the nickelodeon.

Films of ghetto life were made and had a series of successes following the very influential *Humoresque* (1920), based on Fannie Hurst's sentimental novel of Lower East Side struggles. These films ranged from the rather ambivalent *None so Blind* to the warmly sympathetic *His People*, made by the Jewish director Edward Sloman. But such films primarily assumed audiences would find Jewish life unfamiliar and possibly exotic. A case in point is Sloman's *Surrender*, which presents life in an Austrian Jewish village as the romantic background for a tale of forbidden love.

Interestingly, it was a film of Jewish life which announced the end of the silent era; Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer*. And as a short film like *Cohen on the Telephone* shows, the addition of a soundtrack in some ways brought film back to its roots in vaudeville, incorporating the comic ethnic monologue which was impossible to convey in a silent film. In *The Jazz Singer* one finds a familiar element: ghetto life with its family tensions between older traditions and younger ambitions, already dealt with in *His People*. Jolson, one of the major figures in the creation of a new mass American culture (combining blackface performances and songs about the southland with a Jewish emotionalism), represented the challenge that this new popular culture offered to the older religious forms. The choice in *The Jazz Singer* between singing in the theatre and becoming a cantor was more than a choice between tradition and assimilation, it was a symbol of how strongly the new generation of American Jews identified with the emerging popular culture. The American entertainment industry was not simply an established foreign culture which they were adopting, but rather a whole new form of culture – and one which Jews were instrumental in creating. When the mother says at the end of *The Jazz Singer*, "He isn't my boy any more, he belongs to the world," one should remember that Jews were active participants in and contributors to this new entertainment world. As much as the black contribution to jazz and rock 'n' roll, the Jewish contribution to this new form of culture, the world of movies and popular songs, needs to be recognized. For it was this culture that came to represent America to the world at large. Perhaps it is our prejudice against taking popular culture seriously which has prevented us from fully investigating this Jewish contribution to the American national identity. It is to be hoped that both this catalog and the availability of the collection will stimulate more detailed studies of this larger issue.

Levi and Cohen. The Irish Comedians
American Mutoscope and Biograph Company,
1903, 1 minute (silent speed)

Photographed by Billy Bitzer

On the set representing a vaudeville stage, two grotesquely dressed and made-up comedians enter and begin hitting each other. The audience is obviously bored by their routine and pelts them with rotten vegetables.

This brief film, consisting of one single shot, is typical of many American productions during this period. Only enough time was given to set up and perform a brief physical gag, usually some form of slapstick humor. It generally ended with the characters covered with some distasteful substance. The set acknowledges early cinema's great debt to the humor and characters of vaudeville (most early films were shown in vaudeville theaters). The film was shot by Billy Bitzer, who in a few years was to become the cameraman for D.W. Griffith.

The title itself plays on a basic paradox of American vaudeville at the turn of the century. Ethnic humor in which immigrant or minority figures were held up to ridicule was a staple of vaudeville shows: the Irishman, the Black, the Italian, and the Jew were the most popular stereotypes. However, these figures were rarely played by actual members of those groups. Blacks were white men in black-face, and a variety of other ethnic crossovers can be found (the Italian dialect of Jewish Chico Marx is a late survivor of this tradition).

The violence here is that of a rough and tumble vaudeville circuit, directed against bumbling performers, rather than overtly antisemitic. But as is often true of ethnic humor, it cuts both ways, and it is perhaps significant that the earliest surviving Jews in American cinema are subjected to "humorous" attack.

"Showing two typical concert hall knockabout teams in a very poor performance. It ends up in their being egged by the audience. Very realistic and very funny." *Biograph Bulletin*, Aug. 29, 1903.

Cohen's Advertising Scheme

Edison Company, 1904, 1 minute (silent speed).
Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter

The set is a Lower East Side store front (the sign says "Baxter St.") with a sign in the window announcing "Fire Sale". A passerby examines a coat hanging in front of the store. Cohen, the shop owner, a grotesquely made-up Jewish stereotype, enters and speaks to the man. He goes back into the store and brings out a coat for him. As the man walks off, we see that the back of his coat says "Go to I. Cohen for Clothes". Cohen struts happily in front of his store, delighted at having hit upon this new advertising scheme.

Like *Levi and Cohen*, this is typical of the one-shot gag films of early American filmmakers and was produced for the Edison Company by Edwin S. Porter, who had filmed the famous *The Great Train Robbery* the year before. The humor here is less slapstick than in *Levi and Cohen*, but its debt to vaudeville skits is similar. Painted flats are used rather than location shooting. The importance of the printed message on the coat for the punch line of the film may indicate that it was actually based on a comic strip, another frequent source of inspiration for early films.

This is perhaps the earliest example of the Jewish figure Patricia Erens has called, "the scheming

merchant”, a stereotype already familiar from theater and novels. In American films this figure is rarely villainous, except in adaptations of classic works, such as *Oliver Twist* or *The Merchant of Venice*, but rather a figure of fun. However, the antisemitic attitudes portraying Jews as avaricious and willing to turn any opportunity to a profit are clearly not far beneath the surface.

Cohen’s Fire Sale

Edison Company, 1907, 10 minutes

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter

A new shipment of hats delivered to Cohen’s shop is accidentally picked up by the trash man. Cohen pursues the trash wagon through the streets, gathering up the hats as they drop off, and finally retrieving them from a garbage barge. However, he finds that his customers will not buy the hats when he brings them back to his store. In despair, Cohen reads over his fire insurance policy. He arranges an “accidental” fire by tying a candle to his cat’s tail. Firemen arrive and afterwards Cohen holds a fire sale. At the end of the film, Cohen sits happily holding the insurance policy as he places a large ring on his wife’s finger.

