

Cinema-going from Below: The Jewish film audience in interwar Britain

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Abstract

This article explores the constitution and experiential specificity of Jewish cinema audiences in interwar Britain. Drawing on a range of archival and oral history data, cinema-going in urban Jewish communities will be understood in relation to the textual address, promotion and exhibition of a range of filmic forms designated as being of Jewish interest. The paper first explains how a Jewish cinema audience was constructed discursively across various sites, and then moves on to an exploration of audience experiences at the local level. As an Anglo-Jewish public sphere expanded to include the most culturally significant entertainment medium of the era, and with exhibition spaces taking on the status of a communal institution, the paper will argue the cinema served to mediate the tensions of existing as an 'alien' minority within a homogenous nation state. Such a vision gives insight into an interwar process of Jewish cultural endurance, as well as offering a new perspective on the historic constitution of the UK cinema audience.

Keywords: Jewish; exhibition; audience; materiality; interwar; East End.

Introduction

Accounts of national cinema cultures necessarily take in their object through the deployment of a panoramic gaze to capture the broadest trends. Missed from these narratives are the workings of cinema at the local level – those forms of film consumption only detectable when one swoops down from the aerial view and studies social terrain up close at the register of everyday life. During the interwar years Britain's most visible¹ minority-ethnic group were the 400,000 Jews inhabiting the major urban centres (see Endelman, 2002). Many of these were either migrants or the children of migrants that had arrived in Britain around the end of the nineteenth century, having previously lived in Russia or Eastern Europe. In locations such as London, Leeds and Manchester Jewish neighbourhoods developed that played host to distinct socio-cultural modes of life. Numerous businesses, restaurants, religious and communal institutions, and leisure spaces

oriented to this community were brought into being. With cinema representing the most significant cultural form of the era, it is perhaps not surprising that this too was inflected by the evolving settlement of Jews. The subject of this paper is the emergence of a Jewish cinema audience in interwar Britain. It is my assertion that such an object can be identified as both a discursive projection of the film industry and news media, and as a material reality in actual picture houses and other exhibition spaces in Jewish neighbourhoods.

In what follows I schematically map out the existence of this audience across a range of sites. In regard to its constitution in discourse I first identify a range of films in which a space for a specifically Jewish spectator is opened. These include U.S. studio films with high production values, Zionist propaganda films and Yiddish language productions. I then move on to examine press and municipal projections of a Jewish audience, drawing on Anglo-Jewish newspapers², cinema trade publications and local government files. Finally, I look at promotional strategies of film marketers, giving consideration to advertisements placed in the Jewish press. The second part of the paper examines the life-worlds of various Jewish quarters across the U.K. and the place of cinema within them. Here I predominantly utilise archival data, though also draw on details gleaned from oral history interviews to trace the specificities of exhibition sites and the audience behaviors that took place within them. I conclude by arguing that within the context of a nation state conceptualized as homogenous these cinema spaces took on the status of communal institutions. My approach to this topic will be synoptic; moving quickly from context to context my intended effect is to swiftly conjure a diagram of the interwar Anglo-Jewish cinema audience as a complex constellation operating over a host of registers.

The Jewish audience as a discursive object: the films

Throughout the interwar period a diverse range of films were produced with Jews understood as a primary or significant consumer group. This encompassed both big budget US production and independent production by Jewish filmmakers. Of the former category commentators such as Miriam Hansen (1991) and J. Hoberman (1992) have convincingly documented how, from the early silent period, companies such as Biograph attempted to entice Jewish individuals into the cinema using ethnically specific plots and characters. The logic behind this approach was not complicated. As Ben Singer (1995) has demonstrated, Jews were amongst the most frequent and numerous film-goers during the era of the nickelodeon in New York City. For the major American studios the production of films with a heavy emphasis on Jewish characters and cultural practices continued to be an appealing prospect through the twenties, and even into the 1930s. Several dozen such titles were released, with the more recognised including *Humoresque* (F. Borzage, 1920), *His People* (E. Sloman, 1925), and the half dozen '*Cohens and the Kellys*' comedies put out by Universal between the years 1926 and 1933.

Whilst these later films could not be understood to rely exclusively upon Jewish audiences for box office receipts, it is not far-fetched to see an implicit recognition of a sizeable Jewish viewership in the narratorial address of such fare. Henry Bial (2005) has argued that an array of US cultural material featuring Jewish themes operates through a logic of “double coding”. For Bial the display of Jewishness may be encoded in performances or the mise-en-scene of a given film. Neither a parody of anti-Semitic stereotype, nor a critique of non-Jewish culture this display ‘passes’ by the uninitiated and is offered as a supplementary element for those that can read the code. Thus, whilst the particulars of a Sabbath meal - the lighting of candles, the recitation of prayers - in *His People* might be interpreted as banal background detail by gentile audiences, a specifically Jewish spectatorial position is opened up for those that recognize the meaning and significance of the ceremonial actions. Despite contrasting understandings of ethnic difference on the different sides of the Atlantic a steady flow of ‘ethnic’ films made their way onto Britain’s cinema screens a few months after their US release. *Melody of Life* (G. La Cava, 1932), for instance, was timed to coincide with *Rosh Hashana* (the Jewish New Year) of 1932 (see New Year supplement in *Jewish Chronicle* [JC from here on], 30 September 1932). As much as constituting a Jewish audience member in America, then, the address of such films went to work on Jews in Britain as well.

