

# “You Don’t Have to Be Filmish” The Toronto Jewish Film Festival

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Volume 21, Number 1, 1999

Ethnicités et régionalismes  
Ethnicities and Regionalisms

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087763ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087763ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Koven, M. J. (1999). “You Don’t Have to Be Filmish”: The Toronto Jewish Film Festival. *Ethnologies*, 21(1), 115–132. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087763ar>

Article abstract

The Toronto Jewish Film Festival is a one-week celebration of Judaism and Cinema that occurs in downtown Toronto, at the Bloor Cinema, early every May. The folkloristic literature on festival notes that these kinds of events are ways that communities and groups celebrate themselves, and although film festivals are frequently excluded from consideration of traditional festivity, I shall demonstrate that such an omission is unfortunate, since like traditional festivity, film festivals, in particular ethnic film festivals, explore the same issues of liminality for the celebrating culture.

# “YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE FILMISH” The Toronto Jewish Film Festival<sup>1</sup>

**Mikel J. Koven**

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A friend forced me to come....We like this friend.  
-comment on survey form

The Toronto Jewish Film Festival (hence TJFF) is a one-week celebration of Judaism and cinema in downtown Toronto, at the Bloor Cinema, early every May. The folkloristic literature notes that festivals allow communities and groups to celebrate themselves (Abrahams 1987:178; also Falassi 1987:2). Although film festivals are rarely considered traditional, I shall demonstrate that this ethnic film festival, like traditional events, explores liminality for the celebrating culture, and may thus be so viewed. Some folklorists shy away from popular culture events, like film festivals, seeing commercialization as replacing the expression of community (e.g. Abrahams 1982:171). Beverly Stoltje notes “those events that do have festival in their titles are generally contemporary modern constructions, employing festival characteristics but serving the commercial, ideological, or political purposes of self-interested authorities or entrepreneurs” (1992:261-262). Yet in the TJFF, the interrelationship between cinema and culture, and particularly the issue of liminality, present the fulcrum where cinema and festivity balance. Specifically, through its manipulations of cultural myths, its nostalgia of location, and the tension it develops by including within its purview religious and secular aspects, the TJFF creates a location for cultural dialogue.

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1. Sections of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Ottawa, May 27, 1998. I would also like to thank Pauline Greenhill and the anonymous reader for helping me to develop these ideas.

## The Toronto Jewish Film Festival

As “festival ethnographer” during the 1997 TJFF, I conducted participant observation. I attended festival events, and worked as a voluntary survey coordinator, which I co-authored so that it could both help the Festival organizers maintain and improve their services, and inform my research. I also conducted interviews. For one, I sat down during one of the matinees with Helen Zukerman, the co-founder and executive director of the TJFF, at a cafe across the street from the festival venue. I began by asking her to outline the Festival’s history:

’93 was the first year. 1993. It was seed funded by the charitable foundation that I run. Family charitable foundation. And Debra Plotkin was the first artistic director. She was moving to Toronto....What happened was...we funded a piece of a film that Francine Zukerman made — no relation to me — called *Half the Kingdom*. *Half the Kingdom* went to play in San Francisco to close one of their festivals [San Francisco Jewish Film Festival]. In 1992, obviously. And I went out just to see what the festival was like and have a look around, and thought this was really great. So why don’t we have a festival? John Katz was there, because he’s a — he teaches film [at York University] and he has a lot of friends there. So, he then told me there was an organization starting up a film festival here. They’d tried twice before, and they were in the process. So I said “Great. Listen, when I come back to Toronto, we’ll get to together and talk about it.” So I came back to Toronto, talked to him, and I got a sense of the politics of what was going on, ’cause it was emanating from the JCC [Jewish Community Centre]. When it emanates from a JCC there are politics involved insofar as selection — you know, I don’t even know who the players were. But all I know is that John and I sat and talked and he told me what was going on, who was what doing what, and who was....And I said, “Look. I don’t have time for this kind of stuff. If you ever get it together, give me a call because we’d really like to be involved in this.” Next thing I hear, nothing’s happening. Nothing’s happening here. I still wanted to do a festival. Francine Zukerman got involved with Debra Plotkin, personally, and Debra was moving to Toronto. So I thought, “Oh, this is interesting.” ’Cause her sister, Janis, is the director of the San Francisco film festival. And her sister and Deborah Kaufman started that film festival which is now fourteen years old. It was the first one. So I — we talked to Debra Plotkin about becoming the director. And she said, “Great.” So she moved here and that’s what happened.<sup>2</sup>