By 1907 the form of American films had become more complex. Rather than a single gag covered in one shot, extended stories had become popular. Here Edwin Porter stretches out his gag of the trashed hats over a variety of locations. A number of shots follow the progress of the wagon, creating a sort of extensive space possible only in film. By adding other incidents (the failure of the hats to sell and the rigged fire as a solution), Porter creates a film that is more like a short story than a vaudeville skit. He also uses magical “special effects” to show the start of the fire. Although Cohen’s store is an obvious theatrical set, Porter weaves some location shots of the streets and docks of New York City into his film. Some of these, such as the arrival of the fire engines, give the film an almost documentary feeling. He ends the film with a closer shot of the main character, much like the shot that ends *The Great Train Robbery*.

Cohen’s character in this film is a further elaboration of the “scheming merchant” figure found in Porter’s *Cohen’s Advertising Scheme*. His grotesque putted nose and padded paunch are physical characteristics familiar from vaudeville, but they are particularly emphasized here by the closer camera position of the last shot. Cohen is an unattractive figure and certainly an antisemitic one. However, one might wonder whether the film censures his scheme or comically admires his slyness in turning the tables on a deal of bad luck. Presumably, different audiences could take it either way: antisemites confirming their prejudices, others seeing a clever if unscrupulous little man triumphing over adverse circumstances.

Old Isaac, the Pawnbroker

American Mutoscope and Biograph Company,
1908, 10 minutes.

Director: Wallace McCutcheon.

Script: D.W. Griffith.

Photography: Billy Bitzer.

A small girl in an urban slum goes out to seek aid for her sick and starving mother. She goes first to the offices of the Amalgamated Association of Charities, where she is caught up in red tape as the case workers ask questions and offer no immediate aid. Desperate, the little girl then goes to a neighborhood pawnshop hoping to get some money for food. She brings in a pair of old shoes

which the pawnbroker's assistant rejects. Then she returns with her doll. This innocent gesture of selflessness attracts the attention of old Isaac, who runs the shop. Hearing the little girl's story, he sets out for her apartment, where he stops the men who are trying to evict the sick woman. He pays the rent, provides food and medical care, and even gives the little girl a big new doll.

This is a significant film in the history of American cinema. One of the first films scripted by D.W. Griffith, not only does it herald many of the social themes of his later films (such as the criticism of official charities in *Intolerance*), it also contains the earliest known example of parallel editing used for social criticism. While the little girl waits in the charity office, the film cuts back to her sick mother at home in bed, collapsing in agony. This cutting pattern indicates two things: it shows what is happening at the same time in a different space, a new form of temporal relation in film, and it condemns the bureaucracy of the charity office by showing directly the agony caused by their delays.

The portrayal of Old Isaac here contrasts sharply with the comic scheming merchants in the Porter films. Not only is Isaac *not* interested in profiting from others' misfortune, he is charitable and compassionate, and in a way that differs starkly from the heartlessness of official charities. It is interesting to note that antisemitism appeared in American cinema in this period almost exclusively in comedies. Melodramas generally presented Jewish characters sympathetically, and this film inaugurated a series of films involving compassionate pawnbrokers.

"The portrayal of charity is the theme of the Biograph's story, which dissipates the calumnies launched at the Hebrew race." *Biograph Bulletin*, March 28, 1908.

Romance of a Jewess

American Mutoscope and Biograph Company,
1908, 10 minutes.

Director: D.W. Griffith.

Photography: Billy Bitzer.

Cast: Florence Lawrence (*Ruth*); Harry Solter (*Rubinstein*); Gladys Eagan (*Daughter*), Mack Sennett (*Poor bookseller*).

On her deathbed Ruth's mother gives her a locket. Living with her widowed father, Ruth works with him in his pawnshop and falls in love with a poor bookseller. However, her father wants her to marry the rich Rubinstein, a match arranged by a marriage broker. When Ruth marries her poor lover, her father disowns her. After several years of happy marriage, Ruth's husband is killed in an accident, leaving her with a small daughter. Poverty-stricken and seriously ill, Ruth sends her daughter to pawn the locket her mother had given her. The little girl unknowingly goes to her grandfather's pawnshop. The old man recognizes the locket and rushes to his daughter's hovel. Finding her dying, he vows to take care of his granddaughter and the family is reconciled.

This, one of the earliest films directed by D.W. Griffith, shows his interest in Jewish ghetto life, which is portrayed with sympathy and sentimentality. Biograph's studio was located in New York City on 14th Street, just a short distance from the Lower East Side where the street scenes for this film were shot. These shots blend Biograph actors (such as the young Gladys Eagan) with actual street vendors and passersby in such a natural way that it is obvious they were shot candidly with a hidden camera. The part of Ruth, heroine of the story, is played by Florence

Lawrence, the “Biograph Girl”, whose popularity with audiences was such that she became the first American movie star even before her name was known. *Romance of a Jewess* inaugurated a long series of films dealing with the conflict between generations that life in the New World brought to the Jewish family. The portrayal of all characters is sympathetic, and the film was quite possibly consciously aimed at the inhabitants of the ghetto, who made up a large section of the urban filmgoing population.

“Several of the scenes are decidedly interesting in the fact that they were actually taken in the thickly settled Hebrew quarters of New York City.” *Biograph Bulletin*, October 25, 1908.

The Yiddisher Boy

Lubin Company, 1909, 3 minutes.