As Stallybrass and White (1986) so perceptively note, that which is cast as socially peripheral has an uncanny knack of returning as culturally central. Less numerous than the American product – though still worthy of mention - are mainstream films produced in Europe that feature Jewish characters as central to their narrative. Doubtless many of these figured Jews as exotic Others. *A Daughter of Israel* (E. Jose, 1925) – a romantic melodrama telling the story of a young Jewish woman’s travels from Constantinople to Palestine – was reported to have “an atmosphere of romance and intrigue” and was said to feature the star, Betty Blythe, “in various stages of dress and undress in a picture that appeals more to the eye than the mind” (*Cinema News and Gazette* quoted in advertisement, see JC, 20 August, 1926: 28). Irrespective of what now appears to be questionable Orientalist fantasising, the film was much anticipated in the Anglo-Jewish press, with the *Jewish Chronicle* noting the film had “already been shown in a number of European and other countries, and promises to be one of the successes of the season” (23 October 1925: 27).

Significantly, these predictions of popularity came in the newspaper’s Palestine news pages (a regular subsection collected stories under the banner “The Land of Israel” [Ibid.]). Key to the film’s novelty was not simply the appearance of Jewish characters, but its use of authentic locations in Mandatory Palestine. This was the “first film story photographed in Palestine”, the same article reported, before asserting that footage of the land was “expected to arouse much general interest in Palestinian activities” (Ibid.). During the mid-1920s Zionism was an ideology still gaining traction in Anglo-Jewish life and commitment to its precepts were highly uneven. It is thus interesting to consider that Hillel Tryster (1999) notes that only in Britain were the film’s distributors willing to include any significant

amount of imagery depicting Zionist activity in the print. Whether Anglo-Jewish audiences were drawn to this footage due to politics is now impossible to know. What is conceivable is that a Jewish repopulation of geographic locations referred to throughout the Old Testament would have a quite specific set of resonances for Jewish spectators. Whatever one's position on such matters, specialist knowledge of the events leading to this situation would be far more common amongst Jewish cinema-goers. Other large budget European films featuring Jews that were heavily promoted to a Jewish audience include *Kaddish* (A. E. Licho, 1924), *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (P. Wengerer, 1920) and *The Ancient Law* (E. A. Dupont, 1923). These too contained multiple scenes in which a Jewish audience might be called into being. The Polish *shtetl*³ at the beginning of *The Ancient Law* may have seemed wholly alien to 1920s Anglo-gentile spectators, but to many Jews it was the landscape of their childhood.

In addition to the output of mainstream producers a host of independent Jewish filmmakers laboured to produce films for their co-religionists throughout the diaspora. The address of the spectator as Jewish was more obviously direct in such products – as can be evinced by a plethora of examples. In 1926 a campaign to raise awareness – and funds – for impoverished Ukrainian Jews made use of a travelogue format film featuring documentary imagery of the 'old country'. Organised by the Federation of Ukrainian Jews the film was entitled *Our Very Own* and exhibited at multiple sites across Britain ranging from the Marble Arch Pavilion cinema in central London to one-off screenings in large private houses. Now forgotten or lost, the exact content is unknown, though publicity material does note the piece containing "scenes of Jewish life from the Ukraine and Russia" (JC, 4 December 1925: 26). Footage of Jewish *shtetl* life appears to have been used in entertainment contexts from time to time too. One title, *The Voice of Israel* (J. Seiden & A. Chasin, 1930), intercut performances by Jewish religious singers (*chazzans*) with an assortment of footage including Jews at prayer in Eastern Europe.

Displaying a different aspect of the diaspora were Zionist propaganda films, and the interwar period of Jewish film production was heavily marked by recordings of early attempts at nation building in Mandatory Palestine. Essentially, these seem to have fallen into two key forms, both of which used a documentary format (fiction films such as *A Daughter of Israel* were exceptionally rare). Receiving the highest profile were those with significant production values. *Young Palestine: Eretz Yisrael in 1926* (Y. Ben Dov, 1926), *Land of Promise* (J. Leman, 1934) and *Avodah* (H. Lerski, 1935) are all examples of this trend. Produced at some expense – often by Jewish nationalist organisations – the purpose of such films seems to have been to inspire commitment, both financial and ideological, to the cause. Additionally, smaller scale short films made using 16mm cameras by visitors to Mandatory Palestine were also in circulation. Typically, these were shot by non-professionals with a dedication to Zionism and enough money to purchase equipment and process the exposed stock. In late spring of 1934, for instance, a short film made by Glasgow

based amateur Fred Nettler was screened by various Zionist societies across the UK (see JC, 11 May 1934: 32).

