Films figure with increasing frequency in Jewish studies—as teaching tools, as subjects of research, or as points of entry, often arising serendipitously in conversations with students and colleagues. Feature films and documentaries not only provide a source of widely shared information on the Holocaust—easily the most frequently filmed chapter of Jewish history—they also deal with Israeli life, the place of Jews in modern societies around the world, and sometimes touch on issues of religious practice or even Jewish mysticism. Whether or not scholars are happy with the images and information in these films (often they are not), these works’ prominence at the very least demands scholarly attention as phenomena of Jewish vernacular culture and as points of reference in public discussion.

Therefore, our students’ literacy in film, which is often more developed than their fluency with the kinds of texts that scholars in Jewish studies typically deal with, should not be disparaged; instead, it should be seized as a strategic opportunity for engaging students in analytic exercises. Consider, for example, two French films portraying shtetl life on the eve of the Holocaust: *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* (Ivan and Abraham), directed by Yolande Zauberman (1993), and *Train de Vie* (Train of Life), directed by Radu Mihaileanu (1999). Their subject has, of course, been a primary locus of Jewish memory culture since the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Jews began leaving small market towns both geographically and ideologically. In addition to an extensive corpus of literature, the shtetl has also been treated in memoir writing, works of visual art, music, theater, and—especially in the decade preceding World War II—film. The interwar Yiddish cinema in the United States, Poland, and the Soviet Union facilitated multiple vicarious journeys to the shtetl, whether in stagings of literary classics (e.g., the 1928 film *Durkh trenn*, based on Sholem Aleichem’s Motl stories) or in escapist musical comedies (*Yidl mitn fidl*, filmed on location in Kazimerz na Wislu in 1936).

The two recent shtetl films in question are something quite different. Whether made in situ or on sets erected in the New Jersey countryside (e.g., *Yankl der shmid*, 1938), Yiddish films of the interwar years draw on living memory, however attenuated, of Jewish life in Eastern Europe’s small towns, where millions of Jews still resided. A half century after World War II, efforts to set a film in the shtetl face the daunting task of reenacting a lost quotidian. Moreover, they are works of memory that rely not so much on recollections of actual experience as on the received remembrances of others, encoded in narratives and images produced by previous generations. By virtue of their elaborate scale, these films epitomize postwar efforts to imagine one’s way back into the shtetl. As is often the case with memory projects, their analysis ultimately tells us more about the rememberer than the remembered.

Indeed, despite their shared topic, these two films offer divergent conjurings of the shtetl. As its title intimates, *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* offers a multicultural view of the shtetl. The film’s plot centers around the friendship of its two eponymous characters—Ivan, a Russian Roma (Gypsy) boy apprenticed to a Jewish family, whose youngest member is Abraham. Characters in their anonymous shtetl variously speak Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and Romani; these languages delineate ethnic divides and class tensions as well as evince cultural hybridity and social fluidity. Ivan, for example, speaks Yiddish with his Jewish employers.

The film’s image of shtetl life is gritty, brooding, and earthy. Characters are repeatedly shown clinging to one another and are often sitting or lying on the ground or floor, suggesting their rootedness in the shtetl milieu. Filmed in black and white, *Moi Ivan, toi Abraham* recalls interwar photographs such as the work of Alter Kacyzne or Roman Vishniac, which presented the shtetl through the eye of an observer from outside, drawn to its exoticism and decadence. The aura of decay—crumbling buildings, shabby clothes—pervades the shtetl of the film.  

**THE SHTETL ON THE SILVER SCREEN: TWO RECENT FILMS**

Jeffrey Shandler

Production still from *Moi Ivan, Toi Abraham*, directed by Yolande Zauberman, 1993.
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While ostensibly transporting viewers back to the same time and place, these two films offer complementary visions of the shtetl on the eve of the Holocaust. Moï Ivan, toi Abraham evinces a desire to remember the shtetl as a site of doomed Jewish indigeneity, imbricated among other east Europeans. Train de Vie offers a vision of the shtetl as playful, transcendent, a mythic locus of guileless Jewish resilience. Watching these films together, or comparing them with prewar, Yiddish-language shtetl films or works of shtetl literature (from Sh. Y. Abramovitch to Jonathan Safran Foer), provides rich opportunities to consider the range and dynamics of shtetl remembrance, demonstrating the mutability of memory in response to the changing relationship between the shtetl and those who wish to recall it.

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