

RESEÑAS DE PELÍCULAS/FILM REVIEWS

To Be(come) Jewish and Argentine: Cinematic Views of a Changing Nation

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The usual *caveat*: this paper represents but a small portion of a larger study. In the larger study, I approach the cinematic representation of Latin American Jews from three perspectives: first, as significations of the complexities of national identity formation; second, as productions which reflect the political economy of film-making in a variety of distinct industrial structures; and third, as discrete artifacts of the Jewish Diasporic experience in the twentieth century. Today, I will focus on the last element, looking at one Argentine film as a telling cultural expression of the Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and connecting the film narrative to a tradition of Argentine Jewish storytelling that began in the first decade of this century.

The 1996 Argentine film *Sol de Otoño* (Autumn Sun), written and directed by Eduardo Mignogna, fits into a small group of Latin American films featuring Jewish characters and problematizing the identity of the Jew in Latin America. What sets this film apart, however, is that the film itself dissects Jewish identity, breaking it down into discrete elements. *Sol de Otoño* does not analyze the identities "Jewish" and "Argentine." It does, however, demonstrate the complexity of balancing both. Further, though its heroine seeks a Jewish boyfriend, her search is an effort to please her brother and to bring to life her imagined beau, Jack Kleinman. In her own context and surroundings, she displays a certain ambiguity toward both her "Jewishness" and her "Argentinidad." Ultimately, the presentation and representation of Jewishness in *Sol de Otoño* confirm the flux of identity, particularly the identity of a Diasporic culture within a metropolis populated by immigrants and wanderers.

Sol de Otoño is a sweet, romantic tale of an unlikely late-in-life love. It is a relatively conventional romance meant to appeal to a broad audience. But, it is also a tale of people who might never have met under other circumstances coming together and, unwittingly, bringing out the best in each other. Clara Goldstein, a middle-aged Jewish accountant, places an ad in the personals seeking to "meet a gentleman of average stature, between 55 and 60, absolutely free, with stable economic means, well-educated, for serious friendship." The ad announces her desire that this man be Jewish through the placement of a large Star of David in the box. One suitor, who calls himself Saul Levine, calls and quickly (though inadvertently) reveals that he is not Jewish. Clara, however, needs a beau, and fast, to show off to her brother when he comes to visit from Boston. She asks Saul, whose real name is Raúl Ferrara, to play the role of Jack Kleinman, the quiet, principled Jewish man she has described in her letters. Raúl agrees and they embark on a series of daily lessons on being Jewish, or more precisely, manifesting or performing Jewishness with the goal of "passing." In the end, Clara's brother cancels his visit. Clara, however, has fallen in love with Raúl, Jewish or not.

With the largest Jewish population in Latin America, Argentina has been home to a rich, varied Jewish cultural life since the turn of the century. One of the key subjects tackled in Argentine Jewish theater and literature is acculturation, that faced by immigrants upon their arrival and also felt by later generations as Argentina's relationship with her Jewish citizens ebbed and flowed in the 1930s and '40s. As David William Foster notes, "Argentine Jewish artists became part of the mainstream in an attempt to represent Jewish culture with eloquence in the face of indifference or aggressive anti-Semitism in society at large."¹

Mignogna places his tale of identity within this "society at large" through the device of an impartial, non-specific voice-over. As the film opens, with sweeping shots of sunrise over Buenos Aires, a radio deejay addresses his audience: "We haven't chosen each other, but here we are together, so let's try to get the best out of each other. In the end, there are no winners, no losers, just survivors." Almost Shakespearean in its announcement of the film's theme, the device draws our attention to the fact that Buenos Aires, like many of the metropolises where Jews have settled in the 20th century, is a city of immigrants, a place where cultures meet and mingle. The camera brings our heroine into view as the city awakes, she returns to her house with groceries and has her bag snatched. Stunned, she enters her apartment with the help of the concierge.

The apartment tells us two crucial facts about Clara, she is Jewish and she has a pet turtle. With this knowledge, we can make quick (and later proven) assumptions about her solitary life and the importance of her Jewishness.

