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## Racism in German and American Cinema of the Twenties

by Susanne Hillman September 24, 2019



The problem of assimilation is central to the history of minorities in both the United States and Europe. Given the significance of the issue, it is not surprising that it has been a staple of popular media, including motion pictures.

In E. A. Dupont's silent film "The Ancient Law," released in 1923 Germany, the Orthodox Jew Baruch Mayer leaves a shtetl in Galicia for Vienna, where he pursues a career in acting. Four years later, American audiences were able to watch a loose adaptation of the film with a twist. Alan Crosland's pioneering sound film in Hollywood, "The Jazz Singer," may have been an adaptation of a hit play by the same author, but it also secretly remade "The Ancient Law" by transforming Baruch Mayer into Jakie Rabinowitz, the film's main character who is played by Al Jolson (Asa Yoelson).

The role of Jakie Rabinowitz turned Jolson into a movie-star overnight. Remarkably, his use of blackface did him no injury in the eyes of his admirers—to the contrary: he enjoyed enormous popularity among African Americans who viewed him as a friend and advocate of African American performers and valued his readiness to put black actors on stage.

Blackface has long since ceased to be considered acceptable as a performance style, and we need not wonder that "The Jazz Singer" itself has been disparaged as profoundly racist. As a result of this criticism, the film's former popularity with African Americans has been ignored and Jolson's earlier theatrical performance that sometimes undermined and criss-crossed "the color-line," to paraphrase W. E. B. Du Bois, has been forgotten.

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The last thing I expected to find in Poland was a hot Jewish scene. I had to rub my eyes to believe what I was seeing. Travelers of all religions, ages, cultural backgrounds, and nationalities flocked to Jewish-related sites eager to explore a world that was all but eliminated when Nazi Germany murdered 3,000,000 Jews, ... [Read More »](#)

#### The Jewish Millennial Project

There is plenty of conversation around the term "Jewish millennials" and what they want out of their jobs, their lifestyles, their philanthropy, their spirituality. A big focus of "the establishment" (older generations that hold positions of power in Jewish organizations) is how will this next generation of Jewish people embrace and engage with their Judaism,... [Read More »](#)

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They've tried strongly-worded statements. They've tried private meetings with the prime minister. They've tried negotiations, protest and prayer. But for the past five years, despite broad internal consensus and consistent pressure, the American Jewish establishment has been unable to persuade Israel's government to create an equitable space for non-Orthodox prayer at the Western Wall. The... [Read More »](#)

#### Lawmakers Urge Trump to Appoint White House Jewish Liaison

A bipartisan group of lawmakers is calling on President Donald Trump to appoint a White House liaison to the Jewish community. Reps. Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., Lee Zeldin, R-N.Y., Stephanie Murphy, D-Fla., and Doug Lamborn, R-Colo., are asking members of Congress to sign a letter to the president. Rosen and Zeldin are Jewish. "While it is still... [Read More »](#)

#### Issa Challenger Gains Support from San Diego City Council Members

Newly elected City Council member Barbara Bry has thrown her hat in the ring for Mike Levin as he gears up for a challenge to unseat incumbent Congressman Darrell Issa in representing California's 49th district in the House of Representatives. Writing in the invitation for a June 29 fundraiser at a Rancho Santa Fe home, Bry... [Read More »](#)

Thanks to the research of Charles Musser, a prominent film historian and documentary filmmaker based at Yale University, we now know about Jolson's significance precisely for the people his performance was thought to demean. The recovery of this important story and its message, which mirrors the message of "The Ancient Law," is cause for cheer not only for aficionados of old film but also, and more importantly, for people concerned with the preservation of their cultural identity vis-a-vis the pressures of assimilation. As Musser suggests, "The Ancient Law" and "The Jazz Singer" are essentially optimistic in that they tell a story about the limits, rather than the toxic potential, of racism and antisemitism. "The films are about the ability to reinvent oneself," Musser says, "and about the ability to move across cultures without necessarily assimilating."

Musser himself is no stranger to the need to retain one's identity while navigating different cultures. As a New Yorker, he is privy to what he terms, tongue-in-cheek, the "WASP-Jewish conspiracy," i.e. the inescapable intersection of Jewish and Anglo-Christian cultural forms in the Big Apple. The immersion in uneasily co-existing cultures is certainly a key theme of "The Ancient Law" and "The Jazz Singer." To a large extent, the concerns that animate Dupont and Crosland are Musser's own.

His family history may be the reason for this ongoing preoccupation. While his ancestors were Anabaptists who left Switzerland for Germany and eventually colonial America, his wife Maria Threese Serana is a descendant of Jewish conversos who escaped the inquisition and resettled in the Philippines, where they were able to rebuild a sub-rosa Jewish community. Musser and Serana recently completed a documentary about their various family stories appropriately titled "Our Family Album." The questions that the documentary engages are the same as those of "The Ancient Law" and "The Jazz Singer."

"Despite the current attempts to whitewash U.S. history," Musser says, "ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity is the predominant feature of the U.S. experience." In this sense, all three films tell the story of human mobility and cultural diversity.

Of course it would be a mistake to ignore the idealistic elements of "The Ancient Law" and "The Jazz Singer." Both films downplay racism and antisemitism; as a result, they are hardly realistic representations of the historical period they depict. They do suggest, however, the tension between integration and the retention of a specific cultural identity. For Musser, this tension is both necessary and productive, especially for minorities. As he explains, it is the kind of tension epitomized by Martin Luther

### **The Singular "Art" of Imperfection**

As I deal in relationships, I'm overwhelmed with a nation of people who have adopted "perfection" as the hallmark of our (Jewish) culture. More, too many Jewish people have been made miserable by this exhausting endeavor, which in turn makes me miserable. This month, I'm here to tell you this has got to stop. "PERFECTION"... [Read More »](#)

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King and Malcolm X, who are both indispensable elements of African American culture, yet diametrically opposed in their aims and means. If African Americans embraced the story of Jackie Rabinowitz, Jews in the Weimar Republic could similarly take heart from the positive story told by Dupont. As depictions of transformative performance, the films have lost none of their critical edge.

On October 24, Charles Musser will give a lecture at UC San Diego that addresses historical and contemporary perspectives on both "The Ancient Law" and "The Jazz Singer." The lecture is part of a year-long series of public events organized by the Holocaust Living History Workshop, an education and outreach program at UC San Diego. The talk includes film clips and is followed by a panel discussion moderated by Frank Mecklenburg and featuring Deborah Hertz, Paul Lerner, and Cynthia Walk.

*To register for this free event visit:*

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