Moses, growing up on the Lower East Side, helps support his family by selling papers. When one of the other newsboys tries to rob him of his pennies, Ed, one of the bigger newsboys, comes to his rescue and gives him back his money. Moses thanks Ed and invites him home for the Sabbath meal. Later, Ed is run down by a passing bicycle when he dashes into the street to sell his papers. Moses visits his friend at the hospital and gives the doctor his last pennies so that Ed can have some extra food. Twenty-five years later, Moses has become a prosperous merchant and Ed, down on his luck, comes looking for a job. Moses recognizes his friend from long ago, and offers him the best job he has. (Synopsis based on original publicity material in *The Film Index*, April 24, 1909, p. 7.)

This is one of the few surviving films made by the Sigmund Lubin Company of Philadelphia. Lubin had immigrated to the U.S. in the 1870's, changing his name from Lubszynski. The first Jewish American filmmaker, he was an early leader in American film production and became a member of the important Motion Picture Patents Company in 1908. It appears that Lubin was fully assimilated by this time and concealed his Jewish background from the antisemitic members of this early film trust. This film shows that Lubin's company was still making films in a rather old-fashioned manner at a time when Griffith was already sketching a modern approach to film narrative. Without reading the synopsis it is somewhat difficult to follow the plot, due to the camera distance and lack of narrative editing. The final scene, in which Moses and Ed recognize each other, employs a flashback through a superimposed matte shot which shows the action of the earlier fight scene on the back wall. This use of a “vision scene” was not infrequent in early cinema, but was disappearing by this date.

The film is an important document, as it presents another sympathetic portrayal of urbane, American Jewish life. The two scenes of Moses's home present a contrast in details. The first shot shows the Jewish home as a place where the family works and interacts, the kitchen piled with coats which the father sews, Moses taking the coats out for delivery, stopping before he leaves to wipe his sister's nose. The later scene shows the same kitchen prepared for the Sabbath. As the film's original publicity said, “The room has changed its appearance, work is put aside, the table is set, everything looks clean and inviting”. *The Yiddisher Boy* is remarkable for its accurate observation of this maintenance of tradition in the face of oppressive circumstances. It also portrays the concern and compassion that surmounted and difficult conditions of slum life, as in the scene in which Moses must bribe the doctor to bring his friend enough food in the hospital.

A Child of the Ghetto

Biograph, 1910, 10 minutes.

Director: D.W. Griffith.

Photographer: Billy Bitzer.

Cast: Dorothy West (*Ruth*); George Nichols (*Officer Quinn*); Henry Walthall (*young farmer*).

After the death of her mother, Ruth struggles to support herself as a seamstress. As she delivers her bundle of shirts to the factory owner, the owner's son steals some money from his father. When the bills are found in Ruth's bundle, Ruth is accused of the theft and the police are sent for. Ruth flees, but Officer Quinn pursues her. She jumps onto a trolley and leaves the city for the country. Wandering exhausted through this unfamiliar territory, she is taken in by a young farmer and his mother. They nurse Ruth back to health and the two young people fall in love. They are about to be married when Officer Quinn appears at the farmer's house on a fishing trip. Recognizing who she is, he intends to arrest her; but when he observes the couple's happiness and Ruth's evident purity, he decides to forget his duty.

A Child of the Ghetto was made at the height of Griffith's career at Biograph, a period when he was perfecting the storytelling power of the film medium. Like *Romance of a Jewess*, this is a story of Lower East Side life, and Griffith again captures in near-documentary fashion the hustle and bustle of Rivington Street, his Biograph actors interacting with candidly captured street life. Griffith's development of editing techniques since 1908 is evident; although both films are about the same length, *A Child of the Ghetto* has forty-six shots, while *Romance of a Jewess* has only thirteen! This increase results in a faster, more natural pace. Griffith responds equally to the urban chaos of Rivington Street and the bucolic beauty of the country scenes. The dancing children with their springtime blossoms may seem like Victorian sentimentality, but the richness of Griffith's response to the freshness of youth and nature gives them a visual grace.

The movement from city slums to pastoral country differentiates *A Child of the Ghetto* from most other American Jewish films of this period. The city is seen as a place of hardship, exploitation, and false accusation, while the country offers health, trust, beauty, and love. Griffith seems to indicate that immigrant Jews would improve their lives by moving out of the ghetto, a possibility entertained by few other films. *A Child of the Ghetto* is also certainly one of the earliest films to show an interfaith marriage and to treat it unproblematically.

"Rivington Street was the lively one, eternally jammed with pushcart peddlars hawking their wares. They had every imaginable commodity, from a needle to a wedding outfit... Emotional, tempestuous, harrowing Rivington Street was perpetually a steaming bubbling pot of human flesh." D.W. Griffith.

Cohen Saves the Flag

Keystone, 1913, 10 minutes.

Director: Mack Sennett.

Cast: Ford Sterling (*Cohen*); Mabel Normand (*Rebecca*).

"Rebecca's two sweethearts, Cohen, a sergeant, and Levy, a captain, are bitter rivals in the Union Army. At Gettysburg Cohen saves the flag and gives it to one of the soldiers. Becoming

frightened, he runs away. Levy finds him hiding in a pigsty and sentences him to be shot for cowardice. Rebecca hears of this and writes to headquarters for a pardon. Cohen is saved by the general, who identifies him as the man who saved the flag. He is made captain and Levy is reduced to a sergeant.” (from the film’s original publicity, *The Moving Picture World*, Nov. 22, 1913, p. 916. Note: in our print of this film the captain is named Goldberg, not Levy).