2. This and all future quotations from Zukerman come from the interview I conducted with her, 7 May 1997.

For Zukerman, trying to create cultural events within the Jewish communities of Toronto meant that independent filmmakers, foundations, universities, and other cultural agencies must converge. But more importantly, the personal relationships between individuals working within those organizations create new expressions, and opportunities for cultural growth. Helen Zukerman had the financial means to get involved. When Francine Zukerman brought Debra Plotkin to Toronto, Helen Zukerman made further contact with Janis Plotkin. This enabled Helen to develop her own team:

So we had — we rented this theatre, and Debra and I go out to have a couple of real stiff drinks because we had rented a 950 seat venue, and don't know what the hell we're doing. Because we wanted this area of town. We wanted — and she said, rightfully so, that you put in as much effort in a 400 seat venue or a 200 seat venue than you do in a 600 seat venue. And there are not very many theatres that are freestanding — like this is — and in this area, which we really like. So we were really limited where we could go, down here. So anyway we took it and we went out and had a few drinks and we said, "You know what? We'll close the balconies." So, we'll have 500 people down there.

At this point, Zukerman broke from her chronological narration to note the contexts of other Toronto film festivals. Earlier in 1993, the Art Gallery of Ontario had programmed a series of Brandeis University's collection of Yiddish language films, which proved quite successful. But no annual festival of Jewish film had materialized. The success of the AGO series could be dismissed as a novelty; whether or not people would come to an annual event was another question.

I remember when the international festival started [the Toronto International Film Festival], like I can't even remember how many years ago, I was walking on Bloor and Yonge one day and they were pulling people into the theatres, because nobody was going to the movies. Helga Stephenson [executive director of the Toronto International Film Festival], she said "You know, the first few years of the festival, we were pulling people in off of the streets. We were giving away tickets." I remember some guy coming over to me and saying "Here's a ticket. There's a movie over there." I said, "Get outta here. I've got other things to do. I'm busy."

Worried that the TJFF would suffer similar growing pains to the Toronto International Film Festival (now the largest in North America), Zukerman and Plotkin went to a nearby bar to wait.

So anyway, Debra and I go out and we're hysterical. We're drinking and we're hysterical. 'Cause we don't know what we're going to do. And we have the theatre. And we started working and we worked like dogs. I have to tell you, we had three months to put this together. But the one thing that I wanted to do was I wanted to fund it as much as I could, because I wanted — I felt, that if you do a half-assed job the first time, you can't recoup the next time. We either come out big or you don't come....And I must say we worked so hard and it came out and there were a couple of things lucky that happened and people came and it became clear to us — like we would pull up here like two hours before show time and there would be a line-up. And we'd get hysterical. We couldn't believe it. So we would say, "How long do you think ahead of time we have to come not to have a line up?" and I don't think it ever happened. That there was no line up. And then — so that came to an end. We were thrilled to pieces.