Clara lives in the building, but does not interact with any of her neighbors. Her contact with the concierge is limited. And yet the camera lingers, more than once, on the closed doors of Clara's neighbors, while the sounds of their crying, laughing, and lovemaking permeate the corridor. A middle-class *Porteña*, Clara exerts her class privilege by secluding herself from her neighbors and the city.² As we will see, this contrasts sharply with Raúl's more communal life.

Clara's apartment is decorated with a smattering of Jewish objects, most having some relation to a religious ritual. We do not, however, see Clara participate in any Jewish communal activities –religious, cultural or otherwise. Jewishness is something she "feels," rather than something she acts on. Clara's identity is complicated by her relationship to the city around her and to the United States, where her absent brother lives. She remains apart from the city, surrounded by it, but not of it. We do not learn Clara's history, so we do not know if she is an immigrant or a child of immigrants. Yet, we can deduce from her world that she struggles, at some level, with the same split loyalty and attention that Saul Sosnowski notes characterize much of Jewish-Argentine literature. Sosnowski writes, "there appear to be two worlds that dispute the attention and, eventually, the participation of the person involved. There are, in fact, two languages with their respective cultural code that signal different messages to those who have to opt for one or strive to integrate some elements of each into a more global concept of self-identification and of one's role in society."³

In *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930*, Víctor Mirelman discusses the ways Jews manifest their identities in distinct manners –some emphasize the religious, some the cultural and still others the ethnic element of their Jewishness. But, Mirelman writes, there is "another crucial factor in the identity of Jews, namely, the fact that they are considered as such by their non-Jewish neighbors and society."⁴ León Rozitchner, in his 1967 essay "*Ser judío*" (To be a Jew), asserted that "when in Argentina he is pointed out as a Jew, this body into which he was born, with its surrounding geographical and cultural context, has been taken away from him...To be called 'Jew' clearly means 'non-Argentine' and it is the others who have the power to cancel an historical attachment to the native land."⁵

Clara seems overly conscious of the demarcation made by others about her identity. And while she does not struggle openly with being considered an Other in her own land (as do the heroines of *Novia que te vea*, a 1996 Mexican film which deals with similar identification issues), she wants to be sure that her "boyfriend" bears the scrutiny and be recognized by both Jews and non-Jews as one of *la colectividad*, as she calls the Jewish community. Raúl, at first, does not pass her cultural litmus test –when they meet, "Saul" reveals

that he is not Jewish by misusing one Yiddish term and mis-pronouncing another. Clara confronts him, admonishing that "no Jew" would mispronounce "varenikes," a Yiddish term for an Eastern European dish. The test of "Jewishness," thus, is determined to be one of culture and performance, as opposed to religious belief and practice.

Moreover, such a broad generalization, "no Jew," leaves no space for the non-Eastern European Jew or the Jew of Eastern European descent who has not learned some Yiddish. In other words, Jack Kleinman, Clara's fictional boyfriend, is not just a Jew, but an Argentine-born Ashkenazi Jew. In training/rehearsing, Clara places the greatest emphasis on language and food, cultural elements of her Jewishness. The linguistic and culinary practices she shares mark her as not just Jewish, but, again, specifically Ashkenazi, of a certain generation. Clara's Jewish identity, in fact, manifests three of the largest tensions that have existed within the greater Argentine Jewish community since the 1890s: first, the separatism between the Ashkenazi and Sephardim. Second, the concern that religious Jews have for what they see as apathy about traditional practices and the growing secularism of the Argentine Jew. And, finally, the linguistic challenge of Yiddish, which in this century's Jewish Diaspora has conflicted with languages of origin, languages of adopted countries, and the Russian spoken by Eastern European intellectuals.⁶