Possibly the most celebrated body of films produced by Jewish filmmakers for Jewish audiences were Yiddish language cinema. Judith Goldberg (1983) has estimated that approximately 130 feature films and 30 short Yiddish language films were made between the years 1910 and 1941. As with other markets across the diaspora a number of films were distributed to the UK, screening in picture houses in Jewish neighbourhoods or occasionally in city centre and art-house cinemas. Leonard Prager (1990) lists several silent productions with Yiddish intertitles being showing in east London; a couple – *Der Yid* and *Der Mesiekh* - in the Commercial Road's Palaseum cinema, a one-time Yiddish theatre. Of higher profile, however, were Yiddish sound films, the first of which were shown in Whitechapel (in East London) in April and May of 1931. For the next few years Yiddish films appeared with a degree of regularity - a total of sixteen for the decade. A majority of these were produced in the United States by Judea Pictures in the early 1930s and tended to focus on American Jewish life.⁴

Conceptualising the 'Jewish audience': the press, the state and the businessmen

That a Jewish audience might exist as an object distinct in its consumption patterns was a common conceptualisation in the Anglo-Jewish press. "Jewish patrons of the cinema...", announced the *Jewish Chronicle* in one 1934 piece, "...will assuredly be intrigued by 'Jew Suss'" (L. Mendes, 1934) (October 20 1934: 45). This construction was applied to numerous films, with titles ranging from *The Golem: How He Came into the World* to *Two Worlds* (E. A. Dupont, 1930) marked out as being of "special interest" to Jews (JC, 15 May 1931: 28). Particularly noteworthy is a stated disparity in Jewish and gentile understandings of those news films that dealt with the rise of Nazism in Germany. Commenting on the exhibition of early footage of a Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses in a British Movietone News film, for instance, the *Jewish Chronicle* remarked not only on shots of "Nazi Storm Troops" painting "inciting symbols on shop windows", but also that "the audience was evidently deeply moved by the picture" and "many cries of 'Shame!'" (14 April, 1933: 31) could be heard whilst the film was screened. However, the review ended on a somewhat uncomfortable note. Whilst British viewers might be radically opposed to state sponsored racial harassment, "the English mind, with its instinctive belief in fair play" was said to have "hardly grasped the real significance of the Nazi oppression".

Later in the decade the American 'March of Time' newsreel was distributed in the U.K. In contrast to the anodyne narration of British news films the March of Time was sharply opinionated, and the Anglo-Jewish press was quite taken with the didactic potential of those episodes that dealt with Nazism. This enthusiasm for the March of Time's coverage of fascist

expansion and its associated problems stemmed from a belief that the films contained the potential to productively influence public opinion. If pressure could be applied on policy makers from a broad swathe of citizenry then maybe the plight of Jews in Germany could be alleviated. *The Jewish Times* was quite clear about the value of this kind of material and sub-headed their report on the celebrated episode *Inside Nazi Germany 1938* with the line “New March of Time Film Should be Good Propaganda” (19 May 1938: 4). From the earliest news films presenting visual evidence of Nazi antisemitism, then, commentators in the Jewish press understood gentile audiences as substantively differing to Jewish audiences since the former was innocent of true nature of Hitler’s regime.

With a reputation based on providing financially sound assessments of a new film’s box office potential to film exhibitors; the British film trade press also offered the Jewish audience as a discursive construction. Referring to *A Daughter of Israel* the *Kinematograph Weekly* remarked that the “main features of the picture are the settings in Palestine ... The appeal is chiefly to Jewish audiences” (see JC, 20 August 1926: 28). Several Yiddish language talkies were similarly evaluated by the trade press, with *The Bioscope* asserting the use of Yiddish in *His Wife’s Lover* (S. Goldin, 1931) as rendering the piece “entirely unintelligible to the ordinary cinema public”, and thus concluding its appeal as “limited strictly to Jewish audiences” (2 December 1931: 18). Likewise, even despite the *Kinematograph Weekly* considering *Yiddle with his Fiddle* (J. Green, 1936) “Story pleasing, acting good, treatment artistic” it was only seen as a sensible booking for “specialised halls” (1 July, 1937: 27). These films were thus understood not – in Bial’s terms – as double coded, but simply as only of bearing to those with access to a Jewish cultural repertoire.

Echoing the trade press’s analysis was the understanding of another Yiddish film – *The Eternal Wanderer* (G. Roland, 1933) – by its distributor and a local municipal body. Arriving in England in 1934 the piece was issued with a rejection certificate upon presentation to the independent regulator, the British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC). With the film’s narrative concerning the persecution of a Jewish painter in Nazi Germany and featuring dramatic documentary footage of Nazi book burning rituals, the BBFC asserted the picture’s “propagandist nature rendered it unsuitable for exhibition in this country” (See LCC, File GLC/DG/EL/01/250 in LMA). Refusing to be put off the film’s distributor, Dan Fish, appealed to London’s local authority – the London County Council – arguing the film posed no threat to public order since the “picture possesses exhibition value only to the limited cinemas that cater for Jewish audiences” (Ibid.). On this point the LCC concurred and in an official report of the Entertainments Committee stated “the film, which will appeal primarily to Jewish audiences, is not likely, although admittedly “propaganda”, to be injurious to morality or to be offensive to public feeling in England” (Ibid.). Across trade press, the distribution arm of the film industry, and local government the idea of the Jewish cinema audience can thus be seen to circulate.