The first TJFF, in May 1993, lasted five days and was a huge success. The 1997 audience survey demonstrated that one quarter of the audience had been attending from the beginning. Zukerman continued:

So then we put that to sleep and we thought "Ok. What are we going to do next year?"...So Debra and I sat and I said to my lawyer, I said, "What if they don't come next year? Maybe it was a fluke. They came the first year. They said they liked it. But you know people — 'We must get together sometime.'"...And the next year everybody came again and it was bigger. And we made it a week. And then we hired Debra Kwinter last year, for the fourth year.<sup>3</sup> The third year — first two years I think our foundation was going to subsidize any loss, and then even the third year my lawyers said, "Look. Technically, if you were to do 52% of the funding they wouldn't kill you this year. Because it's a new thing." So that's what happened. And now, I think we provide maybe 25% of the funds. That's all. Well, depending what final numbers are. And then it started really growing.

To be sure, the success of the TJFF is considerable. But enthusiasm needs to be tempered with some reality, and the festival organizers recognize the need for careful development.

And it just keeps growing and growing. Last year, it really exploded from the third year till last year. Box office really exploded. This year, I think we're ahead a little bit. I see this year, Kwinter's not going to like it, but I see this year, 'cause I think she wanted it to explode the way it had last year, from the third to the fourth. I don't think that's possible every year. I think we've put more roots out, because what we've done is this way, matinees —

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3. Debra Plotkin left the TJFF at the end of 1996.

more matinees, a serial, so we've changed a lot of things that people really like. So that's the history of the festival.

## **Recontextualization: the Jews of Toronto**

Toronto's Jewish communities have a long history. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted, "the oldest Jewish community in the New World was formed in New York before 1700. An organized Canadian Jewish community appeared in Montreal as early as 1838 and in Toronto by 1847, although there were Jews living in Canada as early as 1752" (1972:29; cf. Speisman 1979). Most of the city's Jewish population comprises Eastern European, Ashkenazi Jews from Germany, Poland, and Russia. Their peak period of immigration came from the end of the nineteenth century until just before the Second World War, when Canada closed its doors on European Jewry (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1972:225; cf. Abella and Troper 1983).

The settlement patterns of Ashkenazi Jewry in Canada in many respects parallel those of Jewish immigration into the United States, where entire families, facing persecution in Europe, would come to a major urban centre where a relative (uncle, cousin, or brother) had settled previously (cf. Howe 1976):

The Toronto Jewish community exhibits most of the patterns that characterize the Canadian Jewish community....Previous to 1880, few Jews lived in Toronto and only in the 1850s was the first synagogue formed. Consistent with the history of Jewish immigration to North America generally, some of the earliest Jews to live in Toronto were English Jews, such as Lewis Samuel, and German Jews, such as Solomon Cohen and his family in the 1830s and Abraham and Samuel Nordheimer, who moved to Toronto in 1844. The 1880s witnessed the establishment in Toronto of the first permanent congregations of East European Jews. After the turn of the century, floods of East European refugees arrived in Toronto as a result of the Russo-Japanese War and Russian Revolution, both of 1904 (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1972:40).

Most Jews settled in areas which already had a substantial Jewish population, which assured access to religious amenities (synagogues, shops which sold religious paraphernalia), kosher butchers, and Jewish schools. But most importantly, these neighborhoods assured a kind of solidarity and *communitas*, essential for a group that had been persecuted in Europe for so long. In Toronto, the primary settlement was in the Montrose and College

area, and down Spadina Avenue around Kensington Market, a few blocks away from the Bloor Cinema. But

Many of the Toronto [Jewish community members] learned English, established themselves in their own businesses, improved their financial state, bought their own home, moved from the old immigrant neighborhood in downtown Toronto to the new Jewish suburbs in the northern part of the city, sent their children to the university to become doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, and accountants, and sensed with each advance they made just what a long way they had come from the shtetl in Poland to the suburb of Toronto (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1972:288).

The Bloor Cinema's significance, then, extends beyond its independence from the two major cinema chains in Ontario, Famous Players and Cineplex Odeon. According to Helen Zukerman,

It actually — this is the area of town where a lot of the Jews grew up in. They immigrated and came here. So for a lot of them it's coming back home. It's just a really nice mixed area. A lot of the unaffiliated — the less-traditional Jews live down here. A lot of them. And we get them [to attend the festival]. I just love the place.

