

タイトル	Jacob at the Country Club : Hollywood Images of the WASP
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引用	北海学園大学人文論集, 13: 73-85
発行日	1999-07-31

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Summary

Jewish predominance in Hollywood has resulted in many films with implicit or explicit plots revolving around Gentile-Jewish encounters. Among these, a good many have been comedies. Three comedies which comment on Jewish perceptions of the standard bearer of American Gentile culture — the WASP — are all set in that bastion of WASPdom, the country club. In *Caddyshack*, *Caddyshack II*, and *Happy Gilmore*, the Jew, as quintessential outsider, confronts the closed and snobbish atmosphere of the WASP's last domain.

Keywords: *Hollywood, Jews, comedy*

Introduction and Theory

The central tension in a good story may derive from a small, personal conflict, a conflict between small groups of people, or a conflict between entire civilizations. When it becomes such a battle, it has entered the realm of *kulturkampf*. Throughout history, such grand struggles have been chronicled and celebrated by a long list of bards and moralists, and our times are no different; to find the great struggles which have preoccupied us, we can turn to our novelists, our musicians, even our more colorful politicians. But one of the richest sources

which treat the struggles which occupy our lives can be found in that quintessential product of twentieth-century storytelling: Hollywood movies.

While the great stars of Hollywood have often represented the idealized soul of America — think of John Wayne as frontier hero, WWII leatherneck, Vietnam vet, or Jimmy Stewart in any of his all-American-boy classics — other stars have portrayed characters engaged in a struggle missed by most Americans, though certainly not by many of those who have most often made the movies: American Jews. It is quite possible that the average American is unaware of the *kulturkampf* between Christian, Western culture (even in its modern and secular form) and Jewish culture. But Jews, in a great flood of celluloid cultural artifacts, have attested to the centrality and high seriousness of this struggle, though they have, to be sure, couched it in comic terms much of the time. This paper examines three comic treatments of this struggle, all based in that bastion of *goydom* — the country club.

In *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* author Neal Gabler simplifies the task of demonstrating Jewish dominance in early Hollywood by so clearly documenting it. His opening epigraph sums it up: “Russian — Jewish immigrants came from the *shtetls* and ghettos out to Hollywood. . . . In this magical place that had no relationship to any reality they had ever seen before in their lives, or that anyone else had ever seen, they decided to create their idea of an eastern aristocracy. . . . The American Dream — is a Jewish invention.”¹

Though this invention is now aging, the prime players remain Jews. For example, David McClintick, author of *Indecent Exposure: A True Story of Hollywood and Wall Street*, writes, “Contrary to popular notions about bland financiers, most important executive positions in

the entertainment business today are occupied by high-spirited, entrepreneurial Jews who emigrated to Hollywood from New York and other points in the East and Midwest. . . . And Yiddish remains the second language of Hollywood.”²

With equal candor, William Cash, a journalist, noted the Hollywood presence of Mike Ovitz, Spielberg, Geffen and Katzenberg, Lew Wasserman and Sidney Sheinberg, Barry Diller, Gerald Levin, Herbert Allen et al. and writes: “But in one respect at least this particular combination of talents, or ‘talent combo’ in the local argot, will start out on the right foot. Like the old mogul founders of the early studios — and unlike most other failed build-your-own studio merchants — they are Jewish.”³

Writing in 1985, the journalist Charles Silberman quoted a respected survey which found that “more than three out of five members of the ‘movie elite’ are Jews.” He goes on to note that “Not surprisingly, since television entertainment is in good measure an outgrowth of film production and is still closely connected with it, Jews make up almost as large a proportion of the ‘TV elite.’”⁴

“In television,” Ben Stein writes, “the producers and writers are creative kings. What they say is law, and that law is transmitted on the airwaves into millions of homes (sometimes sixty or seventy million) per night. . . . Who are these powerful producers and writers, and where do they come from? . . . A distinct majority, especially of the writers of situation comedies, is Jewish.”⁵ In an essay which was a precursor to the book, he wrote, “The typical Hollywood writer, from my experience, is of an ethnic background from a large Eastern city — usually Brooklyn. . . . [A]nd a truly great number of the people who write movies and television shows are Jewish.”⁶

From a sociological perspective, the concrete historical situation of

Jews plays a role in Jewish self-identification and Jewish views of the non-Jews around them. Since so many American Jews are either from Eastern Europe or descended from those who are, their impressions of the *goyim* who surrounded them are often negative. During normal times, Jews in the *shtetl* were surrounded by masses of often ignorant peasants on one side and unreliable nobility on the other, while in bad times, they were victims of vicious anti-Semitic pogroms. Needless to say, the horrific events of the Holocaust strongly reinforced these impressions of Gentiles as threatening figures. Psychologically, these memories are still strong and have been projected in the American case by many Jews onto the American Gentile majority, especially those outside large urban centers.⁷

The result, then, of Jewish predominance in Hollywood has been a stream of films and television shows which have become increasingly negative toward mainstream Gentile America. Another part of this negativity, however, has to do with the alienation of many Hollywood Jews from their own ethnic/religious background rather than with conscious or unconscious hostility toward Christians (and other non-Jews).