In role-playing an Argentine-born Jew, Raúl learns at first-hand some of the challenges an Argentine Jew might face in negotiating two strong identities. The first challenge, language, is not merely that of acquiring the tongue of the "Old World." It encompasses comprehending the myriad nostalgic and cultural nuances of the language. As Iain Chambers notes, "Language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted."⁷ Raúl, the pragmatic, asks Clara how he can possibly learn a new language in five weeks. She responds that he need only learn a few words, but that he must *feel* them. Yiddish enables the cultural construction of Jewishness not through linguistic challenges, but because it symbolizes the strongest affective link to the "Old World." For the Argentine Ashkenazi Jew, whose history in their family's adopted country rarely goes back more than one hundred years, Yiddish has been a strong part of community-building and cultural expression, even though in their new world it was imperative to learn Spanish quickly in order to function and prosper. Cultural expression in Yiddish, through the Yiddish theatre, press, and Zionist organizations, confirmed that although immigrant Ashkenazi Jews assimilated and acculturated relatively quickly, they remained separate, from Argentina and from other Jewish communities.

Mignogna is not the only Argentine filmmaker to understand the cultural importance (imperative?) of Yiddish: in his 1986 film *Pobre Mariposa*, Raúl de la Torre uses Yiddish and German to demarcate the Jewish family from Clara. Clara, the child of a Jewish man and a Catholic woman, was raised by her mother's family after her mother died. When she greets her grandmother at her father's funeral, she does not understand the language or the rituals of her *abuela's* grief. Having been separated from the Jewish part of her heritage, Clara does not easily recognize (and is not easily recognized by) this part of herself. As she comes to terms with the death of her estranged father, she sees around her a Buenos Aires of loyalties divided between the Allied and Axis sides of World War II. Surrounded by anti-Semitism, and spurred by her own need to reconcile with her father's memory, Clara searches for some aspects of her Jewishness.

Returning to *Sol de Otoño*, many of the Yiddish words Clara teaches Raúl are related to food, bringing us to Raúl's next challenge, the culinary. She admonishes, "Eating a particular food should remind you of something, for instance having tea with your grandparents." During this lesson, she introduces him to a *beigele*, a type of sweet pastry. This pastry is, to Clara, not just a *pastelito* or little cake, it is "la forma de ser un judío" –not a form of being Jewish, but *the* form of being Jewish. She insists that to pull off their farce, Raúl must know *how* to eat the *beigele*.

Food also tells us of Clara's fluctuating ties to her Jewishness and bring us to the film's crisis: when she learns that he is fighting some kind of cancer, she realizes the depths of her feelings and goes to him. Finally, Clara gives in to her feelings and the couple makes love. When she awakes the next morning, Raúl has prepared breakfast—bagels, lox, cream cheese, herring in sour cream, and other food typical of the Ashkenazi cuisine. Seeing this food, Clara tells him that he should not eat it. Since she has not revealed that she knows he is ill, she cannot tell him directly that the food is unhealthy for him. So she stops and says, "And besides, you're not Jewish." Raúl understands from this that Clara is placing a fundamental and unsurpassable roadblock in the path of continuing their relationship. He does not hear her declaration of love. Finally, after a heartbreaking miscommunication, the couple ends up together. Crossing significant cultural and ethnic boundaries to be together, Clara and Raúl represent what Werner Sollors has termed a "melting pot love,"⁸ though in this case one without parental or communal dissent.

As I mentioned earlier, the communal nature of Raúl's home contrasts sharply with Clara's isolation from her neighbors. His apartment opens into an airy courtyard whose stairs lead to Palomino's apartment. Raúl's door seems perpetually open and both Palomino and his littlest grandson, Wilson, go in and out of Raúl's home/workshop as if it were their own. Raúl explains

to Clara that his connection to Palomino goes beyond friendship and affection –they are both Uruguayan immigrants of Italian heritage. Like Clara, their self-identification is largely cultural. Unlike Clara, however, this identification connects them with each other and an entire community.

The implicit comparison between Clara's isolation and Raúl's connection to community is underscored when it is revealed that Clara's mugger was Palomino's elder grandson, Nelson. The mugger has been intercut several times, seemingly without narrative motivation, until he serves to bring Clara to Palomino's bedside. Eventually, these interludes reveal that the mugger is Palomino's grandson. When Nelson is shot, Palomino has a heart attack and Clara goes to the hospital to be with Raúl. Oblivious to the connection, Clara remains isolated, protected by her economic class and education, and yet connected by circumstance and friendship. In reaching out to Raúl at Palomino's bedside, Clara takes the first step toward bridging their very different worlds.