Mack Sennett’s Keystone Company was famous for bringing to the American screen the new style of farce comedy which ushered in the work of such famous slapstick comedians as Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle. Sennett combined the absurd and often grotesque humor of vaudeville with a sense of pace and action which he learned while working under Griffith at Biograph. Keystone’s most popular comedian before Chaplin, Ford Sterling here plays Cohen, one of a number of Jewish roles he undertook. What is most remarkable about this film is the scope of its battle scenes. It seems most likely that Sennett capitalized on scenes originally staged for Thomas Ince’s *The Battle of Gettysburg*, which was produced at this time for a company allied with Keystone. This film, one of the largest epics produced in America until that time, has been lost, and *Cohen Saves the Flag* may be the only indication of how its battle scenes were staged.

Like most burlesque Jewish characters of this period, Sterling’s caricature borders on antisemitism. Cohen is cowardly, and fun is poked at his discomfort in hiding in a strictly non-kosher pigsty. But Cohen is also the hero of the film and unwittingly turns the tide of battle. Sennett’s sense of absurdity is evident in the placing of these obviously later Jewish immigrants, with their clothing stores and suits hanging outside in Lower East Side fashion, in the context of the Civil War. Here again is a character who can be viewed as either a nasty caricature or as a simple underdog who came out on top.

How Mosha Came Back

Crystal, 1914, 10 minutes.

After his defeat for the heavyweight championship, Mosha is scorned by his girlfriend, who demands he gain the title back.

“The day of the fight arrives. Mosha throws his 98 pounds into the ring amid vociferous applause. The champion enters. When his weight is announced as 240, Mosha’s heart sinks. However, they start fighting and the Jewish champion is getting a terrific beating. He is about to quit when his second administers dope to him by way of a large syringe. Mosha gains courage. He knocks out the champion and also the referee. He is hailed as the heavyweight champion. He is the people’s idol. Mosha has the time of his life. When the cigarette Mosha has been smoking burns his fingers, Mosha wakes up to a realization that it has all been a dream.” (film’s original publicity, *The Moving Picture World*, Feb. 22, 1914, p. 1016.)

Crystal Films, which produced *How Mosha Came Back*, was a small company which released through Carl Laemmle’s emerging film giant, Universal. Laemmle, a German Jew, had challenged Edison’s Motion Picture Patents Company, which in 1909 seemed to have complete control of the American film industry. By 1914, the year of this film, it was clear that Laemmle’s independent company was ascendent and Edison’s group was on the way out. In this year longer feature films were also appearing and it was obvious that short films would be limited to little comedies like *How Mosha Came Back*, which would appear in a program along with the longer,

more expensive films. The contrast here between reality and dream was a frequent theme in early cinema, an economical way to present a comic contrast within a short running time.

With his wide-brimmed derby and long overcoat, Mosha is an archetypal comic Jew. His atypical profession, prizefighting, is the source of the film's humor. Jews in early American films were rarely shown to be physically strong, an Mosha's physique fits the pattern. However, perhaps because of the novelty, the Jewish prizefighter became a recurring image in American films, developing into a new, masculine, forceful, and antitraditional character in films such as *His People* and the later *Body and Soul*. The sudden burst of energy from a drug injection (which here looks more like a bicycle pump) is a gag that Chaplin used two years later in *Easy Street*.

None So Blind

Arrow Pictures, 1923, 66 minutes.

Producer and Director: Burton King.

Cast: Dore Davidson (*Aaron Abrams*);

Zena Keefe (*Ruth*); Maurice Costello

(*Russell Mortimer*); Anders Randolph

(*Roger Mortimer*); Edward Earle

(*Sheldon Sherman*); Sonia Nadell

(*Rebecca*); Bernard Siegel (*Saul*

Cohen); Robert Bentley (*Louis Cohen*);

Gene Burnell (*Hazel Mortimer*).

Aaron Abram's daughter Rachel marries Russell Mortimer, a gentile socialite. However, her husband's father demands that the marriage be annulled. After giving birth to a daughter, Ruth, Rachel dies of sorrow. Her father vows revenge against the Mortimers. He raises his granddaughter, never revealing who her father was. Aaron leads a double life, charitable and respected and adored by his granddaughter in the ghetto, while on Wall Street he works as an unscrupulous moneylender under an assumed name in preparation for his revenge on Mortimer.

A marriage has been arranged for Ruth with Lewis Cohen, the Jewish son of a friend of her grandfather's. However Lewis has fallen in love with Russell Mortimer's daughter, Hazel. Coincidentally, Ruth meets and falls in love with Mortimer's ward, Sheldon Sherman, a non-Jew. Mortimer has meanwhile become indebted to Abrams. On the eve of Ruth's arranged marriage Abrams reveals to Mortimer the motive for his revenge and the fact that Ruth is his daughter. Just before their wedding Ruth and Lewis both reveal that they love other people. Aaron throws Ruth out of his house and she makes her way to Mortimer, who recognizes her as his long-lost daughter and takes her in. Gradually Aaron sees the error of his ways and is reconciled with both his daughter and Mortimer.

A curious and rather improbable melodrama, *None So Blind* shows how gingerly American cinema in the twenties dealt with Jewish-gentile conflicts. While Aaron's revenge on Mortimer is sympathetically motivated, the method of his revenge recalls antisemitic stereotypes as he becomes the "Shylock of Wall Street" (the working title of this film). The film turns on a recurring theme in American films dealing with Jews: intermarriage. Compared to today intermarriage during this period was actually quite rare. Its constant appearance in films owes less to social reality than to the traditional melodramatic resolutions of social reality than to the traditional melodramatic resolutions of social divisions by marriage between opposing groups.

