

Image of the Shtetl
Introductory Lecture

I. IMAGE VS. REALITY, MEMORY VS. HISTORY

- A. As key concept
 - essential term of Jewish self-understanding
 - cf. Galut, Hurban, Exodus, Messiah, Eretz Israel
- B. As lieu de mémoire
 - nexus of time/place
 - preserved in many media: print, visual, oral
- C. As modern construct
 - possible to trace its actual development

II. THREE STAGES

A. **Formative, 1840-1940**

JEWs / JEWs

Yiddish-Hebrew fiction
2ndarily in German, Russian
Jewish community/collective presence in exile, in extremis
the major writers in both languages
sometimes highly subversive

B. **Traumatic/Catastrophic Stage, 1940-1970**

JEWs / GENTILES

explosion of yizker-bikher
return to פ"ק, martyrological site
its destruction = its significance
memorialization @ spatial, temporal remove
USA, Israel, France, Argentina
official memory of the landsmanshaft

C. **Metahistorical, 1970-present**

JEWs / GOD

shtetl as Old Country as Ashkenaz as Yiddishland
from Tevye to Kafka
mainly on stage and film
cf. Simon Magus (UK, 1999); Solomon & Gaenor (Wales, 1999)
USA, Europe
most emphatically NOT in Israel

Alen Hoffman's novel / NBC documentary

2000

2000

2000

2000

Lit 5109 INTRODUCTION

I. The Shtetl vs. Small Town America

A. Similarities

1. Product of 19th-cent. imagination
2. an object of interest only when things began to change
 - a. pace of urbanization
 - b. civil war --- regionalism
 - c. impact of mass immigration
3. Romantic image
 - a. Paradise Lost: the great frontier
 - b. when life was simple and morality ruled
 - c. longing for a Gemeinschaft
 - d. strong ethnographic interest
4. Object of scorn
 - a. place of total conformity
 - b. home of intolerance, violence, calcified traditions
 - c. same void as elsewhere
5. Same writer could vacillate between the two
 - a. Mark Twain: Tom Sawyer (1876) vs. Huckleberry Finn (1885)
 - b. Sholem Aleichem: Mazepevke (1889) vs. Kasrilevke (1901-16)
6. small town changes w/changing literary norms
 - a. rise of naturalism in late 19th cent.
 - b. use of spoken idiom, explicit mention of sex (Peyton Place)
 - c. from marxism to existentialism & everything in between

B. Differences

1. **historical** profile
 - a. small town cannot be defined
 - b. the shtetl most assuredly can: its fortunes rise/fall with political map of E.E.
2. **socioeconomic** profile
 - a. USA: from rural to factory town to suburbia
 - b. shtetl (Jews) inseparable from its market
3. **ethnic** profile
 - a. USA varied ethnic pattern
 - b. shtetl: same multi-ethnic complexity
4. **mythic** profile
 - a. America: HORIZONTAL, the frontier, open spaces = good

HOW TO FILM THE SHTETL

1. Ayzik-Meyer Dik - Habehalah: Charlie Chaplin (USA)
(cf. The Gold Rush)
2. I. L. Peretz - Travel Pictures: Satyajit Ray (India)
(cf. The World of Apu)
3. Sholem Aleichem - Kasrilevke: Milos Forman (Czech)
(cf. Loves of a Blond, The Firemen's Ball) *Philip de Broca*
4. Abramovitsh - Of Bygone Days: Luis Bunuel (Spain)
(cf. Viridiana)
5. Sholem Asch - The Shtetl: Steven Spielberg (USA)
(cf. The Color Purple)
6. I.M. Weissenberg - A Shtetl: Sergei Eisenstein (USSR)
(cf. The Battleship Potemkin, Strike)
7. David Bergelson - At the Depot: Ingmar Bergman (Sweden)
(cf. Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light)
8. M. J. Berdichewsky - Miriam: Federico Fellini (Italy)
(cf. La Dolce Vita)
9. Hayyim Hazaz - Revolutionary Chapters: Fritz Lang (Germany)
(cf. Metropolis, Nibelungen) *Stanley Kubrick*
10. S. J. Agnon - A Simple Story: Jean Renoir (France)
(cf. The Rules of the Game) *Louis Malle*
11. Schultz - The Street of the Crocodiles: Wojciech Has (Poland)
(cf. The Sandglass, 1973) ; winner, Special Jury Award Cannes Festival

Deconstructing the Shtetl

Shul / די שול

Besmedresh / דער בית-מדרש

Shtibl / דאָס שטיבל

Bathhouse / די באָד

Mikveh / די מקווה

Heder / דער חדר(ים)

Tavern / אכסניה, איינפאָרהויז

Marketplace / דער מאַרק

Well / דער ברונעם

Cemetery / דער בית-עולם

Slaughter House / דאס שעכטהויז

Pharmacy / דער אָפטייק

Manor House / דער פריצישער הויף

Jail / די תפיסה

Town Hall / די גמינה

State school / די שקאָלע

Post Office / די פּאָסט

Exhibit B, C <SHOW & TELL (very brief!)>

Shtetl Life Catalog (1993)

- Every Jewish artist who ever drew traditional (=East European) Jewish life—anywhere
- Meah Shearim; Lower East Side

The Paper Shtetl (Schocken, 1984)

Cut-out book inspired by another Schocken classic, *Life Is With People*

<the scrib on back cover>

Unalloyed sacred memory!

No pretense at historicity, geography, actuality

No pushcarts in the shtetl!