A survey respondent shared a similar perception: “For Jews born downtown, like myself, it brings back memories — I see people I haven't seen in year[s]....I still love the downtown core.” However, many festival attendees, mistaking me for someone who worked for the Festival, complained about the downtown location. As Helen Zukerman noted:

Debra Kwinter doesn't like it here [the downtown venue]. She's made no secret of that. From the first day she started working here, she was hassling....I said “Debra, I understand what you're saying. But for every person that you run into that doesn't like it, I run into people who love it. And this is not a film festival for the Forest Hill Jews [an economically upscale neighbourhood in north Toronto]. I'm really sorry.” I haven't said that to her, but she knows. Honestly speaking, I don't care that much about the Forest Hill Jews, simply because they go everywhere and do everything. I'm trying to capture those people who are sort of on the fringe. So I like it here. A lot of people like it here....

Although many Jews who live in the north end of the city would prefer the festival be held there, they still travel downtown for the event. On the other hand, those who have distanced themselves from the “Forest Hill Jews,” as Zukerman calls them, do not feel alienated by the venue. As one survey

respondant noted, "Sometimes I have difficulty being comfortable in a suburban Jewish milieu (clothes, jewelry, etc.)."

The festival's location is liminal. For many who have moved from their downtown, immigrant origins, going to the Bloor cinema functions almost like a pilgrimage. But liminality also operates at an alternative level. Jews who are dissatisfied with the religious experience of Judaism can approach the TJFF on a cultural level. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quotes a newspaper article: "The so-called 'religious' or 'socio-religious'....Jewish community is in fact an ethnic community in which religion....is only one component....Jews are affiliated with synagogues not to worship God but to perpetuate a people" (Evelyn Latowsky quoted in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1972:48). During my fieldwork at the festival, one volunteer quipped that should any Jewish event need to attract more people, all they need to do is advertise it as a "Singles Event" and people will flock there. The implication is that even the most assimilated Jews — those who work in the non-Jewish world, whose friends are non-Jews, who do not keep kosher because of personal choice — wish to form partnerships within the faith. For many "secular" or "cultural" Jews who actively eschew the religious contexts where Judaism can be expressed, this festival is one of the only places for that kind of *communitas*.

One response to my survey question, "Why do you come to the Festival?" observed the same point: "We consider a good film festival (Jewish) to be a very integral part of the Jewish cultural scene and perhaps important for Jews who don't wish to attend cultural, quasi-religious events in synagogues." For others, the festival functions much more centrally: "It's part of my spiritual practice as a Jew;" "It's an easy way to be a Jew," or, "Once in a while (not too often) I like to get in touch with my Jewish roots" (survey, 1997).

For Jews who are uncomfortable with their ethnic identity, the festival is a safe context in which to explore their roots. Anthropologist Ivan Kalmar noted that assimilated Jews frequently seek out the occasional Jewish context to avoid feeling different. "An odd thing, but not a rare one: a Jew seeking to be not Jewish in the company of other Jews. It may even be the chief motivation for the EJI ['embarrassed Jewish individual' — Kalmar's term for secular Jewry] in the Diaspora to attend shul [synagogue]" (Kalmar 1993:212). Such participants could see film as a relatively harmless, frivolous entertainment, allowing a deep play of dismissing their own attendance as just "going to the movies." One survey respondent noted, "This is a place I 'fit' as a Jew." For another, attending the Festival has much more personal motivations: "To



connect with my Jewish heritage. To learn what I've missed as having a Jewish father not proud of his heritage." Indeed, for many attendees, the TJFF functions as religious simulacrum, allowing participation within the faith of Judaism, in the alternative context of a film festival. At this religious/cultural level, the TJFF is liminal in being neither completely religious (like going to synagogue), nor completely secular (like going to the movies).

The dissatisfaction with synagogue-based Judaism and discomfort with many issues facing modern Judaism (e.g. the Holocaust, Israel) was one of Helen Zukerman's prime motivations for organizing the Festival.