From time to time the mainstream British press also provided some acknowledgement of a Jewish cinema audience that was distinct in its tastes. Quoted in the advertisement for *A Daughter of Israel* mentioned above was a statement from *Faulkners Review* claiming “Orthodox Jewry will find the picture interesting from its Eastern atmosphere...the East End Jew may be touched although he has not been known to crave after Zionism” (see JC, 20 August 1926: 28). Whilst it was rare, on occasion a film produced with a Jewish consumer as its target was also reviewed by one of the major titles, and here too the Jewish audience made an appearance. With its political sympathies firmly with the less powerful, the *Manchester Guardian* often discussed Jewish affairs, and this went as far as commenting on both Yiddish language and Jewish nationalist films. In regard to the former the U.S. made comedy *His Wife’s Lover* received a lengthy review in which it was asserted “the fact that it is spoken in Yiddish...will doubtless bring in its audiences when it opens on Friday” (2 December 1931: 10).

Perhaps more commonly, a Jewish audience was conjured by the mainstream press as a kind of implicit absence. Released in Britain in 1937 the Yiddish language musical comedy



Fig. 1. Advertisement for *The Cocoanuts*. Placed in *Jewish Chronicle* (8 July, 1929: 39). Image reproduced courtesy of British Library.

Yiddle with his Fiddle did surprisingly good business at the box office, and thus obtained reviews across the range of news titles. Loftily disdainful *The Times* felt there was something amateurish about the production, but did comment positively on a wedding scene. This had the advantage of cultural specificity and it was noted, “The dances and music are new to us, the customs are fresh material for the screen” (22 July 1937: 12). This “us” presumably did not include Jewish viewers, many of whom were quite familiar with Polish-Jewish tradition and were thus not positioned to witness these scenes through an anthropological gaze. Similarly, it is questionable to what extent a Jewish audience would wonder at the “Jewish faces [that] are so expressive that words seem unnecessary” (Catholic Herald quoted in advertisement in *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 9 October 1937: 2).

Being entirely straightforward in its aims, commerce took a more direct approach to articulating a ‘Jewish audience’, and those areas of the film industry involved in promotion

accented their marketing to account for ethnic specificity. In the Jewish press film advertisements regularly featured some emphasis of the presence of Jewish actors, characters or themes. In an ad (see Fig. 1 above) for the Marx Brothers comedy *The Cocoanuts* (R. Florey & J. Santley, 1929) for example, the four star performers are billed as the “world’s funniest Hebrew comedians” (see JC, 8 July 1929: 39). Other notices contained details of the advertised film in Yiddish. *The Busybody* (E. Sloman, 1930) - a vehicle for Jewish comedian Harry Green – informed potential viewers of the comedic credentials of the piece (see JC 18 April 1930: 30), whilst Julien Duvivier’s 1937 version of *The Golem* simply carried the name of the film in Yiddish underneath the English title (see JC, 14 March 1937: 45). Perhaps the most audacious tactic was used in an advertisement (see Fig. 2) for



Fig. 2. Advertisement for *The Ten Commandments*. Placed in *Jewish Chronicle* (18 August, 1924). Image reproduced courtesy of British Library.

The Ten Commandments (C. B. de Mille, 1923). Here it was argued that a viewing of the film during the festival of Passover was not only appropriate, but that it would facilitate the injunction to inform children of the exodus story (see JC, 18 April 1924: 33). Productions more overtly oriented towards Jewish audiences were also, unsurprisingly, heavily promoted as of interest to Jews. Deploying the key mark of self-identification for Ashkenazi Jews – language - advertising notices in the *Jewish Times* for the first Yiddish talking films in the UK carried a prominent header reading (in Yiddish) ““COME SEE! AND HEAR! THE MOTHER TONGUE!” (19 April 1931: 3).

It is worth noting here that it was not exclusively ostensibly ‘Jewish interest’ films that were promoted to Jews using culturally specific marketing strategies. In January 1930 an advertisement for the early British sound film *Atlantic* (E. A. Dupont, 1929) appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle* with information almost

exclusively presented in Yiddish text. True, the director Dupont had made earlier films with a significant Jewish content (such as *The Ancient Law*), and an *Observer* article from 1934 (see 7 January 1934: 23) does note his Jewishness, suggesting his ethnicity was widely known. Nevertheless, *Atlantic*’s narrative was based on the not at all ethnically specific Titanic disaster, and although Dupont’s name is featured on the advertisement little is made of this (indeed it is only given in English, appearing nowhere in Yiddish). This hardly seems enough to justify a cast list and screening times – at the Leicester Square Alhambra theatre,

no less – in Yiddish. What this thus implies is that the concept of a Jewish audience must have been conceived in multiple ways, by different agents.