Although it is the love between the Jewish Ruth and the gentile Sheldon that is highlighted, the film also includes a marriage between a male Jew and gentile female in the pairing of Lewis Cohen and Hazel Mortimer. There is also an indication that Ruth's love for Sheldon is a step towards conversion brought about by her response to the Salvation Army sermon. The film's message of tolerance is labeled as a specifically Christian concept, in contrast to the teachings of Ruth's grandfather. It does however attack Christian antisemitism as well as Jewish intolerance, and its ending is clearly a plea for integration and assimilation. Not only are the two interfaith marriages celebrated, but the former opponents consider a new business partnership: "Abrams, Mortimer, Sherman, and Cohen".

"There have been a number of Jewish heart interest stories since the appearance of Fannie Hurst's Humoresque, and they have apparently satisfied the public. None So Blind is another along this line, although the situations, some of them fairly conventional, have been twisted around into a theme different from the others, and given sufficient careful treatment and direction to make this entertaining and interesting.... The religious angle is prominent but it is always used with discretion and forms a very important part in the climax when the moneylender learns that love breaks all barriers." (advice to film exhibitors on the box office potential of *None So Blind* in *Film Daily*, Feb. 25, 1923.)

His People

(also known as *Proud Heart* or *Common People*)

Universal, 1925, 91 minutes.

Director: Edward Sloman.

Presented by Carl Laemmle.

Cast: Rudolph Schildkraut (*David Cominsky*); Rosie Rosanova (*Rose Cominsky*); Bobby Gordon, George Lewis (*Sammy Cominsky*); Albert Busholand, Arthur Lubin (*Morris Cominsky*); Jean Johnson, Blanche Mehaffy (*Mamie Shannon*); Kate Price (*Kate Shannon*); Virginia Brown Faire (*Ruth Stein*); Nat Carr (*Chaim Barowitz*); Bertram Marburgh (*Nathan Stein*); Edgar Kennedy (*Thomas Nolan*).

In an American urban ghetto, the Cominsky family raise their two sons, Morris and Sammy. Morris, the elder, is his father's pride and joy, studying to become a lawyer. Sammy, however, is secretly becoming a prizefighter under the name "Battling Rooney." Although Sammy has worked to support the family (and pay for Morris's education) since childhood, his father throws him out of the house when he discovers that the money comes from boxing. Morris, now a successful lawyer, has meanwhile become selfish and ashamed of his ghetto family. When his father becomes seriously ill, he doesn't come to his sickbed because it interferes with a date with his uptown girlfriend. Sammy comes instead, and the family convinces him to pretend to be Morris and receive his father's blessing. Mr. Cominsky recovers, but a doctor's examination reveals he should move to a warmer climate, something the family cannot afford. Sammy gets a chance to fight the champion, realizing that the purse could finance the family's move. Morris

becomes engaged to his rich girlfriend and tells her he is an orphan. Mr. Cominsky reads of Morris's engagement party in a Yiddish newspaper and goes to confront him. At the party Morris denies his father, who leaves, stunned. Sammy wins the match and gives the money to his mother. He hears of Morris's betrayal, and in anger drags him back to the ghetto. Confronted again by his father, Morris apologizes. Seeing Sammy, the father also realizes his error, and declares that in America success can come through means other than learning. The ghetto family is reunited.

Of all the surviving silent feature films of Jewish life, those of Edward Sloman deserve special attention. A talented director, he remains almost unknown because so few of his films have survived. Sloman claims that the three Jewish films he made for Universal – *His People, We Americans* (unfortunately lost), and *Surrender* – were undertaken at the behest of studio head Carl Laemmle. Yet it is clear that Sloman's heart and imagination were fully engaged by the material. *His People* is a rich and detailed evocation of ghetto life. Not only are the opening scenes of the pushcart-filled streets and elevated train rattling overhead crammed with atmosphere, but Sloman never forgets these surroundings after the drama gets under way. He had the set of the Cominsky apartment constructed so that the windows of the Irish across the airshaft in the background are always visible. While drama occurs in the Cominsky house we see beyond it to the everyday actions of Lower East Side life. The performances of Rosanova and Schildkraut are outstanding. Rosanova had already established herself as the archtypical Jewish mama in *Hungry Hearts*. Schildkraut, here making his American film debut, was already known as one of the leading dramatic actors in Germany and as a major star of the Yiddish theater in New York. Although powerful in the key dramatic scenes, Schildkraut and Rosanova are even more effective in creating an atmosphere of easy intimacy and affection between them. Cominsky's sacrifices for his son Morris (as in the scene where he sells his precious fur coat to buy him a dress suit, an offering Morris later throws in the trash), are given a pathetic dignity by Schildkraut's performance.

Few silent films give so thorough a picture of Jewish home life in the American ghetto. The opening sequence of preparation for Sabbath gives a sense of family cohesion, in spite of potential conflicts between the brothers. The Sabbath prayer is used to bridge a ten year time gap, but at the parallel Sabbath dinner for the adult children, neither brother has time for tradition. Though following the traditional path of study, Morris nonetheless loses the most important aspect of his Jewish heritage, the sense of family. Sammy, however, while pursuing an unusual path for a Jew, that of physical prowess, does maintain his commitment to his family, even when his father disowns him. Sammy, who is engaged to his Irish neighbor Mamie, is in many ways an assimilated Jew, profoundly different from his father; but the film makes clear that while some things change in this new country, in matters of family, traditions must be maintained.