People make choices in their lives based on what they know to be available to them. If you see a thousand different ways of being Jewish, you may not be so disenchanted with Judaism that the only thing Jewish you do all year is go to that festival. If you could find a place in this society, where your Judaism was as valued as the image we have of what Jews are, which the Orthodox Jews have told us is Judaism, you might not be as disentangled from the community. That's what I want people to see.

Although the TJFF is secular, its central referent is the religious life of Jews. But the religious dimension is ambiguous; the event is not synagogue-based, yet the dominant commonality of attendees and organisers is a shared religious experience.

### **Cinema as liminal experience**

The concept of the liminal is familiar. Van Gennep suggested that the "complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (1960:11). The liminal transformed an initiate. Victor Turner, not content with describing the liminal as a state of "betwixt and between," preferred to see it as a process whereby separation occurred over time and to a variety of degrees (Turner and Turner 1982:202).

Turner coined the term "liminoid" to address the modern cultural experience of this process. In the liminoid, we "take our crises and transitions into our own hands, ritualize them, make them meaningful, and pass through and beyond them in a spirit of celebration, to begin a new uncluttered phase of our lives, having learned from some of the world's oldest and most tenacious cultures a portion of their wisdom, their understanding of the human condition" (Turner 1982:26). Beverly Stoeltje notes the connection between festival and

liminality: “festival removes or transforms the behavioral environment into a space and time markedly different from that of routine life, i.e. into what Victor Turner labels the liminal for preindustrial society and the liminoid for modern society” (1983:243). For modern society, then, taking control of and celebrating the very symbols which have meaning for us, in our own cultural contexts, is a liminal process. That is, we should be communicating the *sacra*, and experiencing the *ludic* and *communitas*; playing with that which we hold sacred in order to foster a sense of community and groupness.

The operation of such processes within cinema was noted, albeit tangentially, by Turner:

Most cultural performances belong to culture’s “subjunctive” mood. “Subjunctive” is defined by Webster as “that mood of a verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc., rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of were, in ‘if I were you.’” Ritual, carnival, festival, theater, film, and similar performative genres clearly possess many of these attributes (1984:20-21)<sup>4</sup>.

Modern cinema, however, differs from traditional celebrations in being theoretically accessible to everyone with the price of admission. This openness leads some folklorists to see the cinema as a medium of universal communication, rather than community or group based (see Abrahams 1976, Dégh 1994, Russo 1992). Yet the public presentation of a cinematic text is subject to the same cultural dynamics as any display event, which includes the subjunctive mood. As cinema expresses cultural subjunctivity in a public frame, and liminoid performances are in the subjunctive mood, cinema can be addressed as liminoid. Audiences experiencing the cinema control the dynamics of the context of its reception and their own understandings. Both movies and festivals explore the liminal dimension of cultures. As Turner noted,

Liminality itself is a complex phase or condition. It is often the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values in the form of sacred dramas and objects...But it may also be the venue and occasion for the most radical skepticism — always relative to the given culture’s repertoire of areas of skepticism — about cherished values and rules (Turner 1984:22).

Cinema, within the cultural nexus of the group who produces or presents it, gives voice to the cultural dialogue which Turner identifies as liminal. The

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4. The term “Hollywood Dream Factory,” a frequent euphemism for the cinema, expresses this dynamic.

films shown at the TJFF express a cultural-mythic or a cultural-skeptic dynamic; they either support or reject the cultural values inherent within the cultural hegemony — in this case, the voice of mainstream Judaism. What is significant for their cultural display, however, is the dialogical position with the audience (Stam 1991:254). As Zukerman notes, the real meaning of the festival is not on the screen,

It's in the coffee houses after. It's in the car on the way home. It's in your discussion with other people during the week. It's the best — what I love to see is people standing and arguing after a film. I love that. Because that's what it's for. So it's a safe way for people to discuss what they saw, and what it meant to them....I guess what I want to do is blur the lines between what is Jewish and what is not Jewish. And just to think about it. Listen, I've certainly gotten a lot more educated about what being Jewish is in the five years I've been involved here. I've no Jewish ba — very little Jewish background. My father was a "lefty," a "commie." So I had a lot of Jewish culture in my house, but no religion at all.