Based on the sources identified above it is clear that three distinct conceptualisations of the 'Jewish audience' were in circulation during the interwar years. Most straightforward is the Jewish audience as an auditorium of Jewish cinema-goers. Next is the Jewish audience as a disparate group of spectators connected by the tastes, knowledges and interests that inhere in his/her ethnicity. Finally we have the Jewish audience as a consumer demographic. This is an effect of advertising; it is an audience whose ethnicity is of relevance only to the extent that persuading it to part with cash is contingent on targeting the ethnicity (this is the understanding of *Atlantic's* promoters). The advantage of ranging across an array of archival sources is that it becomes possible to separate these different concepts, *and* to see how they overlap as contexts shifts. The Jewish audience as a discursive object is thus best understood as complex multiply enfolded assemblage. Each articulation of a given audience identity (e.g. the LCC's deployment the Jewish audience) will have effects, and these effects are able to activate one of the other identities (the *Jewish Chronicle's* deployment the Jewish audience). What this analysis cannot tell us, however, is how the Jewish audience might be understood as lived experience. It is thus to the territory of everyday life that I turn to next.

The Jewish audience in its materiality

We are now at a point where - in addition to discussing the Jewish audience as a discursive object - it seems meaningful to talk about a material Jewish audience inhabiting real spaces. In my further examination of something called the Anglo-Jewish cinema audience I want to consider the spaces and the geography that films of Jewish interest were shown in. In Britain's major cities Jewish communities were in existence from the late 19th century, and sometimes before. In Manchester the area around Cheetham Hill, Strangeways and Broughton had a sizeable Jewish settlement, and the same was true of the Leylands and Chapeltown districts in Leeds. London was home to several neighbourhoods with large Jewish populations including Hackney and Maida Vale. The most significant Jewish neighbourhood in Britain, however, was in London's East End. Although it is difficult to assess quite how numerous Jewish inhabitants were during the interwar years, in the 1930's a minimum figure of around 100,000 people is considered reliable (see Fishman, 1975: 60). Jews lived mainly in the west of the district, in the areas of Aldgate, Whitechapel and Stepney, though there were also synagogues in Bow, Poplar and Canning Town.

Before painting in the colour of some of these spaces it is perhaps worth pausing to clarify some details in relation to the oral history testimony I draw on. Over recent months I have solicited about one dozen interviews from Jewish people who can recall the interwar period⁵. A majority of this work was undertaken in the East End of London at an older persons day centre. Information on Leeds' Jewish neighbourhoods was gathered at a Jewish

Community centre in Moortown, Leeds. In addition to this material I have located over 250 existent oral history interviews of Jewish people in Manchester. These were conducted during the 1970s, with some interviewees recalling events as far back as the final years of the nineteenth century. These latter interviews sought to glean information on the totality of Manchester Jewish life, and as such focus on leisure activities alongside work conditions, religious observance, memories of fascism etc. I have come across reflections on cinema-going in eighty-six of these interviews, some of which are fascinating and unique.

Overwhelmingly the individuals I spoke with came from working class families. Some had gone on to forge successful careers in business or professional sectors, though a majority of those interviewed in the East End spent their working lives in skilled or semi-skilled manual jobs (often the rag trade) and have continued to live close to the neighbourhoods they grew up in. This class profile most certainly informed the data I received, and the cognitive maps of cinema geographies that were laid out for me were exclusively situated in working class areas. My interviewing is ongoing and future work will certainly attempt to account for experiences of more middle class places of Jewish habitation such as Golders Green. As Annette Kuhn found in her landmark study *An Everyday Magic* (2002), for the generations that visited the cinema during the 1930's local topography can be thought through via the locations of its cinemas, and many interviewees began by listing the cinemas they visited in their youth and organising space around these sites. From here I enquired across a variety of topics, asking about favoured film stars, memories of specifically 'Jewish' films, and trying to get to the detail of the atmosphere of exhibition spaces.

Whilst I have managed the resultant interview material using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, my utilisation of it here is essentially as a supplementary resource. Oral history is a key method for accessing historical consciousness at the local level, and the recollections of individuals contain the details of everyday events not found elsewhere. In the remainder of this chapter I situate a selection of these fragments alongside an array of archival sources. Some of these too rely on memory (e.g. the extracts from Goldman's memoir), but there is also contemporary press discourse, promotional bump and photographic material. Memory is notoriously unstable – I, like most, have recollections of events that I cannot possibly have taken place - but in a project of this kind it remains a vital resource. By triangulating memory data with archival material and theoretical texts a construct of some epistemic robustness can - I think - be built, but it is crucial to be sensitised to the partial nature of this knowledge.⁶

Spaces of exhibition

Discussing East London with 'Simon' - a Jewish interviewee born in Petticoat Lane in the early 1930's – he recalled films being shown at a popular Whitechapel youth club (Brady Boys Club). These he thought were "films of interest to Jewish youth, and the East End". Occasional spaces of film exhibition seem to have been a common mode through which

Jewish film audiences self-organised during the interwar years. Locations took a variety of forms – a short article in the *Jewish Chronicle* notes Fred Nettle's "film of Palestine" film being screened by the North London Zionist Society in Stoke Newington Synagogue hall (JC, 11 May 1934: 32). The domestic setting was also utilised, and a number of "At Home" performances of films of Jewish interest are recorded in the pages of the Jewish press (see JC, 2 July 1937: 22). These affairs seem to have taken place at the houses of officials of Jewish communal organisations, with Zionist films and charity screenings of footage of Ukrainian Jews featuring heavily. Finally, several Jewish film societies sprung into life in Britain around the end of the 1920's. Some even created a production arm, with the London based 'Jewish Amateur Film Society' completing a film entitled *The Ghetto* in 1930. Directed by one Ray Siddins it screened at various one-off locations including the Walthamstow and Leyton Social and Literary Club (see JC, 7 November 1930: 35).

