CHAPTER 7

Muscles, Mimicry, Menschlikyat, and Madagascar
Jews, Sport, and Nature in US Cinema

Nathan Abrams

American cinema is replete with Jewish stereotypical self-images. These include those constructed from the inside, such as the schlemiel, the Jewish American Princess, the Jewish Mother, and the tough Jew. But where these have evolved into new types in recent years, which I discuss in some detail in my book, the idea of the “unnatural” Jew – that is the Diaspora Jew who does not belong in nature – is stubbornly maintained in American Jewish culture.¹ Drawing upon an erstwhile anti-natural ethic in Jewish culture, the Jew is constructed as urban (often urbane), located overwhelmingly in a metropolitan landscape, and who has an uneasy relationship with nature, where he does not belong.² By and large, Jews have been denied a significant place or omitted from those cinematic genres in which landscape, as part of the mythic national character, dominates as a narrative device. This is because archetypal images of the environment function to exclude the Jew: in iconographic terms the “landscape connotes untamed nature, the pre-historical and the primitive, while the Jew is associated with urban civilization, business, and culture.”³ Consequently, American Jewish filmic stereotypes, some of which date back almost as far as the birth of the medium itself, portrayed Jews as urban businessmen. Where Israeli cinema decisively rejected this trope in its formative years to eulogize the efforts of the tough pioneering farmer-heroes in order to reclaim the fertility of an arid and barren land,⁴ Jews in American film are still an extraordinarily urban people whereby the “city is usually seen as the prototypical Jewish place.”⁵

² I deliberately use the masculine pronoun here because, by and large, the stereotype is largely confined to the Jewish male.
⁵ Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 18.
Closely intertwined with this stereotype, as the classic joke from *Airplane* (dirs. Jim Abrahams and David Zucker, USA, 1980) demonstrates, is the erstwhile tenet of Jewish humor that Jews also do not do sports (largely because they are outdoor activities that take place in nature):

Air Stewardess: Would you like something to read?  
Passenger: Do you have anything light?  
Air Stewardess: How about this leaflet, “Famous Jewish Sports Legends?”

In *The Hebrew Hammer* (dir. Jonathan Kesselman, USA, 2003), for example, members of “the Coalition of Jewish Athletes” are, entirely predictably, nowhere to be seen. Although this stereotype is clearly inaccurate, the representations of Jewish sportsmen and women in cinema have been surprisingly few and far between.

These tropes continue to dominate contemporary American cinema today; yet, neither has been subjected to extensive scholarly analysis (in filmic terms at least). By building upon several trends in recent Jewish Studies, namely the topographical and spatial turns, the growing interest in Judaism and ecology, and the corporeal turn in Jewish Studies, I attempt to redress this gap and to consider the function of these continuing stereotypes which, while rooted in both inside/outside views of the Jew, are perpetuated by Jews themselves. I will explore Jews in American cinema with a particular interest in how cinema’s use of sport and nature allows us to view the Jew and his body, something which, ironically in films about physical exertion, is not particularly evident in the writing about it. In so doing, I will consider the dynamics of the representation and subjectivity of the Jew through the prism of post-colonialism. Using Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, I offer a detailed reading of the films *Madagascar* (dirs. Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, 2005) and *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (dirs. Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, 2008) to argue that this unnatural/nonathletic Jew provides a form by which the American Jew is able to assimilate on his own terms, that is to mimic the dominant culture, while preserving a sense of self-identity by critiquing its values, what will be called the contrast between menschlikyat and Yiddishkeit (Yiddish: lit. “Jewishness,” or “Jewish culture”) on the one hand and goyim naches (Yiddish: tough/gentile pleasures/values) on the other.6

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6 Note here the deliberate use of the masculine pronoun, for the Jewess is even more excluded from this landscape than the Jew, being invisible in nature. This Jew is also anglicized and white (i.e. Ashkenazi) in which all intra-ethnic Jewish difference is erased or elided.