For Zukerman then, the cultural dynamic is the very ontological discussion of what is a Jew, and the medium of that discussion is film. She continues:

You know what I said to Ram Loevy [director of *Mar Mani*, the Israeli mini-series screened at the 1997 Festival] last night that really blew him away? We were talking about Israel. Israel, financially, does not need North American money anymore. They really don't. I said to Ram, "You have to understand something. If we don't have Israel, we have to go about redefining what it means to be Jewish." What does it mean?...Take Israel out of this. Take the Holocaust....If Israel doesn't need me, or my money — and they don't — and the Holocaust ceases to be out there blinking, how are we going to be Jews? I don't know.

With a large number of Israeli and Holocaust themed films, the "mythic" relationship of these referents to the community becomes the very essence of the films' "ritual dramas" — a way of renegotiating Jewish identity markers. The action of going to a special — and for many, a liminoid — place has an aspect of coming closer, in literal spatial terms, to the simulacra of these cultural myths.

Folklorists frequently approach cinema, especially popular cinema, as an artistic text which has some kind of superorganic existence outside of the culture which produces it (see Thomas 1980, Dégh 1994). However, the TJFF repositions any such understanding by including the cultural source in the discussion, thereby recognizing the position of the audience within the

performative frame of the film and festival. Cinema, then, is but the medium through which internal cultural dialogues occur.

The dialogical discourse of the TJFF is not limited within a binary or dialectical frame; frequently, it emerges in what Bakhtin has labeled “polyphony.” “Polyphony calls attention to the coexistence, the collaborative antagonism in any textual or extratextual situation: a plurality of voices which do not fuse into a single consciousness, but rather exist on different registers and thus generate dialogical dynamism” (Stam 1991:262). As John MacAloon noted,

We are asked to assume that cultural performances are more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others (MacAloon 1984:1).

This dynamic, and these alternatives, are by design the basis of the TJFF. For example, I noted to Helen Zukerman my disappointment with the Festival that I had not seen my own experience of Judaism on screen. Her response, I believe, cuts to the heart of understanding the TJFF:

If you put a thousand faces on Judaism, then a thousand more people will find a connection. That’s all it is. Because, we grew up with “What is a Jew?” “He obeys or she obeys” — you know that. So, I’m not sure I want you to see yourself on screen, but I am sure I want you to see a hundred other faces of what Judaism is. When we previewed the film *Bene Israel* [1996], about the East Indian Jews, it blew me away! Well then we find out that there’s a congregation, in Toronto, of East Indian Jews. So we contacted them, and they came to the film. I mean here are Jews with the red dots and wearing saris and they’re praying in Hebrew. Now, how much more inclusive can you get? So when a kid who leaves his parents’ form of Judaism, doesn’t think he has to leave Judaism to practice a different kind of Judaism. That’s all. Options, options, options.

Similarly, in response to my question, “Why do you come to the festival?” a survey respondent noted:

Fun, enjoyment, intellectual provocation, to be in the process of working though what it means to be a diasporic Jew in the late 20th century — a process aided by artistic representations like film — TJFF is one of the most important Jewish events in the city because it has managed to attract

the most diverse cross-section of Jews to assemble in one place for a community event. This, in a city quite fractured into isolated segments of Jewish life, is quite an accomplishment.