Of course, the prime location in which a Jewish film audience would come into being were formal entertainment spaces. These might be situated in cosmopolitan 'downtown' theatres in city centres, or in neighbourhood cinemas catering to the specifics of local taste. In regard to the former category it is possible to trace the circulation of a given Jewish interest film around the U.K. appearing in centrally located picture houses in a variety of towns. Directed by and starring one of the giants of the pre-World War II Yiddish stage – Maurice Schwartz – *Souls in Exile* (1926) concerned itself with "Jewish home life – Jewish joys – and Jewish sorrows" (see advertisement in JC, 25 May 1928: 13). First appearing in London in March 1928 it screened at the Astoria Cinema in Charing Cross Road. A few weeks later it moved to Cardiff showing at the Queen's Cinema (apparently the first Cardiff theatre to be converted for "talkies") and the Pavilion Cinema in the city centre. Finally the film was exhibited at Manchester's Gaiety cinema located on Mount Street close to the town hall. Even for large city centre cinemas then, catering to Jewish audiences seems to have made the box office sense. Indeed, some theatres – such as Birmingham's Regent Picture House in New Street - repeatedly screened Jewish interest films, and over a period of three months in late 1926/early 1927 *His People*, *The Cohens and the Kellys* (H. A. Pollard, 1926) and *A Daughter of Israel* were all exhibited.

Unsurprisingly it was those cinemas located in the heart of a Jewish neighbourhood that oriented their programmes most overtly to a Jewish clientele. A Leeds based interviewee, 'Raymond', had clear memories of the Yiddish language *Yiddle with his Fiddle* screening at the Forum Cinema in Chapeltown (an advertisement in the *North Leeds News* confirms this taking place in October 1937 [see 15 October, 1937: 1]); whilst an interesting article in the *Jewish Chronicle* records the Jewish-American actor Eddie Cantor (then in the city to promote a Jewish refugee charity appeal) recommending Jewish residents visit the same cinema in order to see the anti-Nazi *The Eternal Wanderer* (see JC, 19 July 1938: 44). In the East End of London Jewish interest films are documented as being screened at at least ten different cinemas from the 1910s onwards. To take just one cinema - the Rivoli in

Whitechapel Road (see Fig. 3) – *Theodore Herzl* (O. Kreisler, 1921), *Uncle Moses* (M. Schwartz, 1932) and the Zionist documentary *Land of Promise* are just a few of the titles to be presented during the interwar years. Of course in an area as densely populated by Jews as Whitechapel a cinema did not require a Jewish themed film in order to host a Jewish audience, and my interviewee ‘Janet’ recalled cinema-goers at Brick Lane’s Mayfair cinema as overwhelmingly Jewish as late as the 1950s.



Fig. 3. Rivoli Cinema 1922. Image reproduced courtesy of Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

Whether located in the city centre, or in a Jewish neighbourhood film exhibitors appear to have been wise to attracting Jewish audiences through offering culturally specific entertainment as part of the scheduled program.

Relatively common was a musical performance oriented to Ashkenazi tastes. When *Kaddish* screened at London’s Avenue Pavilion cinema in 1927

it was accompanied by “incidental music by Isodore Berman’s male voice choir” (see

JC, 13 August 1927: 29), whilst an advertisement for the Yiddish language *The Eternal Wanderer* 1935 screening at the Mile End Empire carried the information that a stage show would feature the popular Dutch Yiddish singer “Leo Fuld singing Jewish Melodies [*sic*] with Jack Goldy and Sidney May” (JC, 20 March 1935: 52). Many of the local picture houses seem to have had an idiosyncratic quality, and a delightful account of Cheetham’s Bijou cinema is given in an oral history interview taken in Manchester during the 1970’s. According to ‘Joe’ the cinema was owned by a Jewish performer, who between films would appear on stage to act a short sketch in Yiddish as the lead actor alongside his family and friends in supporting roles (see file MJM J193 at Manchester Jewish Museum).

Whether inspired by Marxism, Jewish Nationalism or simply the experience of anti-semitism, an anti-fascist politics was key to the political consciousness of many British Jews, and it is perhaps only to be expected that this awareness would be reflected in the cinema culture of this social group. In addition to commercial screenings there is some evidence of those March of Time films that included a criticism of fascism being utilised for fundraising or activism purposes by Jewish political groups. On March 12th 1939 *The Refugee – Today and Tomorrow* was shown with the Zionist film *This is the Land*. Screened at the Odeon in

the East End's Mile End Road profits went to the Jewish National Fund (see JC, 10 March 1939: 11). A few weeks later on April 25th *Inside Nazi Germany: 1938, Nazi Conquest - No. 1* and *Prelude to Conquest* exhibited at Stoke Newington Town Hall in North East London. Advertised as a "Film Show and Mass Meeting to organise Boycott of Nazi Goods" (21 April 1939: 9) the event was arranged by the anti-fascist 'Jewish People's Council'. Only reserved seats commanded an admission charge (6d), and featured among the speakers was Nye Bevan M.P. As part of an Anglo-Jewish cultural landscape, then, sat those March of Time pieces that sought to challenge Hitler's regime.