To Medved, Stein, and others, the Jews of postwar Hollywood represent this strain of "alienated" Jew. Though Hollywood has always maintained a few splendid synagogues, many Hollywood commentators have noted the estrangement of Hollywood Jews from Judaism, if not from the Jewish ethnic community entirely. We are dealing not only with a small group of Jews distinct from a largely non-Jewish society, but a group which is also alienated from its roots. Tracing the effects of this double alienation becomes a daunting task, but with effort we can see evidence that some sense of Jewish identity vis-a-vis the non-Jew is still alive.

Medved, in *Hollywood vs. America*, makes a compelling case for the estrangement of Hollywood people from mainstream American society and their subsequent hostility toward “the traditional.” While noting Hollywood’s cumulative attacks in recent years on the family, patriotism, and traditional sexual mores, Medved’s clearest message is that much of what has emanated from Hollywood is now shockingly anti-religious, in particular with respect to Christianity. While Medved does not state it explicitly, we are witnessing the effects of cultural hegemony exercised by a distinct group of alienated Hollywood writers, producers, etc. who are predominately Jewish.

Before continuing with Hollywood, a brief theoretical treatment of hegemony is in order. Antonio Gramsci, the great theoretician of hegemony, made an important distinction between “rule” and “hegemony”:

“Rule” is expressed in directly political forms and in times of crisis by direct or effective coercion. But the more normal situation is a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces, and “hegemony” . . . is either this or the active social and cultural forces which are its necessary elements. . . . It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. . . . It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a “culture,” but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.⁸

It is important to note that while the concept of hegemony stresses

the “wholeness” of the situation, “it is never either total or exclusive. . . . The specific functions of ‘the hegemonic,’ ‘the dominant,’ have always to be stressed, but not in ways which suggest any *a priori* totality.”⁹ As Michel Foucault has shown, this power relationship creates a “regime of truth,” where the dominant group controls information and defines the parameters of debate, causing the public to accept this view of truth as mere common sense. This amounts to “ideological hegemony,” which is expressed by “experts in legitimation.”

Gentile Americans have tended not to notice a Jewish role in such (partial?) cultural hegemony, nor have they examined its implications. An exception might be John Murray Cuddihy, who, in *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*, brilliantly addresses this Jewish-Gentile clash, writing that “The cultural collision, the *Kulturkampf*, between *Yiddishkeit* and the behavioural and expressive norms we call the Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette came to constitute the modern form of the ancient *Judenfrage*: the ‘Jewish question.’”¹⁰ Lest we think that this struggle is one of the past, Cuddihy informs us that the conflict continues “unabated into our own time because Jewish Emancipation continues into our own time.”¹¹

As a subordinate people in Europe, many Jews felt alienated from the dominant culture. For example, a century ago Max Nordau noted that in 1897 the emancipated Jew was “allowed to vote for members of Parliament, but he saw himself excluded, with varying degrees of politeness, from the clubs and gatherings of his Christian fellow countrymen.”¹²

The Country Club Comedies

Three comedies which feature the theme that the Jew is “excluded...from the clubs and gatherings of his Christian fellow countrymen” are set in fancy country clubs. All three films have the same plot: an outsider tries to gain admission to the refined setting of a Gentile country club but is rebuffed by a leading Gentile member of the club. Undeterred, the protagonist endures, warts and all, and, after unmasking the incivility and hypocrisy of the WASP members, triumphs. This is *Yiddishkeit* vs. Cuddihy’s “Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette.” With good reason, golf has long represented the pinnacle of the Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette: the muted competition, the hushed tone, the smooth, generous gestures. But behind it we still see the aggression, the greed, the social climbing, and other “normal” human traits which, in contrast to the mask of civility presented by the golfing culture, offer a plump target for lampoon.

As with any good lampoon, parody, or satire, these three comedies represent a deeper and more urgent message, here the hostility felt by some Jews toward a modern culture by which they feel threatened. Jews, then, fight back by exposing the hypocrisies of this supposedly civilized “Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette.”