Though they may not employ the same terminology, cultural studies, ethnographic scholarship, the event producers, and its consumers all seem aware of this polyphonic dimension. The multi-voiced, multi-optioned dialectic which occurs whenever a text is performed before an audience, especially when the producer and audience share cultural identity, demands a continual re-evaluation of the basic ontological understanding of this identity. As Victor Turner noted: "When a social group celebrates a particular event it also 'celebrates itself.' In other words, it attempts to manifest, in symbolic form, what it conceives to be its essential life, at once a distillation and typification of its corporate experience" (Turner 1982:16). That is festival, and that is cinema.

Another dimension to the festival experience, as I noted earlier, is the issue of *communitas*. For scholars such as Abrahams, Stoeltje, Turner, and Rodger Brown, *communitas* must be present for an event to be considered a "festival." As Abrahams notes, "perhaps most important there is a sense that the community members must enter into the event for it to be successful; it is, after all, an epitome of everything which is important to the continuity of the community" (Abrahams 1982:171). My survey question, "Why do you attend the festival?" elicited a number of responses regarding *communitas*. Many simply replied, "cultural experience." Others noted that the festival gives them "a Jewish feeling" or "it tugs at my heartstrings — whatever that means." But many gave much more detailed responses:

The festival is a unique cultural and community event in Toronto which I eagerly anticipate each year. The selection of films always bring to the Toronto Jewish community film[s] on the topics of Jewish relevance and concern. This one week a year gives me an opportunity to feel and be Jewishly active and affiliated in a very special way. Another great thing about the festival is that it appeals to Jews across age and economic strata in the city!

And even more vehemently,

It is a *duty* for every Jew to attend the Festival. We should be proud of our rich heritage. I think the Festival brings Jews from all denominations....This is very good to keep our people together.

The nostalgic, the “bittersweet remembrance of things past” (Brown 1997:174) gives many festivals, including the TJFF, meaning. Beverly Stoeltje noted that “meaning in festival derives from experience; thus, festival emphasizes the past. Yet festival happens in the present and for the present, directed toward the future” (1992:268). This enigmatic and slightly ambiguous comment highlights the complex web of cultural signification within which the TJFF operates.

Festivals’ uses of the nostalgic obviously focus attention on the past. As Abrahams noted, perhaps overly simplistically, “both fair and festival operate in the zone of nostalgia, as reminders of life in a simpler economy and technology, when individuals ‘could do for themselves’” (1987:181). In many respects, the TJFF is what Ralph Linton called a “nativistic movement”: “any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture....certain current or remembered elements of culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value” (quoted in Brown 1997:xi). TJFF is developed, run, and attended by members of the Toronto Jewish community, with the specific intention to be part of a city-wide cultural revival.<sup>5</sup> Even the venue functions to connect those who attend to the neighborhoods in which many grew up. As my survey data show, attendees of the TJFF participate in a number of other Jewish and ethnic cultural celebrations. Helen Zukerman notes

Almost as assimilation is happening, we’re looking — myself, I’m taking courses in Judaism. And all the big synagogues are losing people, but what’s happening is people are forming little *shtibles*<sup>6</sup>; which is back to the eighteen and nineteen hundreds where they got together shabbes and then ten of them prayed, or ten of them told stories, or they did something Jewish. So

5. In my 1997 survey, three quarters of the respondents said that they participated in other “cultural” and “ethnic” type events. Identifying the “ethnic” distinction within Judaic cultures (i.e., distinguishing Israeli, Religious, Sephardic and Ashkenazi cultural events), the majority are Ashkenazi. Thirteen percent of those surveyed went to musical events, specifically klezmer concerts — the *shtetl* music of the Old Country. Seven percent specifically identified “Ashkenaz,” an annual Toronto festival of Yiddish culture. Another four percent identified either the language revival group, “Friends of Yiddish,” or the “Yiddishland Café,” an occasional cultural event presented in different restaurants around Toronto. Collectively, almost a full quarter of those who participated in my survey identified specific Yiddish cultural contexts for their other ethnic involvements. This revival of Yiddishkeit also effects cinema.
6. “House of prayer of hasidim, usually consisting of a single room” (Mintz 1968:449).

we're back to the beginning and redefining maybe what the beginning is. I haven't got a clue what's going on. I don't know what's going on. I just know *at every Jewish event*, we can't believe how many people show up. Jewish film, Jewish plays.

