

**Ethnic Peculiarity and Universal Appeal: The  
Ambivalence of Transition in Mid-Twentieth Century  
Jewish American Culture.**

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# Contents

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|--|------------|
| <b>Contents.....</b>   | <b>2</b>   |
| <b>Abstract.....</b>   | <b>3</b>   |
| <b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>  | <b>5</b>   |
| Captain America, Batman and X-Men.....   | 24         |
| Awake and Sing!.....   | 34         |
| <b>Chapter Two: American Dreams, Ethnic Realities.....</b>                       | <b>41</b>  |
| Superman.....  | 47         |
| Captain America.....   | 65         |
| <b>Chapter Three: The Masculine Ideal.....</b>                                   | <b>78</b>  |
| Batman.....  | 90         |
| Double Indemnity.....  | 95         |
| Dangling Man.....  | 112        |
| <b>Chapter Four: Arthur Miller, Jewish Identity and Post-war Transition.....</b> | <b>119</b> |
| Focus.....   | 124        |
| Body and Soul.....   | 147        |
| Death of a Salesman.....   | 152        |
| <b>Chapter Five: Colouring Consensus.....</b>                                    | <b>155</b> |
| 12 Angry Men.....  | 160        |
| The Goldbergs.....   | 191        |
| <b>Chapter Six: On the Banks of the Mainstream.....</b>                          | <b>201</b> |
| The Incredible Shrinking Man.....  | 203        |
| Marty.....   | 219        |
| The Assistant.....   | 227        |
| <b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>239</b> |
| <b>Bibliography.....</b>   | <b>246</b> |
| <b>Word Count: 84,324</b>  |            |

# Abstract

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*Ethnic Peculiarity and Universal Appeal: The Ambivalence of Transition in Mid-Twentieth Century Jewish American Culture.*

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This thesis examines the contribution of Jewish artists to American popular culture in the mid-twentieth century and argues that the Jewish imagination contains a peculiar ability to simultaneously articulate the concerns of a specifically ethnic identity and a more universal American character. The thesis posits that by exploring how the Jewish community negotiated the space between ethnic identity and an American paradigm, Jewish artists were able to explore the middle ground between individuality and conformity, selfhood and consensus, liberalism and conservatism, tradition and change, and heritage and progress that held a wider pertinence for a more general American audience.

The thesis argues that the diversity of the Jewish American imagination at this time can be united by a leitmotif that can be best described as the *ambivalence of transition*. By examining aesthetically dissimilar texts from a variety of artistic fields, in particular comic books, theatre, cinema, television, and literature, the thesis argues that despite the cultural evolutions that occurred throughout the thirties, forties and fifties, the Jewish voice articulated a continuing concern regarding the relationship between ethnic identity, masculine identity, the individual and mass culture. This last point hints at another preoccupation of this thesis; the texts analysed here all share a narrative focus that explores and represents notions of masculine identity and ideality. In this way, the thesis necessarily focuses upon debates about masculinity within the Jewish imagination and American culture, charting the evolution of the Jewish and American male and their relationship towards notions of performed, consensus, individual and paradigm masculinity.

Although there has not necessarily been a desire to fully deny the notion of a continuing thematic preoccupation within the Jewish imaginary, previous scholarship has shown a tendency towards accentuating the eclectic nature of Jewish American culture. Whilst scholars like Paul Buhle and Stephen J. Whitfield recognise the importance of popular culture as an arena in which Jewish artists sought to articulate issues at the heart of Jewish identity and community in the US, their studies focus upon the kaleidoscopic eclecticism of Jewish American culture. The intention of this thesis is to harness the diversity inherent in Jewish cultural expression via the prevailing leitmotif of the ambivalence of transition. In this way the thesis will use the multifarious and textured fabric of mid-century Jewish culture, as well as the simultaneous articulation of both ethnic and more general concerns, to illuminate the understanding of both Jewish identity and American culture throughout the mid-century. Thus, the thesis builds upon work by the likes of Julian Levinson and Hana Wirth-Nesher that revisits ideas of assimilation and attempts to complicate the inexorable movement away from Jewish distinctiveness and identity. Similarly, the thesis builds upon studies by the likes of Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Will Brooker that attempt to accentuate the reductive understanding of the mid-century based upon boundless suburbia and unthinking conformity.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Ralph is a boy with a clean spirit. He wants to know, wants to learn. He is ardent, he is romantic, he is sensitive. He is naïve too. He is trying to find why so much dirt must be cleared away before it is possible to “get to first base.”

***Awake and Sing!* (Clifford Odets, 1935)**

This thesis examines the contribution made by Jewish artists to American popular culture throughout the mid-twentieth century. By analysing key texts by, among others, Clifford Odets, Jerry Siegel, Bob Kane, Saul Bellow, Billy Wilder, Arthur Miller, Sidney Lumet, Gertrude Berg, Paddy Chayefsky, Bernard Malamud, Jack Arnold, and Philip Roth the thesis will posit that the Jewish American imagination was best positioned throughout the thirties, forties and fifties to articulate the experiences of both a specifically Jewish identity and a more general American character. Using case studies of popular and commercially successful cultural artefacts from a variety of artistic fields the project will explore how mainstream Jewish expression at this time tapped into widespread anxieties regarding cultural change and identity transition. The thesis will argue that texts as diverse as *Awake & Sing!*, *Superman*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Dangling Man*, *Double Indemnity*, *Focus*, *Death of a Salesman*, *12 Angry Men*, *The Goldbergs*, *Marty*, *The Assistant*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and *The Assistant* share a tendency to articulate feelings of trepidation and apprehension regarding the Jewish community's emergence into mainstream American culture. In doing so, these films,

novels, comic books, theatre plays, television programmes, and radio dramas represented the ambivalence of transition that affected a wider American populace during the cultural evolutions that took place throughout the mid-twentieth century.

The contribution of Jewish artists to American popular culture has been an increasingly salient issue in recent Jewish American scholarship. The Jewish presence in American movies, television, theatre, Broadway musical, underground and mainstream comics, photography, and literature has enjoyed ever-growing attention that attempts to isolate and attribute a specifically Jewish aspect in both the commercial provenance and artistic identity of these cultural industries.<sup>1</sup> Collectively these studies have argued persuasively that twentieth century American popular culture is imbued with an identifiably Jewish influence, and thus we may now take it as self-evident that a peculiar Jewish ethno-cultural significance is woven into the tapestry of American culture. As Hana Wirth-Nesher notes in her review of Julian Levinson's 2008 study of Jewish American writers and literary culture, *Exiles on Main Street*, more recent studies differ from previous scholarship in that they are marked by a movement away from:

...an either-or approach, where a stable idea of Jewishness is measured against a stable idea of Americanness, toward more nuanced approaches that characterize

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<sup>1</sup> Gabler, Neal, *An Empire of their Own*, Random House, Inc, 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1983); Desser, David & Friedman, Lester D., *American Jewish Filmmakers*, University of Illinois Press, 2004; Brook, Vincent, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the Jewish Sitcom*, Rutgers University Press, 2003; Zurawik, David, *The Jews of Primetime*, Brandeis University Press, 2003; Novick, Julius, *Beyond the Golden Door: Jewish American Drama and Jewish American Experience*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Most, Andrea, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Harvard University Press, 2004; Buhle, Paul, *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an America Art Form*,; Fingerroth, Danny, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*,; Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*; Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*; Morris, Daniel, *After Weegee: Essays on Contemporary Jewish American Photographers*, Syracuse University Press, 2011; Kramer, Michael P. & Wirth-Nesher, Hana, *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2003. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the scholarship relating to Jewish American culture, merely an indication of some of the more recent or important literature relating to the Jewish imagination in popular culture.

the dialogue between Jews and American culture "as an ongoing, dynamic interaction between two entities that are themselves in a state of flux."<sup>2</sup>

In his own introduction, Levinson characterises the previous body of Jewish American literary studies as preoccupied with analysing how Jewish literature commentates a disintegration of ethnic identity in the face of an ever-encroaching "American" identity and a capitulation towards a fixed notion of "Americanness". Studies like Robert Alter's *After the Tradition* (1968), Allen Guttman's *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (1971), Leslie Fiedler's *Fiedler on the Roof* (1991), and Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon* (2001), argues Levinson, "emphasized movements away from Jewish distinctiveness" within Jewish literature and downplayed how Jewish American authors also contrived to "reclaim" and redesign Judaism and Jewishness. As Levinson summarises it:

In these studies the Jewish experience in America is generally charted as an inexorable process of cultural attenuation, and works of literature are consulted as evidence for this process. A given work of literature, that is, becomes a sort of barometer, measuring the level or extent of Jewishness within the larger Jewish community.<sup>3</sup>

As such, Levinson's study rejects these "...master narrative of immigrant tradition giving way to modernity and assimilation" theses. By eschewing the traditional "...focus on the ethnic, racial, and class aspects of Jewish self-definition in America," and choosing instead to enrich "...the discussion by focusing on the intellectual and spiritual dimension," Levinson presents an interpretation of twentieth century Jewish American culture that incorporates a constantly evolving Jewish identity that sought to retain its ethno-religious distinctiveness.<sup>4</sup> Although my own thesis explores a different area of Jewish culture to Levinson's, the notion of a reciprocal

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<sup>2</sup> Wirth-Nesher, Hana, "Review of *Exiles on Main Street*" in *American Jewish History*, Vol.95, Number 1, March 2009, pp.127-129.

<sup>3</sup> Levinson, Julian, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, Indiana University Press, 2008, p6.

<sup>4</sup> Wirth-Nesher, Hana, "Review of *Exiles on Main Street*," pp.127-129.

relationship between fluctuating identities and the idea of a conscious attempt within the Jewish American imagination to preserve and re-invent Jewish cultural peculiarity is the bedrock of this study.

Levinson recognises that his study, like all academic investigations into cultural history, “may be guilty of highlighting only those writers that are congenial to the book’s overall thesis,” and goes on to give a list of recognisable Jewish authors ranging from Gertrude Stein to Paul Auster via Mike Gold and Norman Mailer. “A study focusing on these latter authors,” writes Levinson, “might have a great deal to say about the directions taken by *Jews* in American culture, but considerably less to say about the ways in which Judaism and Jewishness has been reimagined and refigured.”<sup>5</sup> Whilst it may be true that the presence of Judaism, let alone an attempt at spiritual and religious redesign, may be difficult to trace in the work of these largely secular authors, it is much more difficult to agree with Levinson’s notion that this kind of authorial attempt at reshaping the representation of Jewishness is absent from the work of Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman or many others. Even if we take into account Levinson’s desire to only assess work by authors who have undertaken “some kind of sustained and *explicit* meditation on the meaning of being Jewish,” the importance of mainstream and popular Jewish American artists in trying to negotiate the relationship between Jewishness and Americanness should not be ignored.

Paul Buhle’s book, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood*, supports this idea, arguing, says Henry Bial in his review, “...that American popular culture must be understood as a vehicle for Jewish cultural continuity.” He adds that, “though this continuity is proudly, even defiantly, secular, it draws on a political and spiritual tradition that is traceable to the “old World” of nineteenth-century European Jewry.”<sup>6</sup> Buhle’s analysis does not merely identify the Jewish signature in secular texts, but also argues that the Jewish presence in popular culture has

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<sup>5</sup> Levinson, Julian, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, p.6.

<sup>6</sup> Bial, Henry, “Review of *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 2005), pp. 127-129



helped to define and reconceive Jewish identity in the mainstream. Like Levinson and Buhle, Stephen J. Whitfield also views Jewish and American interaction as a two-way process between fluctuating cultures and identities. “The creativity of American Jewry has also affected and altered...[American]...culture. Exchanging ideas and images with the larger culture in a network of reciprocity. Jews have borrowed freely, but have also expanded the contours of that larger culture – which has itself been protean and fluid,” he states.<sup>7</sup> By opening up the spectrum of investigation into Jewish American culture to incorporate those examples of Jewish artistic expression that “do not bear directly on the beliefs and experiences of the Jews as people,” and that are not preoccupied with “Jewish subject matter,” Whitfield also encourages inquiry into the Jewish involvement with secular and mainstream American cultural expression.

This thesis accepts the invitation to examine the contribution of Jewish American artists to American popular culture in the mid-twentieth century, and how, in articulating the trepidation and anxiety with which the Jewish community approached acceptance into the mainstream, Jewish artists simultaneously represented a more universal American experience. By encompassing the period from the early-1930s to the late-1950s, this study will make use of the well-worn cultural map that exists within scholarship charting the movement away from Jewish distinctiveness within American culture. The intention is not to revise the social history of Jewish assimilation at this time – it has long been established in the literature that this was a period in which socio-cultural developments altered the shape and definition of Jewishness in America – but rather to apply Levinson’s understanding of how Jewish American writers sought to rehabilitate and maintain Jewishness within literature and culture more generally. Instead of shying away from this period of accelerated Jewish assimilation, this thesis will analyse how, by expressing the relationship between an evolving Jewish identity and a fluctuating American identity, Jewish artists working in the mid-twentieth century explored an experience perhaps best understood as the *ambivalence of transition* that was equally pertinent for a wider American identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Whitfield, Stephen J., *In Search of Jewish American Culture*, Brandeis University Press, 1999, p.30-1.