In the 1980 *Caddyshack* (director: Harold Ramis), the gifted Jewish comedian Rodney Dangerfield plays the outsider whose manners flagrantly violate the norms of the club, thus providing the *Animal House*-like source of the humor. The action starts with Dangerfield’s ostentatious arrival at Bushwood Country Club, a private, members only club. Ted Knight (better known to many Americans as Ted Baxter, the arrogant buffoon from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) plays Judge Smalis, an arrogant buffoon who is the leading member of

Bushwood Country Club (and the caricature elite Gentile in this comedy). Having just arrived in his luxurious brown Rolls Royce, Smalis is upstaged by Dangerfield, who arrives in a horn-tooting bright red Rolls convertible. With Dangerfield is camera-toting "Wang," Dangerfield's Asian acquaintance. Wang's presence provides the setting for this line: "I think this place is restricted, Wang, so don't tell 'em you're Jewish," which, of course, serves to introduce Dangerfield's own concern with Bushwood. Playing the role of an ill-mannered *nouveau riche*, Dangerfield enters the club's pro shop and proceeds to buy up absurdly large quantities of tacky golf supplies.

Later, at the fancy Fourth of July gala held in the ornate dining hall of Bushwood, the scene begins with a pan of tuxedo-clad and long-gowned WASP dancers and diners, most of whom sport dignified white hair. In the background a big band plays soothing forties music, and at the table Judge Smalis leads a suitably civil discourse on golfing attire. At a neighboring table, however, "uncivil" Dangerfield fires off rapid one-liners and has his group doubled up with laughter, often because of his raucous humor. For example, after insulting the chef's cooking (and handing an unnecessary tip to the waitress), Dangerfield leans forward and loudly relieves himself of a build-up of intestinal gas. "Oh, did somebody step on a duck?" he asks. Needless to say, the genteel members of the club are scandalized. Soon afterward, on the dance floor, he cuts into a dance between Judge Smalis and his wife and insults her with a comment more suitable for a brothel than a country club.

As another symbol of WASP gentility, the film moves to the water, where Judge Smalis is about to have his new yacht — appropriately named "The Flying WASP" — christened by his wife. In yet another upstaging, Dangerfield enters the scene with an enormous cruiser and

proceeds to wreak havoc in the harbor. As a final insult, he drops his anchor through Judge Smalis's pathetically small boat, joking "Hey, you scratched my anchor!"

The finale comes when Dangerfield and Judge Smalis enter into a golf match, where the judge is shown to cheat, both by moving his ball illegally and by bribing his caddy. Overall, it is of note that three of the most bumbling and hypocritical Gentile characters are represented by the elites of gentile society: a judge, a doctor, and a bishop.

In *Caddyshack II* (1988, directed by Allan Arkush), the sequel to *Caddyshack*, acerbic Jewish comedian Jackie Mason plays, well, himself and delivers line after line of cutting insult/humor to his Gentile counterparts. In *Caddyshack II* the issue of the "masking" of Jewish identity is introduced. In the opening scene, a foursome of young, attractive golfers discuss ethnic issues, with the ridiculous WASPy "Miffy" relaying a "scandal" about one of her friends who was humiliated to find out that her boyfriend was part Italian. This gossip leads to the questioning of one of the foursome, the dark-haired Kate (who provides a sensitive performance throughout). When asked about her ethnicity, she ambiguously replies, "We're New Yorkers." Her family name is also ambiguous — Hartounian. Is that Armenian?

From the beginning of the film a clear binary is established: good Jews/bad WASPs. This is applied even to golfing talents. In the film's opening scene, Miffy has no coordination and puts her shot in the water, while Kate deftly lofts the ball to within inches of the hole.

Her father's introduction carries on this dichotomy of good Jew/bad WASP. Just after a WASPy young man heartlessly informs two caddies that they will be fired, Kate's father (Jackie Mason) is shown playing poker with his decidedly multicultural construction crew. Holding three aces, Mason nevertheless folds because he knows the

Hispanic worker with whom he is playing needs the money for his family. This soft-heartedness is certainly not extended to Mason's perceived WASP foes. When two WASP historic preservationists try to stop Mason's construction project (he is building affordable housing for low-income families), Mason sends a bulldozer after them.

The ambiguity regarding Mason's and his daughter's ethnicity continues when Mason jokes that his father was Armenian and his mother "half Jewish, half English, and half Spanish." While Rodney Dangerfield's Jewish outsider character in *Caddyshack* was kinder with his jokes, Mason remains very cutting. For instance, after one look at the inside of the clubhouse, Mason reveals how he thinks of WASPS: "Take a look at this place. This is what the world would have looked like if the Germans had won." WASPs. Germans. They are all the same *goyim*. Here his ethnic identity is showing.