"One of those down-to-earth stories that everyone understands without worrying about it. The kind of story that the masses love. Where a Jewish community exists, it should do Florida real estate turnover, but it's good anywhere for real business." (advice to film exhibitors on *His People*, *Film Daily*, Nov. 15, 1925, p.3.)

Surrender

Universal Pictures Corporation, 1927,
77 minutes.
Directed by Edward Sloman.

Based on: "Lea Lyon" by Alexander Brody. Adaptation & Continuity by Edward J. Montague and Edward Sloman.
Production Supervision: Paul Kohner.
Photography: Gilbert Warrenton.
Film Editor: Edward Cahn.
Art Director: Charles Hall.
Technical Assistants: Jack Bleifer and Alexis Davidoff.
Wardrobe designed by Joanna Mathieson.
Cast: Mary Philbin (*Lea Lyon*); Ivan Mosjukine (*Constantine*); Nigel de Brulier (*Rabbi Mendel Lyon*); Otto Matieson (*Joshua*); Otto Fries (*Tarras*); Daniel Makarenko (*General Davidoff*).

In an Austrian village made up mainly of Jews, the chief Rabbi functions as the compassionate resolver of disputes and manager of village affairs. His beautiful daughter, Lea, encounters Prince Constantine, a Russian officer, in the forest one day. Coming upon the pair, the Rabbi denounces the Russian as an oppressor of his people. With the outbreak of World War I, Russian troops led by Constantine invade the village. Concerned for his daughter's safety, the Rabbi hides her. Prince Constantine remembers the Rabbi and demands to see his daughter. When the Rabbi claims to have no daughter, Constantine searches his house and finds her hidden among the Torah scrolls. He demands that Lea come to him or he will burn the village and all its inhabitants. Although her father tells her that it is right to resist this sinful demand, Lea yields to the pleas of the village people and goes to Constantine. Constantine is struck again with her beauty and dignity, and allows her to leave unharmed, but first confesses his love for her. Lea finds herself falling in love with this passionate and powerful man. Suddenly it is announced that the Austrian army has retaken the village and Constantine narrowly escapes, with Lea's aid. She returns to her father and tells him that Constantine has not harmed her. However her fiancé discovers she is wearing a ring Constantine gave her as a token that he would return to her. The village turns against her and begins stoning her as a traitor. When her father rushes forward to help her, he is hit by the stones and dies in her arms. After the war, Constantine, now a commissar of the new revolution, returns to the village, and the lovers are reunited.

In the same year as *Surrender* was made another film with a Jewish theme was produced: *The Jazz Singer*. The success of its talking sequences delivered a death sentence to the art of silent filmmaking. This is unfortunate, because never was silent film art as accomplished as in this period, and *Surrender* is an example of this sophisticated silent style. In *Sunrise*, considered the greatest American silent film, F.W. Murnau made elaborate use of tracking shots and influenced a number of other directors, including Sloman. The opening tracking shots and pans of *Surrender* bring Austrian Jewish village to life, while the tracking shot that follows Lea to her rendezvous with Constantine past the pleading villagers propels her with dramatic momentum. Sloman excels with other cinematic devices as well. He frames the Russian troops as they invade Austria so that only the barrels and bayonets of their rifles appear above the frame, transforming them into an inhuman threat. The multiple superimpositions of hands barricading the village houses, flames, and pleading faces which overwhelm Lea are a beautiful visualization of the emotional pressures which lead her to give in to Constantine's demands. The introductory sequence of

Mosjukine hunting a squirrel is given dramatic emphasis with camera movements and point-of-view shots, but then ends with him laughing and letting the squirrel go (a foreshadowing of his treatment of Lea). Mosjukine was a famous actor in pre-revolutionary Russia and later, as an émigré in Paris, became both an actor and director of films (his *Brasier Ardent* inspired Jean Renoir to take up filmmaking). He was brought to the U.S. possibly in order to supply the slightly effeminate European sex appeal that Valentino had made popular. However, the coming of sound cut short his American career (Sloman had to direct him through an interpreter, something possible only in the silent era where actors depended on expression and gesture rather than on dialogue).

This is one of the few American silent feature films to deal with life in a European Jewish village. The film is filled with the details of village life and Jewish customs. The Sabbath meal, which was also important in Sloman's *His People*, is presented in detail. It also serves a dramatic role: just as the Rabbi is about to stab Prince Constantine for threatening his daughter, the Sabbath is announced. At this moment, all forms of work and secular activity must cease immediately, and the Prince is therefore reprieved. While the Rabbi is shown as wise and compassionate, the villagers are less sympathetic, pleading with Lea to save them but soon ready to denounce her as a harlot. It seems unlikely that Lea would be so quickly attracted to a man who had just threatened her village with destruction. However, the melodrama depends on passions that are stronger than rational decisions, and Philbin and Mosjukine play their love scenes with erotic intensity. Prince Constantine seems capable of quick changes in character as well, particularly when he addresses the peasant at the end as "Comrade". But this, presumably, is part of his clever sense of survival.

"The theme will appeal strongly to Jewish folk everywhere and for others offers a great deal of enlightening information on Jewish religious customs, all of which have been quite respectfully handled by director Sloman." (advice to film exhibitors on how to handle *Surrender*, *Film Daily*, Nov. 10, 1927, p. 6.)

The Jazz Singer

Warner Brothers, 1927, 90 minutes.

Director: Alan Crosland.