Julius Novick argues that twentieth century Jewish American theatre "...chronicles and analyzes the Jewish American version of an all-but-universal experience. We all live in the tension between what we came from and what we have come to; we are all faced with the challenge of making some accommodation between them."<sup>8</sup> Novick's study examines the:

...great attempt by Jewish American playwrights to dramatize American experience by dramatizing Jewish American experience, by exploring the Jewish American version of "two-ness"; the conflict between the "two souls," the attempt to reconcile them, the choices made between them, and what happens when one of the two...is suppressed.<sup>9</sup>

This thesis expands upon Novick's position on Jewish American theatre, applying it to a wider range of artistic texts. In doing so the thesis will posit that by articulating the issues that plagued Jewish identity in the midst of transition, feelings of acceptance, resistance, anxiety, discord, ambiguity, and ambivalence, Jewish artists concomitantly articulated # wider American debates regarding national identity .

Although the focus in this thesis is on ethnic and national identity, the texts that I will discuss tend to focus their attention on distinctly masculine anxieties and it is through the exploration of masculine ideality that these Jewish American artists most readily negotiated wider notions of identity. The fight, sometimes quite literally, to locate and cement a viable and fulfilling masculine identity is the tie that binds many Jewish authored texts from this era. Whatever other problems affect Ralph Berger in *Awake and Sing!*, Clark Kent in *Superman*, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Charley Davis in *Body and Soul*, or Morris Bober in *The Assistant*, it is their impact upon the character's masculinity and/or attitude towards patriarchy

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<sup>8</sup> Novick, Julius, *Beyond the Golden Door: Jewish American Drama and Jewish American Experience*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, p.5

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.7

through which the authors of these texts choose to explore both the salient issues of American culture and the ambivalence of transition.

The mid-twentieth century was an era in which American masculinity was bombarded by attacks that questioned the integrity of its orthodox character and its traditional boundaries of self-awareness. During the 1930s, for example, the emasculating effects of the depression's austerity brought into question the basic act of being the "provider" at a time when traditional gender boundaries dictated that this role went some way to define masculinity. Moreover, wartime advances in social stature enjoyed by women and minority groups also meant that mid-twentieth century American males had to redefine and reassess their position in American culture. The battle for masculine identity in Jewish texts from this period therefore is fought amongst and between different generations, cultures, ethnicities, genders, and classes. It is a battle through which anxieties regarding the family, the urban environment, upward mobility, the American dream, and individual identity are represented and interpreted. Indeed, masculinity is intertwined with the very notion of nationhood at this time and evolving American identity in such a way that widespread anxieties and aspirations are articulated through the changing representation of masculinity in Jewish expression. The theme of masculinity is the primary common ground upon which Jewish American art articulated a shared ambivalence regarding identity transition.

The temporal parameters of the thesis are not intended to be precise and hermetic; there is no denying that the texts analysed in this thesis are founded upon continuations of the themes laid out in work by the likes of Abraham Cahan and Mary Antin in the early twentieth century and serve as precursors to those Jewish American artists – of which there are too many to mention here – who have produced works in the fields of literature, cinema, theatre, comic books, and photography in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the second decade of the twenty-first century. By following the narrative, however, between the economic turmoil and the intense anti-Semitic activity of the early-thirties to the adaptation of

Jews into a mainstream paradigmatic American character by the close of the fifties, the thesis will argue that the mid-twentieth century represents a historical “moment” in which there occurred a closer alignment between the anxieties and concerns of American culture at-large and those of America’s Jewish community.

The two incongruous bookends of this historical narrative serve to illustrate how the Jewish American experience can be viewed as the most patent representation of more universal cultural movements. Whilst the ability to articulate both specifically Jewish concerns and a more general American experience can be seen as a historical and continuing feature of Jewish American cultural expression, a symptom of the Jewish equivalent of African American “two-ness” that has accompanied the community’s historical interaction with their American host culture, in the mid-twentieth century the Jewish journey into the mainstream epitomised the wider experience of Americans who had to bring their own individual identity into harmony with the same paradigmatic and fluid American character.

Jewish artists’ exploration of how best to negotiate transitional identities at this time was not, however, intended to be instructive. In the texts analysed in this thesis the protagonists portray feelings of ambivalence, trepidation, ambiguity, fear, anxiety, disillusion, and apprehension that accompany their desire for accommodation in American culture. There exists a mood of suspension between fluctuating notions of identity, as well as more general concepts of belonging and acceptance that relate to geographical ideals, ideology, conformity, consensus, religion, ethnicity, race and other factors that impact upon the formation of identity throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties. It is the ambiguity of transition and articulation of unstable identities that unites Jewish American cultural output at this time, and it is these synchronicities that make it possible for us to view the diverse artistic output of Jewish artists collectively as a commentary on mid-twentieth century American culture.

Yet, the aforementioned Paul Buhle and Stephen J. Whitfield, both eminent scholars of Jewish American cultural studies, see this quest for concurrencies as futile. In the introduction

to *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood*, Buhle at first seems to support the notion of thematic unity within Jewish American artistry, "...the outsidersness, the propensity to rebel, not only against the Gentile world but also against institutions and power figures of Jewish authority, forged the keen edge of innovation seen most vividly in districts of marginal capitalist enterprise."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to point out that:

...the kaleidoscopic flow of styles, genres, and traditions raises the possibility always close to the Jewish artist, the ability to get beyond himself or herself without losing the sense of self, the chance to try on the clothes of others, and then to look in the mirror and see the results better than the casual wearer of such clothes.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, whilst Buhle obviously supports the notion that Jews possess a peculiar ability to represent the foibles, fears, dreams and desires of a wider American reality, his comments here betray the overriding conclusion of the study that follows; that the Jewish artistic voice is a malleable mouthpiece that lends itself almost exclusively to oppositional sentiments in popular discourse. Outside of this decidedly liberal, sometimes rebellious, and infinitely varied framework, which is itself, unfathomably kaleidoscopic, Buhle implies that concurrencies within the body of Jewish American cultural artefacts are barely worth a mention.

In the preface to his book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, Stephen J. Whitfield positions the premise of his study on a similar judgement, positing that Jewish American culture "...is too fragmented and indeed too rich to allow the caprices of dates to dictate how such diversity should be treated...The Jewish American imagination defies every effort to define it in a unified way."<sup>12</sup> The notion that Jewish American scholarship should succumb to the eclecticism of Jewish American culture is reinforced by edited studies like *From Hester*

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<sup>10</sup> Buhle, Paul, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*, Terso, 2004, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Whitfield, Stephen J., *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, p.xiii-xiv.

*Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen, Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*, and Buhle's own impressive three-volume addition to the scholarship, *Jews and American Popular Culture*.<sup>13</sup> By presenting disparate and wide-ranging investigations into Jewish American culture these studies support the idea that Jewish American expression is too multifarious to be thematically unified.

It should be said that both Buhle and Whitfield offer marvellous insights into individual artists and movements in their quest to present a timeline of Jewish American culture throughout the twentieth century. However, whilst the denial of concurrencies may hold true for their studies simply because their analyses seek to argue the case for a pervasive, durable, continuing but above all diverse Jewish presence in American popular culture, a more specific examination of the artistic output of Jews working in mid-twentieth century American culture does reveal synchronicities that permeate texts across a variety of artistic fields. In its eclecticism, the output of Jewish artists working in America in the mid-twentieth century certainly captures cultural diversity. Yet the thematic preoccupations that prevailed in these same artistic artefacts meant that a body of art which primarily attempted to articulate the particular concerns of the Jewish community – who made up less than two percent of the national population – also articulated more pandemic anxieties regarding identity and the relationship between self and state.

The notion that the eclecticism of Jewish artistic expression belies thematic patterns across genres and mediums that might prove useful to the understanding of Jewish American culture can be challenged using Donald Weber's 2005 book, *Haunted in the New World*. Analysing wide-ranging examples of Jewish literature and popular culture from the early-twentieth century to the mid-1950s by artist like Saul Bellow, Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle,

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<sup>13</sup> Buhle's volumes alone indicate the breadth of study relating to Jewish American culture, with essay the Jewish influence in the studio system, Hollywood musicals, animation, radio, television drama, comedy, Yiddish theatre, vaudeville, Broadway musical, popular music, folk music, Jazz, literature, the pulps, children's literature, post-war satire, comics, baseball, boxing, amusement parks, the toy and novelty industry, food, the department store, gangsters, plastic surgery, and the internet.

Abraham Cahan, Mickey Katz, Isaac Rosenfeld, Henry Roth, and Anzia Yezierska, Weber argues that Jewish cultural expression, or more precisely “early immigrant fiction and culture”, in the first half of the twentieth century can be united by common themes that play into the process of Americanization:

...the drama of Americanization as ordeal, as challenge, as *invitation* (especially for those who embraced the shape-shifting possibilities of New World identity) – enriches our understanding of the modern American narrative: the New World story of migration, adjustment, and transformation...Above all, I am interested in how affect shapes cultural expression. In the example of Jewish American literary and popular culture, we can observe how the deformations wrought by shame and self-hatred, the dialectic of nostalgia and memory, and the psychological “costs” of achieving the host culture’s seemingly “civilized” manners...acquire substantial explanatory power...we can observe how these affects enabled a range of creative responses to the ordeal of Americanization: the Jewish imagination responding to the experience of – and *in* – modernity itself.<sup>14</sup>

Although Weber’s study is clearly selective, the scope of his analysis reaches wide enough to persuasively trace a unifying theme in early immigrant cultural expression so that the burden of the Old World can be read across Jewish American imagination in the first half of the twentieth century. In doing so the kaleidoscopic nature of Jewish American culture is brought into sharper focus and can allow us to better understand the importance and relevance of the Jewish imagination to American culture at-large.

The intention of this thesis is to redirect this focused approach towards a later Jewishness that is not so haunted by the Old World; that is, the experience of second generation Jews who were born as Americans and had only an inherited experience of life in

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<sup>14</sup> Weber, Donald, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs*, Indiana University Press, 2005, p,4-5.

the European shtetl (alongside émigré Jews like Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger whose experience of Europe was different to that of earlier immigrants and who brought with them their own interpretation of modernism). The films, plays, comics, television and radio programmes, and works of literature that are analysed in this study convey varying degrees of what we might call a Jewish aesthetic; the setting, language, and characterisations of Clifford Odets's *Awake & Sing!* and Gertrude Berg's *The Goldbergs* are arguably more "Jewish" than those seen in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* or *Double Indemnity*. But all of the texts, by sheer virtue of their Jewish provenance, articulate the ethno-cultural Jewish experience and have a discernible Jewish artistic signature. Much Jewish American scholarship understandably concentrates on identifying and reinforcing the *Jewishness* present in the community's artistic expression; fundamentally, this thesis is interested in identifying the "American" or universal aspect of those same texts.

In this way, although the thesis is nestled most precisely within Jewish American scholarship, the nature of the investigation invites the project to move beyond this and use the cultural output of Jewish artists to complicate our understanding of mid-twentieth century American culture as a whole and thus challenge the understandings of that period in the scholarship of American cultural studies. Here again, the kaleidoscopic nature of the Jewish imagination proves useful in illuminating aspects of American culture from the 1930s to the '50s, that have been overshadowed in both the scholarship and the nostalgic recollections of that era. There are a number of factors that cloud the view and interpretation of the mid-twentieth century; as Jacqueline Foertsch argues, apart from a handful of vague and isolated moments:

The period of 1946 to 1949 is otherwise a black hole of significance for twenty-first-century Americans. With remarkable regularity, histories of 'the post-war era' begin their analyses 'in 1950' or with 'the early fifties'; one comes to sense that everything happening on American soil in the late 1940s...occurred with



more significance and a better soundtrack in 'the fifties'...the late 1940s are readable as years of rest, recuperation and a catching of breath...or more accurately these years are readable as a time of holding breath, as a hiatus of historical and cultural innovation that ended...only at the dawn of the next decade.<sup>15</sup>

By analysing a wide-range of texts from different mediums, Foertsch's study – like all of those in the Edinburgh University Press series of American decade studies – seeks to remedy the reductive vision of the 1940s.

Foertsch's comments also hint at a wider issue in the study of American culture; that the fifties best sum up the general mood of this period is symptomatic of how the fifties aesthetic preponderates the contemporary interpretation of the mid-twentieth century. Scholarly and cultural understanding creates a concertina effect that collapses together years of intricate cultural history into an easily digestible, simplified and reductive version of actuality. This chronologically unsound concertina means certain parts of the mid-twentieth century that don't particularly support the dominant perspective or that actively undermine it fall into the folds of history; they are not so much lost as they are overshadowed by the more recognisable and more oft promoted events of the era. Thus, within the forties and fifties the two wars cast a shadow over how the era is viewed in historical memory; the Second World War is, accurately, seen as a time in which American economic, political and military power increased to a degree that far surpassed that of any other nation, whilst the Cold War and the stage of paranoia, propaganda and suspicion upon which it was played out dominates the interpretation of American culture throughout the 1950s. Thus, the peaks of this concertina highlight the era's historical moments and key themes, creating a restricted view of the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>15</sup> Foertsch, Jacqueline, *American Culture in the 1940s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p.201.

The inroads made by Buhle, Levinson, Whitfield, and Weber to challenge the linear approach of earlier Jewish American scholarship is mirrored in research within American cultural studies that seeks to augment the traditional or widely approved interpretation of mid-twentieth century American culture. Studies like Pamela Robertson Wojcik's *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* and Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes' *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in 50s America* attempt to emphasize the manifold and diverse nature of American culture throughout this period. These texts seek to augment the scholarly and cultural vision by interpreting issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the era's historical moments, through diverse aspects of mid-twentieth century American culture that are often under-represented in the literature. Wojcik's book, for example, challenges the reductive interpretation of "the home" in fifties culture as focusing almost exclusively on notions of suburbia, heterosexual relations, and the WASP nuclear family, expanding the term to include, for example, urban dwellings, bachelor pads, and racially diverse homeowners. The essays in *Containing America* suggest the importance of food and dress to our understanding of fifties culture, whilst also offering new and insightful readings of *Batman* comics and Disneyland, as well as challenging the traditional narrative of Cold War history and nationhood, and existing readings of fifties conformity. The aim is not to disprove previous understanding but to widen the spectrum of investigation so the appreciation of the cultural fabric of the mid-century is enriched and fibres that had previously been hidden become more pronounced.