Mason's poor manners in the refined (but hypocritical) setting of the WASP world mirror those of Dangerfield. Just as Dangerfield loudly passed gas in the golf dining hall (recalling Desser and Friedman's chapter on Mel Brooks, "Mel Brooks: Farts Will Be Heard"), Mason has this scene: In a parallel to the WASP game of golf comes the pastime of horsemanship, with Mason riding a slow and heavy beast. When a loud flatus is heard coming from Mason's horse, the arch-WASP says, "Your horse has quite a gas problem," to which Mason blithely replies, "It's not the horse."

The *denouement* to *Caddyshack II* is very much the same as its predecessor. Conflicts are to be settled by a "gentlemanly" round of golf, and once again the WASP cheats. Well, he does not exactly cheat; he hires an assassin to kill Mason, his rival. Naturally, his plan backfires, and Mason wins. In addition, his daughter Kate rejects the opportunity to assimilate into WASP society by refusing to change her

name from Hartounian to Hart. She embraces not only her father, but her father's heritage as well.

The last comedy, which smoothly incorporates the theme of Gentile snobbishness toward Jews, as well as the Jewish male-*shiksa* motif, is the recent Adam Sandler film *Happy Gilmore* (1996, directed by Dennis Dugan). Here Sandler plays the crude outsider, the "Jew" wearing the mask of a hockey player in a country club setting. The movie establishes the pathology of Gentiles by introducing a thoroughly corrupt, though charming, defending golf champion. In contrast, Adam Sandler plays the unschooled neophyte who can, nonetheless, drive the ball amazing distances. He cannot, however, master the supremely cultivated art of putting. On the green, all of Sandler's "uncivilized" (i.e., non-Protestant Etiquette) qualities come out. Until he can at least imitate the controlled Protestant norm, he cannot overtake the defending (Gentile) champion.

In his quest for victory and self-control, Sandler meets and falls in love with a sympathetic blonde reporter, one who, tellingly, is willing to "teach" him the rules of self-control. Here, the message seems to be that by pairing off with the *shiksa*, Sandler will be able to extract himself from the depths of his "uncivilized" position (which, nevertheless, still has its innocent merits) and rise up to "victory" in the well-mannered setting of the country club.

This struggle is not exclusively Jews against Gentiles. In one instance, according to Cuddihy, it is Jews against themselves: the lure of the Gentile women is always threatening to tear the Jewish male away from his own tribe. "In Freud," Cuddihy writes, "the deepest taboo of Judaism, the taboo against intermarriage, the forbidden lust of the Jew for the Gentile *shiksa*, for the *shiksa* as 'the promise of fulfillment,' is rationalized, psychologized, and reinterpreted as the desire for

the *mother*, which desire” he continues, “is held taboo by everyone, of course, not just by Jews. The particularist, ritual taboo of the *Jewish* subculture — intermarriage, *connubium* — is reconceptualized (and psychologized) as the universalist, ‘scientific,’ anthropological taboo on incest . . .”¹³

Naturally, as the film unfolds, the *goyishe* champion is shown to be an unprincipled cheat. He stumbles and is exposed, while Sandler perseveres — despite his constant relapses into “incivility”— and wins. And he wins not only the golf tournament, but the hand of the Gentile woman as well. Sandler may wear the jacket of the golf champion, but his sartorial transformation represents only a partial transformation into a “Gentile” proper. He has emerged with one foot in the modern, “civilized” world while leaving one foot back with his “coarse” roots. It is this ambivalence that accurately portrays the real-life ambivalence which many Jews have had about leaving their ancient Jewish culture and setting foot into the tempting modern one.

Conclusion

Hollywood has no shortage of comedies which deal with the sensitive topic of the Jewish encounter with Gentiles (and the Gentile encounter with Jews!). Humor provides one of the safest vehicles with which to explore the potentially explosive issues involved while, at the same time, relieving some of the pressure. With a modicum of attention, these themes can be seen and appreciated by audiences, both Jewish and Gentile.

ENDNOTES

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3. William Cash, "Kings of the Deal," *The Spectator*, 10/29/94, p.14.
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6. Benjamin Stein, "Whatever happened to small-town America?" *The Public Interest*, Summer 1976, p.22.
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11. *Ordeal*, p.68.
12. Max Nordau, "Speech to the First Zionist Congress (1898)," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. and trans. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Meridian Books; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), p.239.
13. *Ordeal*, pp.62-63.