"They turned the place into a circus": the cinema as home ground

In a celebrated account of the 18th century theatre in *The Fall of Public Man* (1977 [1986]) Richard Sennett vividly illustrates the disorderly nature of the period's audiences. Wholly different to the silent and disciplined spectators of the Victorian era, Sennett's theatre-goers openly converse amongst themselves, indulge in horseplay, or loudly offer advice to the actors in the midst of a performance. Two hundred years later in the East End of London cinema-goers – at least by some accounts - were apparently equally unrestrained. Discussing the film business with the manager of an East End cinema in a report for World Film News reporter Richard Carr quoted him stating:

"East End audiences are very critical...If the regular patrons don't like a film they make a point of telling me afterwards. They say 'B____y [sic] awful film that' or some such remark. Or else they clap their hands during the film or shuffle their feet and whistle. They certainly let me know whether or not they like the films we show" (quoted in Richards, 1984: 26).

These were people, it appears, quite at home in their surroundings. Neither middle class codes of public propriety, nor uniformed cinema officials were going to stop them having a good time.

An atmosphere of unrestrained vocality and informal communality are amusingly evoked in Willy Goldman's biographical document of pre-World War II East London *East End My Cradle* (1940). Recalling an afternoon at the cinema the Jewish author, tells of how the audience "turned the place into a circus. They stood up and shouted jests to each other. Some sought out relatives and friends and when they caught sight of them screeched across: 'Hey Becky!...Here's a seat I saved for you – come on over!'" (139). Once the programme begins "the noise does not so much quieten down as change its character". Some in the audience whistle along to a theme-tune whilst youthful wags shout out jokes at a moment of high drama. For the middle class Jewish establishment such scenes were not a matter of pride. Writing on a screening of E.A. Dupont's *The Ancient Law* at the Pavilion Theatre in Whitechapel, the film's reviewer was not the least amused to witness a scene

involving Jewish ritual being met with “stupid and unmannerly laughter” from “an audience which, presumably, consists almost exclusively of Jews” (JC, 16 May 1924:30).

Completing his tableaux of East End cinema-going Goldman refers to “the incessant crackling of peanuts and the squelch of sucked oranges” accompanying the sound track (ibid.). The lived experience - the sounds, the smells, the ‘feeling’ - of being situated in a neighbourhood cinema was a recurrent feature across a number of the oral history interviews I conducted. ‘Raymond’ recalled the softness of the carpets in Chapeltown’s Forum, whilst ‘Lily’ remembered the crunch of peanut shells underfoot in the East End’s Classic cinema (presumably discarded by Goldman’s fellow audience members). Some of the most intriguing information in this area was offered by ‘Janet’ about the Mayfair Cinema (again in the East End). Although she was not of a sufficient age to recall the 1930s she did remember post-war Whitechapel, and described the Mayfair as a kind of throwback to an earlier form of film viewing. Here the audience were almost entirely Jewish, with many in old age. Refusing to acknowledge the ‘fourth wall’ she told me of shouts in Yiddish of “*khoorva!*” (Whore!) at femme fatale characters, and in English of “he’s behind you!” as a murderer approached a victim. Some of her strongest memories were of the smells of the traditional Jewish foodstuffs that the audience brought in with them. Indeed, it was for this reason, along with the increasing disrepair of the site that eventually led her and her sister to travel further afield in their search for cinematic entertainment.

There is, of course, a danger in exoticising the life-worlds of pre-World War II Jewish neighbourhoods. For most, living conditions were extremely humble, and opportunities for betterment few. The cinema could not always provide an escape from such problems, either. Two separate female interviewees informed me of the very concrete dangers posed by “dirty old men” to young girls in the darkness of an auditorium. It was also the case that cinemas might become the location for political dispute and even violence: the Jewish Chronicle records two instances of fascist ‘Blackshirts’ distributing propaganda near cinemas popular with Jews. One of these was outside the Troxy cinema in the heart of the East End, and resulted in scuffles mere days before the area exploded into violence at the famous ‘Battle of Cable Street’ (see JC, 2 October 1936: 4). Additionally, as pointed out above, my interviewees’ backgrounds were uniformly working class and it should not be read as given that outsiders to these neighbourhoods would have felt as equally at ease in these environments. The *Jewish Chronicle* journalist in attendance at the screening of *The Ancient Law* may well have been joined in his antipathy towards the disruptive audience by many unused to public rambunctiousness.