The diverse and eclectic cultural output of Jewish American artists can be utilised to further illuminate the folds of mid-twentieth century American culture. By reading low-brow comics like *Batman* alongside high-art existentialist literature like *Dangling Man* the Jewish imagination offers the opportunity to analyse an all-embracing cultural spectrum that thus provides a comprehensive insight into the multiplicity of expression and the diversity of experience throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties. By embracing an approach that is wide-ranging and thus unifies the eclecticism of the Jewish imagination within popular culture via a

theme of shared experience like the ambivalence of transition, these differing and diverse voices can allow for an understanding that draws a precise insight. In addition to this, the unique cultural position of Jewish Americans as both insiders and outsiders, ethnic and American, meant that the community's artistic expression often articulated a unique perspective on American culture and the texts analysed here disclose a tendency to critique or challenge mainstream and mass culture. Whilst these voices are not necessarily dissenting, they articulate a diverse desire for accommodation that is often oversimplified in the literature as rebelliousness or nonconformist. In this way, the thesis intervenes in scholarship in a similar manner to way in which Jewish expression intervened in American culture in the mid-century; although the analysis here is ostensibly concerned with Jewish American culture, the insights offered are equally interested in the understanding of more general American culture at this time.

## **Comics and the Comics Industry: Ethnic Representations of an American Era**

The lifespan of the comics' Golden Age more or less encompasses the historical period explored in this thesis. Within the fantastic and seemingly innocuous world of Golden Age comics, an age that stretches from the late-1930s to the mid-1950s, there lays a wealth of wisdom regarding the culture of the United States. A survey of comic book content and the issues affecting the comic book industry reveals insights into the personal, parochial, national, and global concerns prevalent in mid-century American culture. With their socially conscious treatments that critique slum urban environments and irresponsible, uncaring capitalists the tone of the earlier editions of *Superman*, the comic that initiated the industry, capture the mood of thirties New Deal liberalism. As the nation geared up for entry into World War Two, comic books, particularly those featuring the antics of the newly created superhero subgenre, were instrumental in how American shaped her national character and her own self-image. As we will see, the task of re-imagining and reinstating a damaged Depression-era masculinity and

revitalising a national machismo vital for wartime national strength was informed, at least in part, by comic book aesthetics that were predicated upon uber-masculinity.

Similarly, the lead up to America's entry into World War Two and its participation in the conflict, both militarily and on the home front, can be narrated by the substance and rhetoric of contemporary comic book stories and characters. This, in turn, allows for a view of the conflict between isolationism and intervention and the issues surrounding gender and race that were important features of the cultural environment in which these comics played an integral part. As the nation moved into the post-war era and the content of these comic books and the characters therein necessarily altered, their place in cultural discourse allows for an interesting analysis of post-war cultural preoccupations in the new Cold War climate. Concerns regarding comic book content, undertaken largely in light of the much maligned and misrepresented concerns of Dr. Fredric Wertham, reflect contemporary anxieties surrounding juvenile delinquency and a host of adjacent fears. The crippling effects of the pressures brought to bear on the comic book industry reflect an American culture characterised by a propensity for hysteria, a fragility of individual identity, and a suffocating and free-floating cultural paranoia.<sup>16</sup>

As we will see in the chapter one, the comic book industry, much like the movie-making business, is heavily indebted to Jewish artistic and commercial innovation. The comics industry and comic book content reflects a distinctly Jewish condition, to the extent that Paul Buhle argues that it would be an "error not to identify the comic as *the* vernacular form in which Jewish genius...found its mass audience."<sup>17</sup> Although there is an arguably as strong a case for vaudeville or, especially for a mass audience, Classical Hollywood cinema to be proclaimed the epicentre of the Jewish American vernacular, Buhle's comment articulates the

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Wertham and mass culture see: Beaty, Bart, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, University Press of Mississippi, 2005; Brooker, Will, "Containing Batman: rereading Fredric Wertham and the comics of the 1950s", *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in 50s America*, University of Birmingham Press, 2000, pp.151-167.

<sup>17</sup> Buhle, Paul, *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an America Art Form*, The New York Press, 2008, p.10.

truism that the Jewish imagination lies at the very heart of the comic book. The vitality of comic books in articulating American concerns did not dissipate with the passing of the Golden Age, neither did the specific marriage between comic books and Jewish identity. Moving into the Silver Age the notion of excluded and divergent outsider identities continued in the shape of superheroes like *Spiderman*, *X-Men*, *Fantastic Four*, *Silver Surfer*, and *The Hulk* created largely by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. These new heroes fitted their cultural environment but were built upon industry codes laid out in the earlier superhero comics. Jewish authored comic books – or more precisely, graphic novels – also moved into more austere and challenging territory with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1972-1991) and Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978). Both of these texts 'use' the mid-century not only as a backdrop for their stories, but as an integral aspect of their thematic agenda, suggesting that the 1930s through the 1950s was a period of special significance for Jewish American identity and experience. By dovetailing his autobiographical experience of researching and writing *Maus* with his father's biography and recollection of the Holocaust, along with the detailing of their father-son relationship, Spiegelman creates an intergenerational account of how the Jewish experience in the mid-century reverberates with significance for second, third, and fourth generation Jews (all articulated within a medium inspired by the Jewish imagination).

The popularity of comic book movies in the past ten years or so suggests that the essential mythos of superhero characters like *Superman*, *Batman*, *Captain America*, *Spiderman*, and *X-Men* possess a universal appeal in terms of what these characters articulate about individual identity within an American environment. In most of these films there remains only a trace of their temporal and ethnic origin; although a Jewish artistic echo can be read in these contemporary texts, what is most apparent are their debates about universal themes like exclusion, morality, and troubled identities. Indeed, the fact that these distinctly Jewish modes of expression continue to resonate and adapt to new cultural climates in the present day is testament to the vitality of their thematic and aesthetic agenda (the continued development of other forms of ostensibly Jewish cultural expression that were created or

nurtured during the mid-twentieth century, such as Weegee's sensationalist photojournalism, the film noir aesthetic, sci-fi creature features, and *The Goldberg's* New York "apartment" sitcom also suggest the universal strength of Jewish expression). In this way, the universal aspect of the Jewish American imagination appears to be proven; divorced from their ethnic importance and removed from the historical period that they were originally produced to represent, these superheroes and their fictional world still maintain an ability to tap into current trends of thought and feeling. Thus before undertaking an investigation into the mid-century, it is useful to analyse these modern comic book-inspired texts that reach into the cultural past of the Jewish imagination to inspire their own artistic vision. In doing so we will see that the ethnic spine of the comic book industry was not only successful in articulating more general anxieties and identities in the mid-century, but that the essential universalism of the Jewish imagination within comic books allows for their mythos to continue to address issues that remained pertinent to the American character as the pages of the twentieth century were turned and a new post-9/11 chapter was written.

That said, the significance of the specific ethnic and historical provenance of the comic book aesthetic remains detectable in many of these films, and especially in Jewish director Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000). The first *X-Men* comic, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two second-generation Jews, was published in 1963; Singer's film borrows freely from the narrative of *X-Men* comics since then. The X-Men are a mutant superhero team led by Dr. Charles Xavier who campaigns for the acceptance of mutants and harbours a belief that harmony can exist between mutants and humans. Xavier and the X-Men's antagonist is Magneto, a fellow mutant and embittered Holocaust-survivor dedicated to enacting revenge upon humankind for the oppression and discrimination directed towards mutants. As Danny Fingeroth recognises, the X-Men are the "most direct metaphor for tolerance, racial and otherwise, to grace the pages of comic books."<sup>18</sup> The author's discussion of the *X-Men* mythos illustrates how rich the comic

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<sup>18</sup> Fingeroth, Danny, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, Continuum, 2007, p.113.

book text is as, for example, an analogy for Cold War anxieties about radiation and nuclear power, a re-enactment of Jewish communal identity, a representation of various subcultures, and a treatise on racial, ethnic, and religious affinity.<sup>19</sup>

For Lawrence Baron, Singer's film is imbued with cyphers for Jewish identity and the modern Jewish experience. Dr. Xavier, though not Jewish, is cast as a crypto-Jew, his superior intelligence and disability helping him to fulfil the "stereotype of Jewish males as intellectuals with weak bodies."<sup>20</sup> Xavier's "mission to acculturate the mutants and train them to defend their host society mirrors the integrationist strategies pursued by many of the first generation of Jews born in America," and his idea of mutants attempting to gain acceptance whilst still retaining the essential aspects of their distinctiveness suggests the experience of Jews as ostracised and mythicized cultural 'others' trying to achieve respectful accommodation within the mainstream.<sup>21</sup> Magneto, on the other hand, is an ambiguous villain; the *raison d'être* behind his nefarious crusade to convert humankind to mutants (or eliminate the human race), is borne out of him having survived the attempted genocide of Jews. Thus, Magneto simultaneously embodies anxieties regarding a repetition of the Holocaust and that same pernicious threat.

Arie Kaplan notes that Magneto's followers, the Sentinels "work as a metaphor for everything from Nazi stormtroopers to Klansmen to rabid McCarthyites...Lee and Kirby created not only a metaphor for the downtrodden (the X-Men) but a metaphor for the persecutors (the Sentinels)."<sup>22</sup> Baron also argues that Singer invites a more general reading:

Singer explicitly draws parallels between the Holocaust survivors and connived by Magneto and chapters from U.S. history that resulted from mass hysteria and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.113-129.

<sup>20</sup> Baron, Lawrence, "X-Men as J-Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 22.1, 2003, pp.44-52, p.47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.47.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, Arie, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Jewish Publication Society, 2008, p.113-114

fear of groups allegedly posing a threat to the American way of life. Senator Kelly, who spearheads the movement for national and international registration of mutants, is a modern incarnation of Joseph McCarthy. The only difference is that he is obsessed with ferreting out mutants instead of communists...*X-Men* encourages younger viewers to relate its themes to contemporary issues... By presenting Dr. X so much more positively than Magneto and Kelly Singer affirms his belief "that all kinds of people should live in as much peace and harmony as humanly possible on this planet, regardless of their differences."<sup>23</sup>

Singer's film shows how the themes and characterisations within comic book texts like *X-Men* have the ability to act metaphorically or analogously. Much like the fight between Batman, Superman, Captain America and their various villains, the X-Men and the Sentinels symbolise a battle between tolerance, acceptance and harmony and discrimination, persecution, and exclusion. Still, by emphasising Magneto's Holocaust "origin story", Singer, who had already examined the cultural legacy of the Holocaust in *Apt Pupil* (1998), suggests that the Jewish American mid-century experience and imagination is integral to comic books and the American psyche.

### ***Batman & Captain America: The First Avenger: Zeitgeist Cinema and the Maintenance of the Superhero Mythos.***

The representational value of comics and the comic book industry to the cultural history of the mid-twentieth century has been recognised in two recent examples of American culture; Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnson, 2011). The presence of these texts in contemporary American culture attests to the continued relevance of the mid-century Jewish imagination; more importantly for the interests of this thesis, this continued relevance indicates the universal qualities of the Jewish imagination in communicating with wider American identity.

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<sup>23</sup> Baron, Lawrence, "X-Men as J-Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie," p.51-52



Whereas the former work joins a body of texts, be they comic books or films based on comic books, that accentuates the narrative of Jewish involvement in the mid-century and the importance of Jewish identity and assimilation as a way of understanding the cultural movements of this period, the latter attempts a postmodern approach that self-consciously recognises the cultural importance of *Captain America* comics within early-1940s wartime America whilst simultaneously reducing the essential 'American' aspects of the character's identity to better fit the contemporary cultural climate. This suggests that the cardinal characteristic of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's creation has been adulterated, but on closer examination, the depreciation of Captain America's brash patriotism means that his essential mythos stays true to his original appearance in *Action Comics* in 1941.

The thesis will analyse the Captain America comic book 'story' in much more detail in the first chapter; here it is suffice to say that Steve Rogers, a feeble but enthusiastic Brooklyn kid eager to conscript and battle the Nazis, is registered 4-F, unfit for duty. Nevertheless, he is offered the chance to be injected with a super serum that transforms him from a weakling into Captain America, an all-American hero. *Captain America* comics proved immensely popular throughout World War Two when the pages were filled with the eponymous hero fighting Hitler, his henchmen, and the Japanese. In his review of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Peter Bradshaw points out that in Johnson's film:

The stylish, post-modern explanation for Captain America's existence is that, once bursting out all over with muscles, Steve is given a superhero costume and pressed into service as an explicitly fictional character, touring with a morale-raising gang-show to raise funds and even starring in a hokey movie serial. Inevitably, the Captain finds this showbiz imposture irksome and even

humiliating, and needs a way to show the world that he can serve his country and fight the Nazis for real.<sup>24</sup>

This postmodern recognition of *Captain America* comic's significance within 1940s wartime American culture is augmented by the thoroughly camp and exaggerated aesthetic tone that burlesques the Golden Age comic book tradition, especially the ostentatious action sequences and the self-knowing computer-aided effects that make no attempt to disguise their artifice.