Barbara Myerhoff noted that in creating cultural scenes “we do them to and for ourselves, and immediately we are involved in a form of self-creation that is potentially community building, providing what Van Gennep would call regeneration by revitalizing old symbols from the perspectives of the present” (Myerhoff 1982:131)<sup>7</sup>. Bakhtin also noted the festival's ability to regenerate community life: “this carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (1968:34). For him, as for Abrahams, Stoeltje, Brown, Falassi, and Turner, the rite of reversal, by first deconstructing the culture itself, rebuilds and renews itself often on an annual basis. “Carnival...did liberate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people” (Bakhtin 1968:274).

But the “golden age” to which festival refers is not necessarily in the past; rather, as Stoeltje suggests, it has both past and future. Bakhtin noted that

Popular festive forms look into the future. They present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past....The victory of the future is ensured by the people's immortality. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old (Bakhtin 1968: 256).

At TJFF, Jews can look back to either the nineteenth century *shtetl*,<sup>8</sup> or to being “the Chosen People,” as idealized time periods of unquestioning identity and community solidarity. Likewise, the Festival functions to allow Toronto Jews the opportunity to look forward to a time when the Holocaust and the

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7. A similar dynamic is noted by Ray Browne: “Apparently steadily moving from a religious nation, Americans have constantly altered and abandoned their forms of religious practices, at times almost abandoning them. Always, however, the old forms have apparently remained close to the surface. In times of national frustration, anxiety and incertitude, people have found the old forms again” (1980:2-3).
  8. “Little city, small town, village — in particular, the Jewish communities of eastern Europe, where the culture of the Ashkenazim flourished (before World War II)” (Rosten 1968:373).

Israel/Palestine conflicts will be the stuff of stories. By celebrating culture, in whatever guise, there is an implicit knowledge that this year is not going to be the last. The TJFF will be around next year, a continuation of this cultural expression and its referents and meanings.

But, as the saying goes, "nostalgia ain't what it used to be;" that is, frequently the past idealized by nativistic movements is celebrating a period that was less than ideal. As Rodger Brown noted, "nostalgia may give the appearance of being a comforting, wistful state...but after a while, if you fan away the mist, you begin to remember that the past is laced with anxiety, uncertainty, fear, denial and dread" (Brown 1997:174). The *shtetl* experience, for example, so idealized in films like *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), was frequently characterized not only by community and identity, but also by poverty, pogroms, and a repressive patriarchy which kept women functionally illiterate. "Nostalgia has become history without guilt, and, for it to work, remembering and forgetting pull together in harness" (Brown 1997:175). Yet, as Turner noted, the nostalgic functions as either a validation or as a critical re-evaluation of that concept of the golden age. Cultural values may be reified or challenged, but the filmed dramas/myths/narratives are presented within a liminal frame of festival, with a liminal function of nostalgia, and within a liminal mood of the subjunctive.

## Conclusions

Rather than being expressions of hegemonically oriented consumer marketplaces, phenomena like the TJFF celebrate the culture which supports them. The complex dynamics of festival, of temporal and spatial distortion, of community definition, redefinition, renewal, and reavowal, of public liminality and subjunctivity, are all evident within this annual event. The texts themselves — the films — function as cultural icons to be displayed for the invocation of *communitas*. Cinema, itself expressing with a degree of liminality, is a medium through which the community is reborn and revalidated.

The TJFF functions as a social and cultural context where members of the Toronto Jewish communities can gather to celebrate being Jewish through the medium of popular cinema. In focusing my field research on a celebration of Jewish film, I redefined my own thoughts about how culture became emergent in popular cinema. As a participant observer, I was able to not only collect data, but also to celebrate Jewish film, and to understand not only film, but also being Jewish.



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