We should also be careful about emphasising the specificity of the disorderly Jewish audience. Other cinema cultures have developed similarly lively social cinema scenes. In an article on Asian cinema-going in the Midlands during the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Nirmal Puwar (2007) records audiences at Coventry’s Ritz cinema more absorbed in the

food, clothes and dating potential of their fellow cinema-goers than in the onscreen action⁷. That said, it is not simply a contrast to an idealised silent and disciplined spectator in which I am interested. Rather my concern is to record the specificity of the character of the atmosphere and the particularity of the unruliness. The smells distracting 'Janet' and her sister were the acrid tang of Jewish pickles; the catcalls came in Yiddish. In the larger picture houses of the East End – the Troxy or the Rivoli - it is certain that outside of screenings of films of 'Jewish interest' audiences would have been constituted of both Jews and Gentiles. A willingness to, say, loudly express dissatisfaction with a tedious film is conceivably part of a broader set of viewing practices associated not simply with ethnicity, but with the local area, and possibly a social class in general. My point is that whatever the source of the license for disorder, the fact of its Jewishness is of noteworthy significance given the context of this historical moment.

As Endelman (2002) states, it was only after the mass migrations of people from South Asia and the Caribbean during the 1950s and 1960s that Britain became less obviously homogenous in terms of ethnicity, and the pre-WWII landscape was often an uncomfortable place to be marked as different. One of the Manchester interviewees, 'Julius', recalled an all Jewish gang that went by the name "the Shaun Spidah' being organised during the 1920s in response to violence committed by members of an anti-semitic gang called "the Naboo". Jews could not be Jewish just anywhere. The cinemas of Jewish neighbourhoods, however, were spaces of everyday leisure where 'passing' – as disciplined, as genteel, indeed as British - was not expected or even particularly desirable. And it was the social comfort that unfolded in such spaces that formed the basic condition for a rich expressive culture to take root. These were not places in which one had to apologise for difference; it was difference that was on offer in the advert for the film, in the programme itself, and in the behaviour of one's fellow audience members. Here, informality reigned providing a respite from the hyper-visibility that British Jews were subject to in the interwar period. The value of such sanctuary should not be underestimated.

In conclusion then, it is my position that a distinctly Jewish audience can be identified across a range of sites in interwar Britain. At the level of discourse it is projected in advertisements, promotional strategies and as a distinct figure in the Anglo-Jewish and trade press. As Jewish individuals came together in exhibition spaces in Jewish neighbourhoods, however, I feel it is meaningful to talk of a Jewish audience in its materiality. In these cinema sites pleasure and politics merged as a cultural life – elsewhere regarded as indecorous – played out. The precise nature of any interaction between these two social objects (the discursive audience and the material audience) is not straightforward; though, it is worth recalling that in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) Habermas asserts that the self-identity of the bourgeois public was part constituted in the self-image that publication offered and part constituted in material spaces of human interaction. Whatever the formula, it should be borne in mind that the historic constitution of the British cinema

audience has never been monolithic or unitary, and that those Others who have made Britain their home during the twentieth century have on many occasions infused the places in which they watched films with great energy and creativity.

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Cinema News and Gazette

Jewish Chronicle
The Jewish Times
Kinematograph Weekly
North Leeds News

Archives

London Metropolitan Archives, London County Council records, File GLC/DG/EL/01/250, London UK
Manchester Jewish Museum, File MJM J193, Manchester UK
Tower Hamlets Local History Library, London UK

Notes

¹ I am referring to discursive visibility, as well as the material visibility of Jewish neighbourhoods (in the shape of specialist shops, advertisements in Hebrew lettering etc.) and markers of difference such as the wearing of the skullcap and the speaking of Yiddish and Hebrew. The question of embodied Jewish visibility - and, indeed, invisibility - is too large a topic to dwell on here. Readers interested in this area might want to consult Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (1991).

² I draw on two Anglo-Jewish newspapers in this article: *The Jewish Chronicle* and *The Jewish Times* (in Yiddish *Di Tsait*). The former was a national weekly publication founded in 1841. It commanded the largest readership of any Anglo-Jewish newspaper and considered itself the official voice of British Jewry. The latter was a Yiddish language daily produced in the East End of London, also distributed nationally. Somewhat in contrast to *The Jewish Chronicle* this latter publication had a keen awareness of the political and cultural dispositions of its mostly proletarian readership.

³ The literal translation of the term *shtetl* from Yiddish is 'little town'. *Shtetlach* (to use the plural) were rural villages dotted across Eastern Europe and Russia that were the literal and symbolic home to 'Ashkenazi' Jewish life and culture until their obliteration during World War II. A recent depiction of a *shtetl* comes at the beginning of the Cohen brother's recent film *A Serious Man* (2009).

⁴ For a fuller account of this topic see Gil Toffel, 'Come See and Hear the Mother Tongue': Yiddish cinema in interwar London, *Screen* 50:3, Autumn 2009.

⁵ This process of data gathering is ongoing.

⁶ There is, of course, a significant literature on the qualitative interview and the memory text as a topic of research. A good place to start is *Memory and Methodology* (2002) edited by Susannah Radstone.

⁷ See also her fascinating film on the subject at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DzEknpeceQ>.