Yet the import of the comic book context threatens to be lost amongst a postmodern miasma of cinematic references that range from the apt to the curious, including, but surely not limited to *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1946), *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook, 1998), *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the H-Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Mission Impossible* (Brian De Palma, 1996), *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), *Cliffhanger* (Renny Harlin, 1993), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), and, bizarrely, *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994) and *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). Thus, after the innovative opening act, the film goes through a period of postmodern detachment; sleek and ironic nostalgia takes precedence over aesthetic realism; symbols and signifiers are borrowed freely and seemingly without much forethought; and characterisations are drawn along broad and archetypal lines where Captain America is necessarily the epitome of masculinity, Peggy Carter possesses a refined sexuality that is somewhere between Gilda and Jessica Rabbit, and Johann Schmidt is that most evil of villains: a demented Nazi tyrant in possession of both super-powers and a desire to take over the world.

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<sup>24</sup> Bradshaw, Peter, "Captain America: The First Avenger – Review", *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jul/28/captain-america-film-review>

Even though the self-reflexive awareness of Captain America's textual significance signals the character's cultural importance, in a fictional environment in which Nazis become mere pantomime villains, Captain America is similarly de-historicised and the character threatens to lose his socio-cultural emphasis. The film reduces the comic book form down to its very essence whereby heroism, masculinity, campness, and sexuality exist for transient and immediate gratification. The meanings at this point are so diluted by the artificiality of the viewing experience that what remains is a frivolous and apparently meaningless prototype of a Hollywood action movie. Of course, this in itself suggests why the comic book superhero has had a lasting appeal: even when divorced from the context of cultural importance the comic aesthetic still presents an enchanting artistic appeal. Given, however, the fact that Jack Kirby and Joe Simon created *Captain America* with the explicit intention of interacting with and challenging the cultural milieu of wartime America, using the character as a potent symbol of the common Jewish and American cause against Hitler, it appears antithetical to the character's mythos that he become removed from the cultural spectrum, in effect denying Kirby and Simon's creation of its subsistence.

Writing in *The Jerusalem Post*, Simcha Weinstein moves beyond suggesting that the character is de-historicised, arguing that the film strips Captain America of the most fundamental aspect of his being: his American identity:

Unfortunately, the spirit of 1941 (let alone 1776) is a long way off. In an era of anti-Americanism -- at home and abroad -- the movie's director and star have been playing down the character's American identity. Director Joe Johnston insists that "this is not about America so much as it is about the spirit of doing the right thing." Chris Evans, who plays the title character, echoes the sentiment,

saying that “I’m not trying to get too lost in the American side of it. This isn’t a flag-waving movie.”<sup>25</sup>

The importance of global markets coupled with the fragility of the American “brand” around the world meant that, both artistically and commercial, the American aspect of *Captain America* was scaled back, with distributors being offered the option of ‘dropping’ the “Captain America” in the title and simply calling the film “The First Avenger” (with Russia, Ukraine and South Korea accepting the marketing invitation).<sup>26</sup> For Weinstein, the reduced emphasis on patriotism and nationhood is an almost offensive slur on the Captain America myth, “Hollywood is now more concerned with international box office numbers than national pride, never mind respecting the obvious wishes of the two artists without whom Captain America wouldn’t exist,” he states.<sup>27</sup> In effect Weinstein suggests that by reducing the American side of Captain America, the film abnegates the character’s Jewish, national, and historical contextual importance. But whilst this may ring true for the middle-third of the film in which *Captain America’s* imminent meaning struggles for significance amongst the cyclonic postmodern semiotic commotion, the final act brings the film’s self-awareness into a focus that taps into the zeitgeist mood regarding nationhood and masculinity that exists within contemporary American cinema.

Out of the colourful whirlwind of intertextual frivolity and by-the-numbers blockbuster-spectacle emerges a surprisingly poignant and intelligent debate on post-9/11 American identity and culture. Schmidt, intent on annihilating American cities, boards a plane bound for the US laden with bombs (or WMDs...) emblazoned with names of various American metropolises. As the flight takes off, Captain America clambers aboard, defeats some footmen, disables some bombs, and battles Schmidt, who, having handled the ‘tesseract’ (a mysterious energy that will enable him to achieve world-domination) evaporates into a blinding light.

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<sup>25</sup> Weinstein, Simcha, “Patriot Games: Is Captain America Too America?” *The Jerusalem Post*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2011. <http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=230217>

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

Seizing control of the aircraft, Captain America realises that it is on an unavoidable collision-course with New York City; the best the superhero can do is to nosedive into the Arctic, perhaps sacrificing himself along the way. When we next see Cap', he awakes in what appears to be a 1940s hospital room; realising that the baseball game playing on the radio is anachronistic he bursts out of the room, revealing to the viewer that the 'room' is in fact a 'set', and emerges into present day Times Square where he is informed by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) that he has been asleep for seventy-years.

The allusions to 9/11 and especially Flight 93 are apparent: an aircraft heading to destroy New York and various other US landmarks is heroically deposed of its terrorist pilot, tragically too late to save the over-thrower. More than this, the character's 'death' whilst defeating the Nazi threat and his postmodern emergence from cultural hibernation are interesting when put in the context of Shaun Treat's ideas about a post-9/11 "superhero zeitgeist" that has seen more superhero films released since 2001 than in the previous seventy years combined, along with the popularity of television programmes like *Smallville* and *Heroes*. Comic book style action figures of George Bush as a "'Mission Accomplished" flight-suited" hero and Sarah Palin as a "GOP superheroine", alongside the fact that Presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama were asked who their favourite superhero was and have been made into comic book heroes themselves suggests that the comic aesthetic has some utility within the modern political and cultural sphere.<sup>28</sup>

Treat is interested in the 'darker' superhero texts, especially the Batman franchise that engages the "troubling enjoyment of 9/11, a trauma facilitating attractions to violent messiahs and crusading vigilantes."<sup>29</sup> Building on work that contextualises superheroes as agents of Late Capitalism, Treat argues that "schizophrenic superheroes and their evil doppelgangers become material embodiments of present ideological antagonisms and co-constitutive

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<sup>28</sup> Shaun Treat (2009): How America Learned to Stop Worrying and Cynically ENJOY! The Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6:1, p.105-6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.105.

intersubjectivities.”<sup>30</sup> For Treat, the ideological ambiguity of the *Batman* franchise “illustrate[s] the fetishistic denial of cynical reason in Late Capitalism theorized by Slavoj Žižek,” epitomising the mood of the post-9/11 superhero zeitgeist that portrays an “increasing cultural attraction to cynical cyborg SuperAntiheroes.”<sup>31</sup> Vincent M. Gaine also suggests that the Batman franchise presents the character as a “*post-traumatic hero*,” pointing out that the films articulate a free-floating rather than specific anxiety.<sup>32</sup> Batman films function by negotiating an un-attached anxiety via a titillating antihero that allows the viewer to indulge in terror-as-fantasy; they capture the prevailing mood by crafting a superhero that teeters on the edge supervillain, agitating a post-9/11 cultural anxiety that terror is never far away.

Although *Captain America: The First Avenger* presents its eponymous character as a post-traumatic hero and explores a scenario of pseudo-terror, there is little moral ambiguity or antiheroism in the character’s quest that would enable us to position the film within the “superhero zeitgeist” identified by Treat. Instead, the film marries the superhero genre with a new interpretation of a dormant mood within American cinema: the rehabilitation of white American masculinity. In this way, the essential aspect of the Captain America mythos, a determination to champion American masculinity and nationhood, remains intact, showing how specifically ethnic concerns first articulated in the forties can re-emerge in American culture thanks to their universal congruity.

Paul Grainge has discussed a movement within early-nineties cinema towards restoring the preponderant identity of the emasculated male. This effort, by such films as the *Schindler's List* and *Forrest Gump*, attempted to repair the damaged white American male ego by creating awe-inspiring masculine heroes. Schindler and Forrest were the action heroes of filmic nostalgia, sent through the pages of history to deliver the American people from their troubled past, the agents of their saviour, lest we forget, are the eponymous white-male

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.104.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.103.

<sup>32</sup> Gaine, Vincent M., “Genre and Superheroism: *Batman* in the New Millennium,” in *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*, edited by Richard J. Gray II & Betty Kaklamanidou, McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2011, p.119

protagonists. Although, as Grainge realises, Schindler and Forrest have their faults, the ultimate resolution of both films results in these character flaws being overcome, rendered inconsequential, or wholly eradicated - the fallibilities of the American male become consigned to a past where culpability for America's social and political scars rest not on the shoulders of the white-male but on those of any deviants from this newly-restored norm. In this instance nostalgia heals through ignorance and through its propensity to aggrandise the ability of the masculine WASP-identity to re-establish a lost equilibrium. That both films end in the present - a time removed from the turmoil of the past - reinforces this fact, thus sealing the blissful ignorance of the nostalgic loop in a positive resolution of survival, dominance, honour and nobility of the white-male protagonists.

This, of course, seems remarkably similar to the narrative arc witnessed in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, especially given the fact that the title character can be perhaps considered as *the* white American male: a superb example of American military prowess and white-identity. The film, however, updates this theme to better fit a post-9/11 mood. As Martin Halliwell surmises, "most commentators agree that the film industry has recently come together to provide a left-liberal response to the more pernicious forces that George Bush's war on terrorism has spread at home."<sup>33</sup> The postmodern application of ironic nostalgia serves to imbue Captain America with venerable American ideals of masculinity. Simultaneously, the quietness of the character's identification with US nationhood and the comprehensive disavowal of jingoistic patriotism recast the superhero as an embodiment of a post-9/11 troubled white-liberal masculinity that betrays culpability and pride in equal measure.

Vera Dika points out in her discussions on nostalgia and Barthes' definition of myth that "...myth is also the carrier of ideology, an unconscious meaning...of which the consumer is not aware."<sup>34</sup> Throughout *Captain America: The First Avenger* a new myth is invoked where nationhood and patriotism is informed by citizenship and pride rather than jingoism and

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<sup>33</sup> Halliwell, Martin, *American Culture in the 1950s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p.237.

<sup>34</sup> Dika, Vera, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.12.

terror. At one point Captain America says “I’m just a kid from Brooklyn” and when he asks his boyhood chum, Bucky (Sebastian Stan), if he is “Ready to follow Captain America?” he replies, “Fellow I know from Brooklyn who was too dumb to run away from a fight – I’m following him.” Despite this, in the final battle between Captain America and Schmidt, the notion of nationhood is reinforced; the latter wonders why the former is wasting his powers helping America: “I’ve seen the future, there are no flags,” proclaims the supervillain, to which Captain America replies “Not my future!” In this way the film personifies patriotism and makes it an individual investment in a set of ideals and a prideful dogma rather than chest-puffing nationalistic chauvinism.

*Captain American* problematizes the understanding of the purpose of nostalgia in postmodern theory. In its simplest form nostalgia’s function in cultural remembering is to use the past as a playground in which to exercise the imperatives of the present and inspire the aspirations of the future. According to Jameson, however, this means that nostalgia creates a problem within postmodern American culture as it contradicts genuine historicity.<sup>35</sup> As Paul Grainge explains, this:

...nostalgia mode articulates a concept of style, a representational effect with implications for our cultural experience of the past. To the likes of Fredric Jameson the central issue is not how the past is made to relate to the present. Rather, the nostalgia mode questions the ability to apprehend the past at all in a postmodern culture distinguished by the profound waning of history.<sup>36</sup>

Grainge contrasts the nostalgia *mode* with nostalgia *mood*, arguing that although they both treat history in a similar manner whereby the past becomes a malleable commodity, they differ drastically in how that past is utilised. Whilst the nostalgia mood seeks a visceral reaction to an implied reality, the nostalgia mode is not concerned with actuality and codifies an

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<sup>35</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1993, p.19.

<sup>36</sup> Grainge, Paul, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*, Praeger, 2002, p.21.



intertextual past to create a fatuous history that need not recognise the passage of time or the concept of chronology. Paradoxically of course, this “unreal” history is as real as any other, because to the postmodern world history is an increasingly intangible, unverifiable abstract concept, hence it can be commodified.

It is this nostalgic mode that *Captain America* uses to fashion a postmodern history. The detritus of intertextual imagery conforms to Jim Collin’s notions of “eclectic irony,” whereby nostalgic symbolism is used to present a disposable past in which historical imagery is divorced from its contextual importance and manipulated in an effort to reveal its ideological malleability.<sup>37</sup> The deluge of intertextual references, the postmodern self-awareness, and the exaggerated nostalgic aesthetic come together in the final sequence when Captain America emerges into Times Square: behind him, amongst the multitude of advertisements and slogans, the image of a soldier (that appears to be a cross between “World War Two” and a toy soldier) can be seen looped on a screen. After the affecting allusions to 9/11, the film breaks the fourth-wall and interrogates the viewer’s surreal enjoyment of the Second World War and their indulgence in post-9/11 terror-as-fantasy. At the epicentre of New York, a city that symbolises both the war-on-terror and the American “brand,” and amid the bright lights of commodity culture, both Captain American and the soldier on the screen are framed images appropriated and traded with wilful disregard for their original symbolism. *Captain America: The First Avenger* appears acutely aware of its own position within American culture; placing itself within a framework of post-9/11 postmodern representation (of which games like *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honour*, and *Battlefield* are the best examples) that sustains a desire for the titillating exploration of terror that commodifies historical imagery in the process. The nostalgic aesthetic not only burlesques the comic book form, therefore, but artifice itself.

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<sup>37</sup> Collins, Jim; Preacher, Ava; Radner, Hilary (Editors), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Routledge, 1993, p.242.