Script: Alfred A. Cohn.

Based on: Samson Raphaelson play.

Photography: Hal Mohr.

Cast: Al Jolson (*Jakie Rabinowitz*); May McAvoy (*Mary Dale*); Warner Oland (*Cantor Rabinowitz*); Eugenie Besserer (*Sara Rabinowitz*); Otto Lederer (*Moishe Yudelson*); Myrna Loy (*Chorus Girl*); Cantor Josef Rosenblatt (*Himself*).

As a young boy on the Lower East Side, Jakie Rabinowitz resists his father's desire to have him follow the family tradition and become a cantor. After his father beats him for singing ragtime songs in a saloon, Jakie runs away from home. In San Francisco May Dale, a rising star in the Follies, discovers him singing in a café under the name of Jack Robin. She gives him his first break and eventually brings him to Broadway to headline in her show. In New York Jack visits his family, charming his devoted mother with his jazzy numbers on the piano, but finding his

father still adamantly opposed to his choice of profession. As rehearsals progress on “April Follies”, Jack’s first Broadway show, he is recognized as the star of the show. However, on the night of the dress rehearsal his father is taken seriously ill and is unable to sing Kol Nidre for the approaching Yom Kippur service. The congregation ask Jack to sing in his place but he refuses to leave the show at this vital point. After rehearsal, Jack goes to see his father. Present at his father’s death, he decides to sing at the Yom Kippur service the following night, although it means missing the opening night of his show. As a result of his brilliant performance the entire congregation is moved. The film ends with Jack performing on Broadway, his mother beaming from the audience.

It is appropriate to include *The Jazz Singer* in this catalog of Jews in American silent films, since although it is popularly considered to mark the end of the silent era, *The Jazz Singer* is not a “talkie” (the first “all talkie” was *Lights of New York* made the next year). It is almost entirely a silent film, with the addition of a synchronized score (the equivalent of the orchestra accompaniment offered in any premiere theater during the silent feature era), brief sequences of synchronized songs, and a few sentences of Al Jolson’s patter between verses. Nor was this the first feature film with a synchronized soundtrack (Warner Brothers’ *Don Juan*, also directed by Alan Crosland, preceded it). It was however the enormous success of *The Jazz Singer* that established the future potential of the sound film, signaling that great divide in film history, the death of the silent film.

But apart from its technical historical role *The Jazz Singer* stands out as a further elaboration of the themes we have been tracing in the other films in this series. The conflict between generations, between Old World traditions and New World tempo and temptations, and romance between Jews and gentiles, together with the neighborhood characters of the Lower East Side and the doting Jewish mother, are all here. The film in many ways resembles *His People*, and the fact that Alfred Cohn wrote the scripts for both is undoubtedly an important factor.

But part of the importance of the film is its return to the vaudeville, music hall roots of the Jewish impact on American culture. Certainly the most important element in the film’s success is the performance, and particularly the singing, of Al Jolson, who had for the last decade been one of the most important vaudeville stars in the nation. The sound process allowed audiences to hear the unique quality of Jolson’s voice, his extraordinary blend of ethnic roots and Tin Pan Alley jazziness. Although George Jessel had played the lead role in the Broadway production, and had originally been slated for the film, it was Jolson’s singing style that inspired Samson Raphaelson’s original short story. Enthralled by Jolson’s emotional style, he developed the theme that modern jazz somehow expresses an ancient religious impulse, an unconscious passionate prayer into a story “The Day of Atonement”, the original source for the film.

This comparison of the jazz singer with the cantor provides one of the most important insights into the role popular culture played in the assimilation of the Jews in America. Jakie Rabinowitz does not simply abandon his family tradition by becoming a theatrical singer rather than a liturgical one. He brings to the theater a religious intensity, a unique force from his ethnic past. Raphaelson’s story and play, as well as the original script for the film, ended with Jack taking his father’s place as cantor. The film adds an additional coda after his Yom Kippur performance, showing Jack as a Broadway star performing “Mammy”. While some may view this as sidestepping the real conflict, it also makes perfect sense that the film version should ultimately uphold Raphaelson’s insight and present Jolson’s singing as a secular ritual no less valuable than

religious tradition.

Raphaelson felt that the film betrayed the atmosphere of his original story by providing a sanitized Lower East Side with an overdramatized phoniness. Certainly, compared with Sloman's detailed recreations in *His People*, *The Jazz Singer* lacks a neighborhood feeling; and the performance of Warner Oland (later to become famous as Charlie Chan) compares poorly with that of Rudolph Schildkraut. However, in both the silent and sound sequences Jolson provides a vivid glimpse of the synthesis of Broadway rhythm and synagogue intensity that was developed by a number of twenties vaudeville performers. His body language amazes almost as much as his voice (as when we first see him eating ham and eggs in ragtime rhythm, or in his joyful dance as the train leaves without him).

Jolson also returns us to that basic paradox of vaudeville exemplified by the earliest film in this series, *Levi and Cohen*, *The Irish Comedians*: that ethnic performers in vaudeville generally appear masquerading as other ethnic types. Jolson's blackface certainly appears as a racist stereotype today. Yet it shows again the strange mix of ethnic identities that made up American popular culture. When the Lower East Side kibitzer Yudelson first sees Jack in make-up, he says to Jack's mother, "He talks like Jakie, but he looks like Jakie's shadow." This is a veiled racist joke, substituted for an outright ethnic slur in the original script. However, it inadvertently reveals something of the relations between minorities in popular culture in the early part of the century. Jack Robin, assimilated as he may be by the end of the film, maintains inspiration from his own past. And this synthesis is accomplished through his masquerade as another even more despised minority, the Black. Perhaps in some way the American Black does stand as an important shadow behind Jack's success, providing another ethnic inspiration to the new Tin Pan Alley style.