Clara advertises her Jewishness, literally, and her need to find a like mate. But, this need is not necessarily a desire –we see her celebrate the Sabbath only once, as a "rehearsal" for Raúl. And though he fails her Jewishness litmus test with the "varenikes" mix-up, this rules him out mostly in terms of suitability to pass her brother's eye. What rules Raúl out for Clara is the fact that he does not respond with any knowledge or passion to her affection for the Hollywood actor Humphrey Bogart. Many of Clara's daily habits, though somewhat universal, link her to North America –she watches old Hollywood films on television; she obsesses a bit about her weight and age; her leisure time is spent on an exercise bike; and even her daydreams take the form of legendary Hollywood films (my favorite is her imagining an *An Affair to Remember* type scene wherein she gets hit by a truck on her way back to Raúl). None of these North American-isms in and of itself signify much about Clara. Together, though, they do remind the viewer, frequently, of Clara's "northern gaze," partly induced, no doubt, by the ubiquity of U.S. cultural exports and partly induced by her brother's choices.

In a recent anthology, British art historians Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb have collected essays which expound on "the Jew in the text," exploring, according to the book's title, issues of modernity and the construction of identity.⁹ While Nochlin and Garb's study is limited to European visual arts, many of the editors' observations ring true for this film and for other Argentine and Latin American films which portray Jews: Garb notes, "Jewishness, unlike Judaism, could not be discarded." She continues, for those who left Europe and went to America, "Tensions between old and new, tradition and modernity, identification and assimilation, become the leitmotifs of Jewish American cultural expression." Though Garb refers

specifically to the U.S. writers Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, her commentary resonates for Latin American Jewish literature and, more recently, its cinema. Garb argues, as do I in my larger project, that first, "the characterization of the Jew provides a vehicle for a critique of contemporary society," and second, "the problematic natures of identity and narration itself are juxtaposed so that neither can be comfortably secured or fixed." Here, I have addressed only the second part of Garb's argument, the difficulty of securing identity within a particular narrative. Clara's negotiation of her own identity and her attempt to create Raúl's performance of Jewishness do not happen in complete isolation –they take place in a city to which both characters relate differently; within the context of Clara's middle-class, educated lifestyle, and in relation to Clara's northern gaze. The text is imbued also with the meaning of its production and reception context (subjects which I do not have the time to elaborate on). The identity of Jew in this text slips and slides as she tries to teach Jewishness as performance, or to create the text in the Jew.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *Argentine Jewish Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Nora Glickman and Gloria F. Waldman (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996).
2. For a strong analysis of the negotiation of the public/private divide in texts about the city and the role of this divide in creating a middle-class social imaginary distinct from others, see Podalsky, Laura, "High-rise Apartments, Arcades, Cars and *Hoteles de Cita*: Urban Discourse and the Reconstruction of the Public/Private Divide in 1960s Buenos Aires," in Ann Marie Stock, *Framing Latin American Cinema: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
3. Sosnowski, Saul, "Contemporary Jewish-Argentine Writers," *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 6, Number 12, 1978: 4.
4. Mirelman, Víctor A., *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930, In Search of an Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 46.
5. Rozitchner, León, cited in Sosnowski, Saul: 6.
6. Mirelman, Chapter 7, "Jewish Cultural Expressions in an Acculturating Community."
7. Chambers, Iain, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 22.
8. Werner Sollors defines melting pot love as "a marital union or a love relationship across boundaries that are considered significant and often in defiance of parental desires and old descent antagonism." Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 72. We see this boundary-crossing, culture-building love in much of Latin American literature and films, particular in texts which question the nation and/or emerge from a moment of unrest in which national identity is being questioned, reformulated, and rethought.
9. Nochlin, Linda and Tamar Garb, eds., *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).