When placed within the context of the film's participation in post-9/11 discourse, however, the nostalgia and intertextuality begin to take on a meaning beyond that of "eclectic irony." The cinematic references place Captain America within a pantheon of masculine action heroes like Indiana Jones, James Bond, and Ethan Hunt. The nostalgic and self-knowing context of Captain America in World War Two builds upon this context and invokes Grainge's ideas about the nostalgia *mood*. By offering up a historical scenario whereby Captain America delivers the nation from a global threat and then having the character emerge from cultural hibernation the film creates a soothing scenario in a post-9/11 cultural environment marked by the free-floating anxiety exploited by the *Batman* franchise. Indeed, Treat points out that "superheroes flourish during traumatizing wars abroad and an economic crisis inherited from Gilded Age corporate corruption at home"<sup>38</sup> so it is hardly surprising that Captain America should arise from his cultural dormancy to help the national character. This Captain America, however, is not the same one that fought on the comic book front during the Second World War; gone is the bellicose bravado and exaggerated patriotism and in its place is a new American masculinity and interpretation of nationhood.

By articulating a proud patriotism and by attempting to rehabilitate a damaged masculinity, far from disrespecting the wishes of Kirby and Simon like Weinstein suggests, Captain America re-intervenes in America culture in the same way that the original text appeared in 1941. The true spirit of the comic book lives on in *Captain America: The First Avenger* simply because meaningful messages about nationhood and masculinity are disguised amongst a multitude of novel artistic puerility. As I will discuss in chapters one and two, whilst during the Second World War *Captain America* embodied patriotism, victory, and flag-waving nationhood, *Batman* explored the underbelly of the American Dream and a moral ambiguity that sat at the heart of American culture. Seventy years on, with Captain American offering a remedy to the cultural anxiety that Batman appears determined to exacerbate, these same

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<sup>38</sup> Shaun Treat (2009): How America Learned to Stop Worrying and Cynically ENJOY! The Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist, p.105.

character traits remain intact, suggesting that the comic book form and the mid-century, with Jewish identity as their axial constituent, retains a special significance within the American cultural landscape.

### ***Awake and Sing!:* The Dawn of a New Jewish American Culture**

The cultural environment out of which the Jewish imagination emerged in the mid-twentieth century, and which gave rise to the creation of the comic book industry, is best described in the work by Clifford Odets, who seemed to narrate the desires and anxieties that many Americans felt during the 1930s. Of course, there had been cultural texts before Odets that addressed Jewish identity and culture, such as *Abie's Irish Rose* (Anne Nichols, 1922) and works that explored the Jewish encounter with America, like *The Rise of David Levinsky* (Abraham Cahan, 1917) or *The Promised Land* (Mary Antin, 1912). Odets, however, was arguably the first, and certainly the most popular and celebrated of artists to dramatize the experience of second-generation Jews as they negotiated an inherited Jewish identity and the American cultural landscape. And so, it is with Odets that we begin the study of Jewish American popular culture in the mid-century and how the Jewish imagination articulated the ambivalence of transition that marked the experience of Jews and the experience of a wider American character at this time.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1935, *Waiting for Lefty*, a one-act play about a worker's strike that cost just over eight dollars to produce, was performed as part of a *New Theatre* benefit event.<sup>39</sup> Before the curtain was raised on the performance of Clifford Odets's debut play, no-one in the audience that evening at the Civic Repertory Theatre could have predicted that they were about to witness an event that was "to be noted in the annals of history."<sup>40</sup> At the close of the performance, however, after twenty-eight curtain calls, the audience "...was delirious. It stormed the stage...people went from the theatre dazed and happy: a new awareness and

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<sup>39</sup> Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright, The Years from 1906-1940*, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002, p.315.

<sup>40</sup> Clurman, Harold, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties*, Da Capo Press, 1985, p.147.

confidence had entered their lives.”<sup>41</sup> Odets’s piece of agit-prop was a tour de force that captured the spirit of the time; theatres clambered over one another for the rights to perform the play. Many Americans were invigorated by the play’s revolutionary vitality, others were appalled and outraged; at a premier of the play in Boston on 6<sup>th</sup> April four members of the cast were arrested for “using profanity in a public assemblage.” In Newark, New Jersey, a staging was halted by squads of police.<sup>42</sup>

Less than two months later, on February 19<sup>th</sup>, Odets’s *Awake & Sing!*, a play that examines the inter-generational struggles and economic strife afflicting the Bronx-dwelling Berger family, debuted at the Belasco Theatre where it received fifteen curtain calls. At first glance, *Awake and Sing!* could be mistaken as nothing more than a snapshot of Jewish life in early-1930s New York; an esoteric examination of a grim ethnic reality that had little relevance to a wider American populace. Indeed, as scholars have noted, the language, setting, aesthetics, and themes of the play are all emblematic of a specifically “Jewish” identity and experience. Littered with *Yiddishkayt*, underscored by the neo-Marxism and social rebellion so beloved of many in the Jewish community and its author, and achingly poignant in its illumination of the dark familial chasm created by generational disparities and ethnic assimilation, *Awake and Sing!* is manifestly representative of 1930s American Jewry.

Upon seeing a performance of Odets’s play, the writer Alfred Kazin recalls an epiphanous moment when he realised that the lives of ordinary Jewish Americans, like himself, were worthy of great art, “...watching my mother and father and uncles and aunts occupying the stage in *Awake and Sing!* by as much right as if they were Hamlet and Lear, I understood at last. It was all one, as I had always known. Art and truth and hope could yet come together...”<sup>43</sup> It was a realisation shared by many in the Jewish community: their greenhorn *yinglish*, which so often spelled embarrassment and stunted social discourse, took on a certain lyricism when

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.148.

<sup>42</sup> “Boston Police Halt Play for Profanity,” *New York Times*, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1935, p.37; Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p.366

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p.324.

projected from the stage at the Belasco Theatre and served to validate their emotional yearnings and elevate their petty struggles to their rightful place of utmost importance. Yet the play also signalled a departure from the way in which Jews had previously been represented in American theatre and lent the inhabitants of Bronx tenements a voice that had heretofore been muted. It was an innovation that some contemporary reviewers found uncomfortable; as Wendy Smith comments, among the mainstream press, the “...underlying assumption was still that such common folk belonged in the theatre only as the subjects of low comedy or sentimental melodrama. Odets treated them as real people whose lives and aspirations were of general interest, and the Group’s acting gave them a dignity not everyone thought they deserved.”<sup>44</sup>

The themes of the play also indicate a desire by Odets to address issues that had a more general import. The struggle between the Marxist grandfather, Jacob, and the materialistic mother, Bessie, for the heart, mind and future of the young and dispirited Ralph is the plot which drives the play and contains the theme of assimilation that would have spoken especially to a Jewish audience. This is only one thread, however, of a richly textured play that Margaret Brenman-Gibson, Odets’s biographer, calls “almost plotless” on the surface.<sup>45</sup> *Awake and Sing!* is, first and foremost, a play about Jews struggling to adapt to the abandonment of Jewish values and battling to find a comfortable existence between Jewish tradition and American imperatives in Bronx tenements; the overriding themes, however, of environmental and economic factors stunting youth and vitality, hold a more universal pertinence.

Thus, if the language and setting made *Awake and Sing!* ostensibly Jewish, the underlying themes, whilst being symptomatic of Jewish American cultural tradition and experience, ensured that it had a more general appeal. These themes sprang from the Berger family’s material and spiritual frustrations and particularly from Ralph Berger’s perilous position between two polemic ideals: the revolutionary spirit of his grandfather or the material

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, Wendy, *Real Life: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940*, Grove Weidenfeld, 1992, p.209.

<sup>45</sup> Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p.249.

aspirations of his mother. Yet the gossamer of communal, religious, familial, private, and ideological binds that so threatened to entangle Ralph and suffocate his youthful desires also threatened to devour many American males for whom the economic depression had arrested the progress of a future pregnant with possibilities, and caused them to question the legitimacy of American social institutions and ideological value systems.

The revolutionary spirit with which the play was written, coupled with the playwright's success with *Waiting for Lefty*, prompted the *New York Times* to hail Odets as a "Fresh Talent" and as a "new dramatist with exciting potentialities."<sup>46</sup> Yet the newspaper nevertheless curbed its enthusiasm for the play itself:

*Awake and Sing!* seems curiously bound by its own inner turmoil until the decisions of the last act are made. Yet it is difficult for the theatregoer to believe that these impulsive decisions solve anything more than Mr. Odets's emotional state of mind. Probably he intended *Awake and Sing!* as revolutionary drama, and perhaps that is what it is. But many theatregoers will feel that the thinking in the play does not measure up to the frenzy of its emotions. Although Mr. Odets write those last scenes with a rapture that sounds almost like a sense of relief, they leave me still bewildered about the motive and logic of the play...in spite of its vitality *Awake and Sing!* leaves a final impression of nebulous thinking.<sup>47</sup>

The primary failure of the play is that Odets insists upon underpinning Ralph's spiritual awakening with a diminished Marxist ideology rather than simply a humanist determination for self-betterment. Ralph is too self-absorbed for most of the play for the audience to believe that implicit in his awakening is a desire to extend it to social amelioration. C.W.E Bigsby argues that rather than reiterating Marxist rhetoric, the "... awakening with which the play climaxes is very much that moral regeneration for which Roosevelt had called and which he

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<sup>46</sup> Atkinson, Brook, "Fresh Talent; Clifford Odets Revealed as the Most Promising New American Dramatist", *New York Times*, March 10, 1935, Section: Drama-Screen-Music-Art-Travel-Resorts, p.xi.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.xi.

was to continue to call for in his Second Inaugural.”<sup>48</sup> An argument echoed by Odets’s biographer:

The tacked-on quality of his self-conscious Marxist metaphor is nowhere more apparent than in...the successive drafts of *I Got the Blues* as it becomes the classic *Awake and Sing!* reflect his deliberate and cerebral effort to couch in Marxist lingo his rebellion as well as his hopes for the future...The impact of *Awake and Sing!* derives not from its social protest against the horrors of poverty, but from the potency of spirit in its people.<sup>49</sup>

It was a facet of Odets’s early work that the playwright himself would ponder over in later years, as discussed by Brenman-Gibson, “Later he would puzzle over how he had damaged his early plays when he had “tried to take some kind of real life I knew and tried to press it into some kind of ideological mold.”<sup>50</sup> If we divorce Ralph’s actions from Odets’s desire to articulate a Marxist manifesto, his personal rebirth feels a little more believable and inspiring.<sup>51</sup>

Yet even with this qualification, the revivification that Odets’s implies through Ralph’s decision ultimately fails to feel anything other than wishful thinking. Indeed, for all three of the characters for whom self-determination or socialist revolution offers hope for the future, only death and dashed dreams await. Jacob’s suicide, an act intended to provide Ralph with a \$3000 life insurance payment, contradicts the older man’s dedication to social revolution and contempt for American materiality; his last act is one of self-betrayal and futile despair. Hennie, Ralph’s sister, is forced into a marriage of convenience with Sam Feinschreiber after becoming pregnant to another man. R. Baird Shuman reasons that “through this marriage, Odets implies that the whole family cycle will recur; Sam will become the emasculated

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<sup>48</sup> Bigsby, C.W.E., *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume One, 1900-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.172 & 168

<sup>49</sup> Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p 249.

<sup>50</sup> Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p.249.

<sup>51</sup> Jordan Y. Miller and Winifred L. Frazer note that “Although it is sudden and a bit stagy, [Ralph’s] outburst [at the end of the play] is probably not all that much out of character, and it does provide Odets with a brief opportunity to have his say.” *American Drama between the Wars: A Critical History*, Twayne Publishers, 1991, p.177.

husband, Hennie the dominant wife and controlling mother.”<sup>52</sup> Ralph, in deciding to follow in Jacob’s ideological footsteps, and possessing a similar lack of understanding regarding the inner workings of socialist ideology beyond a vague anti-capitalist, pro-worker stance, damns himself to a future similar to that of his grandfather.

Both Ralph and Hennie are doomed to emulate their elders, Hennie only manages to flee the fate of suffocating domestication when, in the final scene, she runs off with the embittered Moe Axelrod, eschewing morality in the process, and is likely to find as much disappointment in her new emotional and physical destination as she has experienced in the Bronx. The only character who really triumphs is Bessie; at the end of the play she has dispatched Jacob as competitor for Ralph’s future, successfully deterred her son from pursuing a relationship with an unworthy sweetheart, and has earned \$3000 in the process. The overriding feeling of bewilderment felt by the *New York Times* reviewer is likely caused by the fact that in a play that claims to offer a joyous and invigorating manifesto for the future, the vague Marxist revolution that Ralph aspires toward, the suicide of Jacob, and the adulterous solution taken by Hennie mean that only the futility of hope lingers on after the curtain falls.

Nevertheless, by examining the experiences of a lower-class Jewish family occupying a particular moment in Jewish American socio-economic history, evidenced in the language, ideologies, and desires of the Berger family, Odets managed to represent a wider American experience. As Margaret Brenman-Gibson notes, Odets dared to “...put on the stage the lives of recognisable people struggling for life amidst “petty conditions.” And he was hoping their conflicts – by reason of their universality – would reach an audience not limited to Jewish-Americans.”<sup>53</sup> The conflicts, struggles and conditions that collapse in upon the inhabitants of the Berger household serve to demonstrate the desperation of their dreams, and it is this theme that ensured that *Awake and Sing!* was a play that had an appeal outside of the Jewish community. The desire to locate an identity amongst a myriad of cultural factors seen in the

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<sup>52</sup> Shurman, R. Baird, “Clifford Odets and the Jewish Context”, p.91.