Nize People

Weiss Brothers, 1927, 20 minutes.

Director: Sam Newfield.

National Distributors: Artclass Pictures Corp.

Cast: Johnny Morris (*Papa*); Leo Sulky (*O'Connor*); Bernie Glazer (*Izzie*); Lucile Errain (*Lizzie*).

The children of the Goldbergs (son Izzie) and the O'Connors (daughter Lizzie) are coming home from college, and a big welcome party is planned. During the party Lizzie discovers her necklace is missing and believes it is stolen. Mr. O'Connor sets out to find a detective and runs into Lunatic Louie, who has just escaped from an asylum and claims to be the world's greatest detective. Returning to the party with Louie, O'Connor suddenly finds his home invaded by the asylum guards. Still unaware of Louie's mental state, both O'Connor and Goldberg pile into a car with him to escape from the guards. During a wild drive they realize that their driver is, in fact, nuts. Izzie and Lizzie chase after them in a car and the pair are finally rescued.

Papa's Pest

Weiss Brothers, 1928, 20 minutes.

Written and Directed by Les Goodwins.

Produced by W.T. Lackey Productions, Inc.

Photography: C. Hye.

Titles by Joe Traub.

National Distributors: Artclass Pictures Corp.

For his birthday Izzie Cohen wants a motorcycle, but his father gives him a camera instead. Izzie takes a photograph of his father in an apparently compromising (although actually harmless) position and uses it to blackmail him into buying the motorcycle. When the motorcycle arrives, Izzie's father gets on it and starts it accidentally. He can neither turn it off nor control it, and it runs wildly around the house before crashing through the house of his Irish neighbor, Murphy. The motorcycle exits Murphy's house, dragging Murphy along in a bathtub. Murphy and Cohen continue on a wild ride, pursued by Izzie and a traffic cop. Finally the motorcycle hits a tree and stops. The cop arrests Cohen and Murphy for reckless driving.

During the twenties a variety of companies produced short comedies to accompany feature films, creating an American style of fast-paced slapstick that led to the masterpieces of Chaplin, Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle and, later, Laurel and Hardy. The Weiss Brothers with their "Happiness Comedies" could not compete with Hal Roach or Mack Sennett, but their Izzie and Lizzie series shares the larger producer's preoccupation with domestic situations which explode into a frenzy of wild action and fast chases. Izzie and Lizzie (curiously, the roles are played by different actors in these two films) also picked up on the popularity during the twenties of Jewish comic characters such as Potash and Perlmutter, or Max Davidson's Jewish characters in Hal Roach's films. These characters are no longer the broadly burlesqued grotesques of vaudeville, although fun is still poked at Jewish customs (such as Cohen's watch with Hebrew characters in *Nize People* or the intertitle in *Papa's Pest* which says "Izzie Cohen – his papa wouldn't let him play football because the ball was made of pigskin"). The Izzie and Lizzie series derives some of its humor from the juxtaposition of two immigrant stereotypes, Irish and Jewish. This pairing had been used in American comedy and drama from the beginning of the century and found a new popular version in the late twenties in the Cohens and Kellys series. Initially based on opposition, this combination usually ends in fast friendships and romances.

Cohen on the Telephone

Universal Pictures Corporation, 1929,
9 minutes.

Directed by Robert Ross.

Presented by Carl Laemmle.

With: George Sidney.

Film Editor: Phil Cahn.

Cinematographer: George Robinson.

Recording Supervisor: C. Roy Hunter.

From his office, Cohen telephones his landlord to ask him to fix a window that was blown out by a storm. Unfamiliar with the telephone and still uncomfortable with the English language, Cohen embroils himself in a comic monologue of misunderstanding, linguistic embarrassment, and general nervousness.

By 1929, talking pictures had fully displaced silent films in Hollywood, and this changed the shape of comedies. Although not a silent film, *Cohen on the Telephone* is included here because it conforms both in style and content to the early vaudeville-immigrant genre. Now, instead of relying exclusively upon physical comedy and funny situations, film comedy could draw on

comic speech, which is the sole source of comedy in this short film. In this respect film comedy returned to its roots in vaudeville, only this time borrowing not the exaggerated costumes, slapstick routines, and grotesque makeup, but rather the comic monologue. Cohen is played by George Sidney, who had been the most identifiable and popular of Jewish comedians in the silent era, playing in both the Potash and Perlmutter and the Cohens and Kellys series. Sidney was born on the Lower East Side, the son of a poor shoemaker. Fascinated by the stage at an early age, he began in amateur night contests and then moved into vaudeville and burlesque. In this film Cohen's semi-absurd monologue ("Last night the vind came up and blew down the vindow...") is delivered with a nervous exasperation, veering from anger to apology. The Jewish immigrant is now characterized not simply by how he moves and looks, but by how he speaks. As in the comic dialogues of the Jewish comedians Weber and Fields, which nonsensically combined English, German, and Yiddish, Cohen does more than murder the English language; he demonstrates the difficulty of ever making sense through talking, the comic impossibility of communication. Although Cohen is certainly held up to ridicule here for his immigrant unfamiliarity with English and technology, there is no doubt that we sympathize with him. At his most absurd he is no longer a confused bumbler, but a crusader against the rationalization of life, new inventions, unresponsive landlords, and even making sense itself.

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