<sup>53</sup> Brenman-Gibson, Margaret, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright*, p.259.



play sets the tone for the preoccupations of the Jewish imagination for the next quarter-century. The ambivalence created by the negotiation of ethnic, communal, familial, environmental and national identities is the leitmotif that unifies the Jewish imagination in the mid-century. More precisely, however, Ralph's desperation to secure a viable masculine identity and find accommodation within an overarching paradigm, consumer-capitalist American cultural climate is the unifying and concurrent interest of the Jewish imagination and that which is echoed in the analysis of the texts that follow.

## Chapter Two

### American Dreams, Ethnic Realities: Cultural Identity in *Superman* and *Captain America*

In the mid-twentieth century, superhero comic books were big business: their sales figures, saturation into various forms of media, syndication in newspapers, associated merchandise, and broad readership all indicate how quickly this new form of expression took flight in American culture.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the inexpensive price and readily accessible reading-range of the comic book format enabled the opportunity for a large audience, it was the relevance of the material printed on the well-thumbed pages of these comics that meant that the superhero's cape swiftly became sutured into the tapestry of American culture. These comics possessed the ability to not only communicate the climate of the Depression and the Second World War, but also intervene in culture and influence the perception of masculinity and nationhood.

*Superman* and *Captain America*, in particular, being the first superhero comics to approach the Depression and the first to address American's involvement in the Second World War respectively, are of particular interest because they offer differing discourses on the formation of

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<sup>1</sup>As a benchmark for sales, Bradford W. Wright shows us that "At a time when most comic book titles sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue, each issue of *Action Comics* (featuring on Superman story each) regularly sold about 900,000 copies per month. Each bimonthly issue of the *Superman* title...sold an average of 1,300,000." (Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2001, p.13.) In 1943 alone, all titles sold a total of twenty-five million comics (Buhle, Paul, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood*, p.112). In slightly more hyperbolic terms, Sgt. Sanderson Vanderbilt writing in *Yank* magazine, an army weekly, reports that the Market Research Company of America, "estimated that 70,000,000 people, or just about half the population of the US, are addicted to comic magazines," continuing that these comics were read by "95 percent of all boys and 91 percent of all girls between the ages of 6 and 11, by 87 percent of all boys and 81 percent of all girls from 12 to 17, by 41 percent of all men and 28 percent of all women in the 18-to-30 age group, and by 16 percent of all men and 12 of all women 31 or over." Vanderbilt, Sanderson, *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1945, p.8, <http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/pdf/YANK%20Comics.pdf>

masculine identity and patriotism. These same texts and their cultural outlook also articulated the specific experiences of their Jewish authors as they encountered late-1930s and early-1940s American culture. It has been established in the literature that an examination of the overarching mythos of Superman and Captain America reveal the two characters to be ciphers for the Jewish and American experience. In this chapter I will explore their embodiment of both ethnic and national identities and argue that the different approaches taken by the authors of these two comics represent contrasting perspectives on Jewish identity and involvement with American culture. Whilst Captain America promotes complete assimilation and an outright abandonment of individuality and Jewish identity, Superman suggests a more discreet integration in which Jewish identity finds accommodation within an American paradigm.

By analysing, Superman and Captain America, two of the most commercially successful and culturally enduring comic book texts from the Golden Age, the chapter will illustrate how the manifestation of their authors' personal attitudes regarding assimilation articulated the experiences of a wider population of young Jewish and American males. How, in articulating their own parochial and ethnic interpretation of the national and global environment of the 1930s and '40s, Superman's authors, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and Captain America's authors, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, were able to create stories that appealed to an American readership both inside and outside of the Jewish community.

## **The importance of Jews in Comics and the importance of Comics in American Culture**

Until recently the majority of comic book studies focused their attention on either the aesthetic aspect of comics by dissecting their artistic anatomy or they sought to reveal their origins and chart their history as an artistic medium and commercial product. Perhaps understandably and necessarily, many of these studies also sought to argue the case that comic books should be considered as a serious, mature, and vital art form. As such, most early studies of comic books, academic or

otherwise, were somewhat ahistorical and did not consider the texts in a cultural context.<sup>2</sup> More recently, scholars have begun to realise that comic books can be used as cultural artefacts that illuminate not only the darkened areas of culture in which low-brow art usually resides, but also as indicators of the political, economic, and popular cultural climate in which they were produced.<sup>3</sup>

In this respect, William W. Savage's pioneering work, *Comic Books and America: 1945-1954*, sought to change the path of comic book criticism by employing comics as primary texts in the understanding and interpretation of post-war American culture. Similarly, Bradford W. Wright's study, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, uses comic books as a primary source that "opens a window into the world of young people – a world that the traditional print sources commonly used by historians can do little to illuminate."<sup>4</sup> Neglect of the cultural importance of comic books as primary texts seems all-the-more irrational when one considers the furore that surrounded claims in the 1950s regarding the supposed detrimental cultural, sociological, and psychological effects of comics. Recent studies like Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* and Bart Beaty's *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* have re-evaluated this imbalance by considering the implications of comic book censorship in popular, mass, and Cold War cultural contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this is not intended as a criticism of the early studies of comic books. On the contrary, many of these texts offer a highly authoritative and exhaustive foundation of knowledge on the subject. See: Feiffer, Jules, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Fantagraphics Books, 2003 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 1965); Daniels, Les, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America*, Wilwood House, 1971; Robinson, Jerry, *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, Putman's Sons, 1974; Goulart, Ron, *Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books*, Contemporary Books Inc., 1984; Harvey, Robert C., *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*, University Press of Mississippi, 1996. It should also be noted that non-academic histories, aesthetics studies, and appreciative accounts continue to be produced in abundance, as do excellent scholarly accounts of comic book's origins and content. What I have attempted to articulate is that, in the past ten years or so, the quest to understand comics in a social and cultural context, and negotiate comic books with cultural and historical theory, has become a more salient issue in the literature.

<sup>3</sup> Bradford W. Wright argues a similar point in the introduction to his book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*: "Laudatory writing by comic book fans and fan-scholars has tended to accentuate [the literary and artistic] qualities in an effort to make the case for comic books as a mature art form worthy of serious critical evaluation...Much of the current scholarship on comic books - and there has not been a great deal - has been produced outside of the historical discipline and without much attention to historical context." The John Hopkins University Press, 2001, p.xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2001, p.xvi.

The specific connection between Jewish authorship and comic book history is also a relatively recent focus in cultural criticism, yet one that is now firmly established in the literature. Where it was once a task to prove the peculiarly Semitic nature of Golden Age comic books and the industry that produced them, thanks to the work of Danny Fingeroth, Paul Buhle, Arie Kaplan, and Simcha Weinstein, among others, we may now take the Jewishness of these comics and the industry's roots as self-evident.<sup>5</sup> Much of this scholarly attention has been directed towards analysing the way in which superheroes reflect and embody Jewishness and the Jewish experience. Weinstein, for example, translates the tropes of the comic book superhero in relation to Jewish ethno-religious teachings and traditions as only a Rabbi with an in-depth knowledge of various Judaic texts could. Whilst at times entertainingly far-fetched and tenuous, his analysis nevertheless draws important parallels between the apparently secular superhero adventures of Superman, Batman, The Spirit and Captain America (and later comic book characters such as Spiderman, X-Men, and The Hulk) and the content and practices of Jewish religious observance, traditions, and folklore.

Weinstein's analysis of Superman, for example, supposes that he is the modern equivalent to the story of Moses, both having been cast away to safety as infants and nurtured by adoptive parents in a foreign land to grow up to save and protect their fellow men and women; for Superman, the denizens of Metropolis, for Moses, the Israelites. In addition, Weinstein points out the Hebraic foundation of Superman's Krypton name, Kal-El – with *kal* meaning variously “swiftness”, “with lightness”, or “vessel”, and *El* being Hebrew for “God.”<sup>6</sup> Weinstein also compares Superman to the Biblical Samson in that they both possess fatal weaknesses; and the author also highlights the

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<sup>5</sup> Buhle, *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form*,; Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*,; Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*; Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*. Aside from the scholarly attention afforded to the Jewish history of comics, comic book artists themselves have self-consciously used the medium to explore Jewish themes and identity. Notable examples include Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* (1978) and Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* series. What's more, Michael Chabon's novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, fictionalized and re-imagined the experiences of various comic book authors in its portrayal of mid-twentieth century Jewish American culture and Jewish myth, and their impact upon American culture.

<sup>6</sup> Arie Kaplan offers a similar, although somewhat more vague translation, positing that Kal-El roughly translates to “All that God is”. Kaplan, Arie, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Jewish Publication Society, 2008, p.15.

similarities between Superman's moralistic mantra "Truth, Justice and the American Way", and the teachings of the *Ethics of the Fathers* contained in the Mishnah, founded as they are on justice, truth, and peace (implying Superman's authors were attempting to suggest an analogous relationship between "peace" and the "American Way").<sup>7</sup>

There is much more to Weinstein's argument than an attempt to locate analogous thematic structures and narrative incidents between comic books and Judaic religious texts and historic cultural practice. By continually placing the content of comics within both ethno-religious and contemporary secular American contexts, the author realises that to stretch the comparisons too far would be to take the analogies to an illogical extreme. Nevertheless, Weinstein's study is indicative of how many studies approach the Jewish aspect of comics in that it is predominantly concerned with identifying Judaic cultural and religious tradition within comic book texts rather than placing these identifiably "Jewish" texts within a wider American historical and cultural context. Weinstein's mode of study opens up the question of the extent to which the reverberation of ethno-religious themes and symbolism within comic books can be put down to a conscious effort by their authors to impart something specifically Jewish, or whether they are the result of these authors unconsciously transmitting inherited, ancestral and indelible cultural traditions.

Given that the Judaic origin and content of Golden Age comics has been argued persuasively by other scholars, however, we may confidently conclude that many comic texts offer an insight into the Jewish American experience of their authors. As with comic book scholarship in general, these texts have studied the Jewish influence in the commercial and industrial history of comic books, the Jewish flavour of comic's aesthetics and thematic content, and the historical and cultural context of comic texts. Recently, Danny Fingeroth's book, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, has sought to bring these different scholarly investigations into a common dialogue in a bid to present a concerted study of how the Jewish cultural and personal experiences of various comic book authors impacted upon the origins of superhero's identities and their mythos.

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<sup>7</sup> Weinstein, Simcha, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*, p.26-28.

Fingerroth's sober and scholarly approach to his authoritative study of Jews and the creation of the superhero positions itself from the outset in response to the notion that the Jewish dominance of the comic book trade in its infantile stages was mere happenstance. A coincidental marriage brought about, Fingerroth explains, by the positioning of the publication and advertising industry in New York coupled with the wealth of young Jewish artists drawn to the comics as their moneymaking options elsewhere in the publishing and advertising trade were restricted by anti-Semitic discrimination.

For Fingerroth, although these commercial factors were major influences in the creation of the Jewishness of the comic books and their superhero protagonist, they alone do not explain the distinct suitability of the comic book and Jewish authors for one another; the apt marriage between Jewish authorship, Jewish sensibilities, and the birth of the modern comic book.<sup>8</sup> Noting that many of the original authors and creators of Golden Age comics do not recognise any specifically Jewish content in their work, and that many deny any contemporary awareness of Jewish symbolism in the comics they were producing, Fingerroth admits that his study is based on subjective, retrospective speculation.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, his argument for the validity of his study and the connections he finds between Jewish American culture and comic book content are based on a sound assumption that the Judaic essence of superhero stories is the result of a distillation of specifically Jewish traditions and heritage. To Fingerroth, the "collective heritage" of the comic's creators, "would reasonably result in the emergence in their work of various themes that, while human and universal, were distilled through a consciousness and collective history that can be given the overall description of 'Jewish'."<sup>10</sup> In short, the comics were created by artists for whom a uniquely Jewish vernacular was being rendered increasingly invisible amid a wider American culture, yet for whom this Jewishness, this *Yiddishkayt*, was an indelible, often subliminal, part of their individual and communal character.

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<sup>8</sup> Fingerroth, Danny, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, Continuum, 2007, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Having interviewed many of the comic's creators, including Will Eisner and Jerry Robinson, Fingerroth notes, "to a man, none of the founders and creators of the superheroes that I interviewed in researching this book thought, when first asked about it, that there was anything particularly Jewish about superheroes in general or any superhero in particular." Fingerroth, Danny, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, p.25 Fingerroth admits the speculative nature of his study on page 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.20.

It is my intention to strike a balance between Fingerhuth's work on the "Jewishness" of superhero texts and Wright's study of how comic books can illuminate the experiences of children, adolescences, and young adults. Thanks to the work of these two authors (and the mountain of previous studies upon which their studies are built), I base my study on the premise that comic books can be used as primary sources that reveal important information about the experiences of young Jewish males. The aesthetic manifestation of this ethnic experience has been analysed exhaustively by scholars much more well versed in Judaic religious symbolism than myself, so too have the real-life experiences of various comic book authors and how these helped create the commercial, industrial, and artistic world of Golden Age superhero texts. How well this experience is indicative of both a wider Jewish experience regarding assimilation and cultural integration, however, remains less well studied. Given that the personal effect of assimilation would have been a salient issue for the young Jewish authors of comic books around the time of the industry's birth in the 1930s, this area of study would appear to be an interesting avenue to explore if we are to understand the importance and function of comic texts to both a specifically Jewish and more general American character in the mid-twentieth century. My analysis will eschew the hunt for religious symbolism in comic book texts in favour of presenting how *Superman* and *Captain America* betray their authors' feelings regarding their position as young Jewish men in late-1930s, early-1940s American culture.

### ***Superman*, Jewish Identity and American Culture**

In his eulogy to the writer of novels such as *The Natural* (1952), *The Assistant* (1957), and *The Fixer* (1966), Saul Bellow referred to himself and the great fabulist Bernard Malamud as "first generation Americans," indicating that they belonged to a generation of Jews who, carrying with them the burden of a scarred immigrant past and a painful Jewish present haunted by the Holocaust, the Depression, and thirties anti-Semitism were forced to pioneer a new path through American society, culture, and art towards an uncertain future. Not only could the same moniker be applied to the authors of *Superman* and *Captain America* comics, both texts could be said to anticipate in the late-thirties the Jewish American literature that Malamud and Bellow, along with Delmore Schwartz, Paul Goodman, and Philip Roth, would produce in the post-war years. Morris Dickstein argues that for this



genus of authors, who between them helped to usher in the first recognisable and concerted body of work that we now refer to as Jewish American literature:

Straightforward realism was never an option...it belonged to those who knew their society from within, who had a bird's-eye view, an easy grasp of its manners and values. As newcomers dealing with complex questions of identity, Jews instead became specialists in alienation who gravitated toward outrageous or poetic forms of humor, metaphor, and parable.<sup>11</sup>

In works by these authors American culture and identity often became an impenetrable paradigm against which the anxious and aspirational cries of American Jews rebounded with absurd, unfathomable, and harrowing pathos. Indeed, these writers often used the most extreme examples of the American character, archetypes of the American Way, as a yardstick to articulate the desperate alienation affecting their male protagonists.

In Malamud's debut novel, *The Natural*, the author used that most favoured pastime of the American masses, baseball, to illustrate the pain felt by the novel's protagonist, Roy Hobbs. The fact that Hobbs is initially halted from pursuing a professional career in a field in which he has an amazing natural talent is cruel and unfortunate, his subsequent second chance at the big time, inspiring, suspenseful, and poignant. That this career is baseball, however, only accentuates the intensity of these emotions. Baseball thus transforms Hobbs's battle into an arduous journey towards an almost universal American goal. In Bellow's debut novel, *Dangling Man*, the author uses a journey towards the uttermost example of state hegemony and American power, the U.S. Army, to chart the disintegration and fall into agitated solipsism of its protagonist, Joseph. The alienation and frustration felt by Joseph pushes him further into an absurd internal world; the fact that the U.S. Army is the ultimate goal of this one-time communist makes his passage from individual to conformist all-the-more irrational, and heightens the pathos of this Kafkaesque novel.

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<sup>11</sup> Dickstein, Morris, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.170.

Just like fiction, this warping of reality is also evidenced in the expressionism of noir cinema, many examples of which were produced by Jewish directors. In much the same way that Jewish American writers used symbols of the American character to illustrate the surreal distress of their protagonists, in *Double Indemnity*, Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson plan the murder of Phyllis's husband amongst the neatly stacked products of a grocery store. Through the juxtaposition of their hushed voices conspiring to murder Mr. Dietrichson and the sanitised, anonymous functionality of Jerry's market, the latter suggesting the comforting function of American consumerism, Billy Wilder sought to articulate the fraudulence of a conformist consumer culture in which even murderers become anonymous.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in noir cinema, lust, jealousy, revenge, murder, espionage, desire, and greed are lent a macabre, otherworldly aspect by chiaroscuro lighting and expressionistic mise-en-scene. The results are anti-heroic texts in which ordinary American males are transformed into tragic heroes who fall foul of fateful circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

The blend of naturalistic reality with the fantastical, mythical, fabled, metaphorical, parabolist, expressionistic, or absurd aspect seen in some examples of Jewish American post-war fiction and noir cinema is similar to the mix of reality and fantasy seen in early Golden Age Superman and Captain America texts. The combination of thematic preoccupations born of national and global concerns such as the American economic depression and the threat of Nazism with the fantastical solution forwarded by the authors of Superman and Captain America is symptomatic of how Jewish artists sought to interpret an American culture in which certain aspects remained blurred. Superman and Captain America represent their authors' desire to gain a better perspective on the indecipherable complexities of an American life with the added burden of an inherited cultural maladjustment and social alienation. The superhero's-eye view becomes an adulterated version of

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<sup>12</sup> James Naremore suggests that the theme of "industrialized dehumanisation" is explored by Wilder throughout the film, listing Walter's insurance offices, his apartment, the Dietrichson's home, a drive-in restaurant, a bowling alley, and Jerry's market as examples of "massified" private and public spaces. *More Than Night*, University of California Press, 1998, p.88-9.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1945), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953), and *The Big Combo* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1955).

the bird's-eye view afforded to the cultural insider and facilitates an ethnic dream of comprehension, empowerment, and acceptance.

Jews, however, were not the only demographic to make up the millions of American citizens who followed the adventures of Superman and Captain America. There is no denying that the popularity of these comics was largely due to the frivolous excitement and dreamlike adventure that their stories evoked; above all, they were a portable, accessible, and inexpensive piece of escapism. However, it is more precisely the visceral fantasies that these fanciful tales tapped into that secured the character's success and enduring appeal. Their blend of fantasy and reality appealed to children, the comics' primary audience, in precisely the same way in which they reflected their authors' desire to enact an acute comprehension of the world around them. This suggests a similarity between the experiences of children and that of the immigrants that comic book authors used to articulate the feeling of incomprehension and a lingering sense of unfamiliarity, discomfort, and bewilderment, alongside excitement and wonder. The unworldly adolescent reader was restricted by the blinkers of immaturity and by the fiats bestowed by adults; Siegel, Shuster, Kirby, and Simon represented Jewish Americans whose progress in American culture was often curtailed by discrimination and whose social stature offered limited possibilities. The child and the immigrant met in a world where dreams, possibilities, and progress were circumscribed by cultural and environmental limitations whose irrationality necessitated fantastical solutions.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, despite children and young adolescents being the primary audience for these comics, the characters also found fans amongst an older readership. Here again, the fantastical realisation of empowerment and comprehension, especially in the face of economic hardship or the horrors of Nazi Germany, appealed to a more general American reader. These texts were not merely escapism; they

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<sup>14</sup> The analogous nature of the experiences of children and immigrants is perhaps why two Jewish authored novels from the mid-twentieth century, *Call It Sleep* (Henry Roth, 1934) and *Marjorie Morningstar* (Herman Wouk, 1955), the former of which was retrospectively lauded by critics, the latter, a huge commercial success and bestseller, couched their accounts of the Jewish immigrant experience within the framework of a *bildungsroman*.

blended the dreamy desire to escape with the harsh realities of modern life in an attempt to reconcile the two opposing feelings.

Aforementioned scholars have successfully argued that Superman is a manifestation of his authors' Jewish heritage and is a potent analogy for the Jewish American experience. This theory is based largely upon the fact that Superman is, literally and figuratively, an alien in an adoptive culture. Complementary to this is the notion of Superman's dual identity; an identity that is, on one hand, pacifistic and ineffectual, almost invisible in its shyness, impotent in its pursuit of masculinity, and lacking the means with which to augment its social stature, and on the other hand, embodies the epitome of machismo, whose destructive strength is policed by an unyielding moral code that supports American ideals. The latter side of this equation has demanded most attention in scholarly investigations of ethnic identity in the Superman mythos, because, as Weinstein argues, "...the extraterrestrial alien turned all-American icon...is a powerful symbol of assimilation."<sup>15</sup> Most studies assume that Clark Kent is the invisible Americanized version of the immigrant Superman, an alter-ego that Superman assumes in order to remain anonymous. I intend to argue that, although Danny Fingerioth speaks at length of Superman's "dual identity," an interpretation of the *Superman* mythos that examines the interplay between Superman's trilateral persona, composed of Clark Kent, Kal-El, and Superman reveals a much more complex manifestation of Jewish American life and assimilation during the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> It is the symbiosis between his two assumed personas and their relationship to the "authentic" Kal-El identity that is crucial in making Siegel and Shuster's creation such a potent analogy for Jewish assimilation.

Throughout the mid-1930s various versions of Superman were submitted, rejected, adapted and re-sketched by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, until it was finally published in *Action Comics #1*

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<sup>15</sup> Weinstein, Simcha, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*, p.30.

<sup>16</sup> Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p.49.

March 1938 (cover dated June).<sup>17</sup> The final Superman model contained a character and structure that resembled the tropes of mythical American heroic characters and legends. Superman's one-man crusade to protect America and the values upon which the nation was founded is a quest to guard the 'American Way' in a similar vein as Paul Bunyan, John Henry, and Pecos Bill. As Robert Weinberg and Lois H. Gresh posit, "...superheroes are most clearly defined by the American dream of the heroic individual. One man against the odds, whether it be the forces of nature, a corrupt government, or foreign invaders, comic book creations like *Superman*...are as crisp a reflection of the American character as Uncle Sam."<sup>18</sup> Danny Fingeroth places Bunyan and Henry alongside other cultural heroes who reside in real or imagined collective American belief systems, such as Hercules, Samson, Buffalo Bill and Babe Ruth, and speculates that Superman and other superheroes are members of this body of courageous and noble individuals.<sup>19</sup>

Superhero imitations notwithstanding, the mythical dimension of Superman's structure was an anomaly in mid-twentieth century Jewish artistry. Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1951) and Joseph H. Lewis's *Terror in a Texas Town* (1958) may have used the fabled setting of the mythical American West to articulate their cinematic treatise on the nature of individual and communal responsibility. In these films however, contemporary issues were transplanted to a historical setting which, owing to genre devices already established within the cinematic western tradition, acted as a canvas on which to debate the relationship between morality, responsibility, and masculinity. In Superman Siegel and Shuster employed accumulated American cultural myth systems which forwarded the notion that masculinity, empowered by superhuman physical strength, was the only viable way of protecting the 'American Way,' improving American masculinity, and driving industrial and ideological progress.

Yet our understanding of the "Superman" facet of the Superman mythos as being derivative of American myth is complicated by two aspects that secure Superman as more indicative of a

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<sup>17</sup> The story of *Superman's* creation is complex and has been explored in great detail by Gerard Jones in *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*, Arrow Books, 2004. Shorter accounts can also be found in Fingeroth and Kaplan.

<sup>18</sup> Gresh, Lois H. & Weinberg, Robert, *The Science of Superheroes*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2002, p.xi.

<sup>19</sup> Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p.32-33.

specifically “Jewish” influence. Firstly, whilst Superman was an anomaly in the Jewish imagination because the character and structure emulated American mythological systems, the way in which he used his powers in early stories means that Superman slots neatly into a lineage of Jewish American art that sought to articulate humanist and socialist ideals. As Bradford Wright realises, “morality tales attacking the evil of greed dominate the first several years of Superman’s adventures...*Superman* stories explore the conflict between corporate greed and the public welfare...[and] also championed social reform and government assistance to the poor.”<sup>20</sup> In *The Blakely Mine Disaster*, published in *Action Comics #3* (August, 1938), Superman, having rescued several miners from an unsound coal mine, visits the mine’s owner as Clark Kent. The owner, a sneering fat-cat unconcerned by the plight of one of his employees who was injured in the collapse, denies that his mine is unsafe and refuses to remedy the appalling safety conditions. Superman contrives to trap the owner in the mine and, after a fashion, the owner is hoisted by his own petard and made to realise that his workers deserve better treatment and working conditions.<sup>21</sup>

Like Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) this story supports the everyman workers and condemns the practices of bourgeois industrialists. Unlike Odets’s play, however, Siegel and Shuster were not inciting revolution. Rather, Superman uses his superhuman power to reconcile disparity between worker and owner and bring together the bourgeois class and the working class in a common dialogue. As Wright describes, another early story opens with:

...an adolescent being arrested and tried for assault and battery. The boy’s mother asks the judge for leniency. “He’s only like all the other boys in our neighbourhood,” she pleads. “Hard, resentful, underprivileged...he might have been a good boy except for his environment.” Observing the trial, Clark Kent agrees and considers the judge’s sentence of two years in reform school too harsh. As Superman, he tells the neighbourhood boys, “It’s not entirely your

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<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, p.12.

<sup>21</sup> “The Blakely Mine Disaster”, *The Superman Chronicles: Volume One*, DC Comics, 2006, pp-31-44.

fault that you're delinquent – it's these slums – your poor living conditions – if  
there was only some way I could remedy it.<sup>22</sup>

This sympathy for America's youth, the censure of slum environments, and the critique of the disintegrating effects that such environments have on the spirit and morality of its youthful inhabitants echoes sentiments expressed in Odets's *Awake and Sing!*. In Odets's play the Berger family are surrounded by spiritual and physical structures built tall by their own imagination; economics, politics, and family loyalties suffocate each member of the household. The two youngest members in particular, Ralph and Hennie, feel the physical restriction of Bronx tenements and articulate their dissatisfaction with life through a desire to escape. Julius Novick points out that "Ralph likes to listen to the Boston airmail plane...Its sound is the sound of flight, of freedom, of getting out. As the play was taking form, Odets wrote in a letter, "I'm restless. I want, I want! But what. I haven't any idea." Ralph Berger has that same restlessness, that unfocused craving."<sup>23</sup>

Yet this hazy longing for freedom pervades the thoughts of all the inhabitants of the Berger's dour household, as C.W.E. Bigsby notes "The constant image is one of flight, escape. They look to escape the reality of their situation through marriage, through luck, through a desperate commitment to political or social myths, through a sardonic humour, through self-deceit, or even, most desperately, through suicide."<sup>24</sup> The aimless and overpowering nature of this compulsion to escape suggests that dreams are born of necessity rather than desire; the apparatus that enable the escape, and the physical or psychological destination that is dreamed of are less important than the exigency to flee present conditions. For a 1930s American audience for whom the economic depression had rendered malleable their ideology, an audience for whom socialism, unionism, communism, liberalism and even anti-Semitism had become viable vehicles for escape and belief, this "unfocused craving" must have resonated loud and clear.

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Novick, Julius, *Beyond the Golden Door*, p.39.

<sup>24</sup> Bigsby, C.W.E., *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama 1900-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.167.

Superman taps into this desire for extrication; as Gary Engle points out, Superman's peerless mobility, be it his ability to leap great distances and run faster than a speeding train in the early years, or his ability to fly in later versions:

...makes him an exemplar in the American dream...Displacement...is impossible.

His sense of self is not dispersed by life's migration but rather enhanced by all the universe that he is able to occupy. What American, whether an immigrant in spirit or fact, could resist the appeal of one with such an ironclad immunity to the anxiety of dislocation?<sup>25</sup>

The Man of Steel is a dreamlike fabrication of the Boston airmail plane that so occupies Ralph's desire for escape; his unmitigated mobility actualises the longings of an American masculinity that felt emotionally and physically restricted by their economic and social circumstances.

The same kind of disaffected youthful masculinity can also be seen another 1935 play by Sidney Kingsley, *Dead End*, which marked the first appearance of the Dead End Kids. Two years later, the play was adapted by Lillian Hellman into a Hollywood film of the same name, directed by William Wyler. The Dead End Kids (otherwise known as the Bowery Boys, the East End Kids, and the Little Tough Guys depending at which time and at what studio they were working) were seen again a year later in *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), and from then on the Dead End Kids franchise "became through a succession of names and cast changes over two decades the most prolific series in Hollywood history."<sup>26</sup> Set against a backdrop of proletariat poverty, the Kid's "mixture of urchin pathos and clowning," marked them as "symptoms of social distress"<sup>27</sup> and likeable, roguish knaves indicative of their Lower East Side upbringing.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>26</sup> Buhle, Paul & Wagner, Dave, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favourite Movies*, The New Press, 2002, p.129.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.129.



If the revolutionary ending of Odets's *Awake and Sing!* seemed pat and unbelievable, Siegel's and Shuster's conclusion to their tale of slum hardships again offers hope when Superman undertakes to remedy the problem himself. According to Wright:

...by demolishing the slums himself in defiance of the legal authorities, even fighting off the police and National Guard when they try to stop him. Where the hesitant and inefficient legal process fails, the one-man wrecking crew succeeds. In place of the demolished tenements, the government constructs splendid, shining public housing to give the underprivileged children a healthier and safer neighborhood.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, although Superman fits into inherited cultural myth systems that cement the superhero as representative of a fundamental American character, he is also more specifically a product of 1930s American culture. In an environment where cinema box office sales and the Dust Bowl migration symbolise the desire or necessity for escape from environmental, cultural and economic conditions, Superman was a potent and apposite symbol of escape and a valiant upholder of social responsibility.

Given the historical moment at which Superman comics first appeared on the newsstands, it is inviting to assume that Siegel and Shuster consciously created Superman in the Golem tradition as a democratic and distinctly Jewish combatant of fascist powers. When Superman was first published in *Action Comics #1* he was born into a world in turmoil. The threat of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, having repeatedly violated the Treaty of Versailles, was becoming increasingly menacing, Civil War had broken out in Spain, Mussolini's fascist Italy had annexed Ethiopia, and American worries over Japan were growing. There has been a desire over the years to position the creation of Superman within this neat lineage of 1930s global history, and this certainly creates a pleasing historical narrative. In this way Superman, by his sheer desperate implausibility, symbolises the dire effects of these marks on history's timeline. As Siegel himself says when attempting to answer the question as to why he had created Superman in the early-thirties:

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<sup>28</sup> Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, p.12-13.

Listening to President Roosevelt's "fireside chats"...being unemployed and worried during the depression and knowing hopelessness and fear. Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless and oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany...seeing movies depicting the horrors or privation suffered by the downtrodden...I had a great urge to help...help the downtrodden masses, somehow. How could I help them when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer.<sup>29</sup>

This, however, seems a little too neat for Superman's faltering beginnings. He would surely come to represent a wider cultural reality as his stories became more popular, and his origins obviously had their relevance in the "historic events" of early-1930s American culture. His journey, however, from his author's imagination to the collective mindset of millions of Americans took years to come to fruition and incorporated influences from many commercial and personal factors.

By Siegel's own accounts, elsewhere and in the 1975 and 1983 articles, the impetus behind the creation of Superman had as more to do with factors more parochial and personal as it did with national and global events. As Siegel explains:

Clark Kent grew not only out of my private life, but also out of Joe Shuster's. As a high school student, I thought that someday I might become a reporter, and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I existed. So it occurred to me: What if I was really terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that? One night, when all the thoughts were coming to me, the concept came to me that Superman could have a dual identity, and that in one of his identities he could be meek and mild, as I was, and wear glasses, the way I do. The heroine, who I figured would be some kind of girl reporter, would think he was some kind of worm; yet she would be crazy about this Superman

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<sup>29</sup> Jerry Siegel, as quoted in Fingerioth, p.41.

character who could do all sorts of fabulous things. In fact, she was real wild about him, and a big inside joke was that the fellow she was crazy about was also the fellow whom she loathed.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, connections should be drawn between this explanation of the reasons behind Superman's creation and the influence of the Depression's effects on the character of thirties selfhood, and specifically, youthful masculinity. Economic hardship and the Depression-era climate must surely have exacerbated existing masculine and adolescent anxieties. As Buhle notes, the Depression brought about a condition whereby a large majority of American citizens were searching for some kind of hero to deliver them from their socio-economic nightmare.<sup>31</sup> As young men coming of age during the early-thirties, the desire to create an efficacious hero with which to defeat the emasculating effects of socio-economic hardship would have been a reassuring fantasy, but we must remember that this this fantasy revolved as much around the resolution of adolescent insecurities as it did the desire to remedy cultural problems. The enduring appeal of Superman certainly suggests that timeless, free-floating juvenile anxieties help to form the basis of the character's emotional composition lasting success.

Superman fits as neatly into a 1930s intertextual timeline as it does one characterised by "historic events". A glimpse at Siegel and Shuster's adolescence reveals them to be two of the earlier brats of popular culture. One gets the impression of two young men readily bombarded by such pulp publications as *Black Mask*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Weird Tales*; who were zealous viewers of the movies of Edward G. Robinson and Paul Muni; and who fervently followed the tales of *Flash Gordon*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Zorro*, *Tarzan*, *The Shadow*, and *Doc Savage*.<sup>32</sup> Siegel and Shuster were scholars of this 1930s "lowbrow" culture; the two friends seemed to have constructed a fictional universe for

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<sup>30</sup> Written by Siegel in 1983, and available online at: <http://theages.superman.nu/superman.php>

<sup>31</sup> Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*, p.104.

<sup>32</sup> This impression is garnered from a variety of sources: Buhle, *Jews and American Comics*, p.54-5; Fingerioth, p.40-3; Kaplan, p.9-14; Dooley, Dennis, *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, Octavia, 1987, p.19-34; Siegel, *1983 Anniversary Letter* available online at <http://theages.superman.nu/siegel.php>; and particularly from Gerard Jones' intricately woven narrative of the birth of superheroes in *Men of Tomorrow*, specifically those chapters pertaining to Jerry Siegel (p.23-39, p.62-86).

themselves that presumably offered some refuge from the realities of adolescence and a hostile wider world. Although distinct and innovative, Siegel and Shuster's Superman is part of this pantheon of popular heroes, and is, in many ways, an amalgamated re-articulation of these various popular cultural characters.

Taking various influences from what Fingerhuth calls the "cultural stew to which many young Americans were exposed," which included, "Bible tales; various myth systems; pulp magazines...; science-fiction adventure comic strips...; novels featuring adventurous characters such as Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel...Doc Savage...; and radio dramas,"<sup>33</sup> Siegel's and Shuster's innovation lay in how they seized a variety of influences from this infraculture and adapted them to fit a new model in which corporeal necessity collided with mythical fantasy. In doing this they created a highly adaptable model that, whilst grounded in the reality of human hardship, offered the opportunity for wish-fulfilment and escapism.

The overriding impression of the influences behind the creation of Superman seems to be as prosaic and juvenile as it does a desire to concoct a magical global messiah or a combatant for the downtrodden masses. It appears that Siegel and Shuster, eager to emulate their pop culture heroes and create fantastic stories and heroic characters, dreamt up Superman as part of a youthful fantasy to win girls and experience by proxy the excitement and power of machismo and magic. Although his mythos would evolve to incorporate factors that would make him more messianic, and the economic and social climate of the early thirties doubtlessly featured in his creation, Superman was more a product of two wistful adolescent minds than an individual socially-conscious psyche. First and foremost, Superman betrays how his young male Jewish creators viewed the realities and possibilities, and the limitations and futilities of 1930s American culture.

Superman can be just as readily interpreted through a model of Jewish mythology as he can American folklore, as Kaplan explains, "...there's a parallel between Siegel's and Shuster's *Superman* and the Golem, the legendary creature magically conceived by Rabbi Judah Loew of medieval Prague

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<sup>33</sup> Fingerhuth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p. 41.

to defend the community from attacks by anti-Semitic enemies.”<sup>34</sup> The Superman mythos does not only embody both Jewish and American myth and adolescent fantasies, it also reflects simultaneously Siegel’s and Shuster’s fears and aspirations regarding their Jewish identity. Whether alien or immigrant, Kal-El is forced from a fatherland on the brink of annihilation. Upon arrival in his adoptive home, Kal-El is received into the bosom of an all-American, Midwestern, Methodist family who accept, without prejudice, his difference. When he is an adult he moves to the city, and there, becomes both Superman and Clark Kent, at once a revered messiah, saviour of the downtrodden; and at the same time, an insignificant, mild-mannered reporter. Under these assumed identities he both pursues and is pursued by Lois Lane; both reports on events for the *Daily Planet* and becomes instrumental in the creation and resolution of storylines. T

his is the basic narrative that has maintained Superman’s popularity for over seventy years, and, as various commentators have noted, from the very beginning it is saturated with analogies to the Jewish experience. Like the thousands of Jews ousted from Europe, fleeing a persecutory and decaying social structure, Kal-El arrives in America, from a ruined homeland, on a wing and a prayer. As Arie Kaplan explains:

Like many Jews [Superman] came to America to escape the extinction of his people...Superman, though an alien, can pass as one of us, even though he is an immigrant – in fact the ultimate immigrant, the supreme stranger in the strangest land, and thus the supreme metaphor for the Jewish experience...If read in a certain way, the Man of Steel’s backstory also reflects the saga of the *Kindertransports* – the evacuation to safety of hundreds of Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, in attempting to answer the question “Is Superman Jewish?” Scott Raab reasons that Superman can be considered representative of the Jewish experience, “...in the sense that he will

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<sup>34</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, p.15.

<sup>35</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, p.14.

always be of Krypton, subject to laws, in his case physical, that are foreign to his countrymen; no matter how assimilated Superman seems, he is both strengthened and haunted by a past he relives over and over.”<sup>36</sup> Superman’s immigrant status, his suitability as an analogy for the Jewish experience in America, is secured by this fact.

Yet it also secures his suitability as a symbol of the American experience at-large in a nation where, as Engle points out, immigration “...is the overwhelming fact in American history. Except for the Indians, all Americans have an immediate sense of their origins elsewhere. No nation on Earth has so deeply embedded in its social consciousness the imagery of passage from one social identity to another.”<sup>37</sup> From railroads to slave ships, Engle argues, the imagery of the American immigrant experience “...just isn’t complete without Superman’s rocketship.”<sup>38</sup> In what is a wonderfully astute analysis of what makes Superman quintessentially “American”, Engle’s most insightful observation is that he recognises the dual representation that the Superman mythos has to both American and Jewish experiences, and that he realises that this synergy reflects an aspirational prototype for a mutually rewarding assimilatory process:

Superman’s powers – strength, mobility, X-ray vision and the like – are the comic-book equivalents of ethnic characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically and spiritually. The myth of Superman asserts with total confidence and a childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Engle also supports the common notion that Clark Kent is an invisible, assimilated alias of Superman, indeed, that Clark Kent is “the epitome of visible invisibility, someone whose extraordinary

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<sup>36</sup> Raab, Scott, “Is Superman Jewish?” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, Octavia, 1987, p.167.

<sup>37</sup> Engle, Gary, “What makes Superman so Darned American?” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, Octavia, 1987, p.80.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.80.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.81.

ordinariness makes him disappear in a crowd.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, both Superman and Clark Kent are the separate and complementary alter-egos of Kal-El. In deciding to assume these two aliases, Kal-El chooses to abandon his true immigrant identity to a farm somewhere in Kansas.<sup>41</sup>

Clark Kent, far from being the invisible American, is the invisible Jew. Through his characterisation as a weak, meek, cowardly, and lovelorn journalist, Kent reflects the position of the disparaged and marginalised Jew in 1930s American culture. His profession should not be downplayed in this personification either. As Jonathan Sarna discusses in his biography of Mordacai Noah, Jews in America had historically been drawn towards journalism at a rate disproportionate to their population.<sup>42</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield points out that anti-Semitism is often fuelled by fears regarding Jewish media control and the adjacent influential political and economic power that this enables.<sup>43</sup> This corresponds with the fact that in his 1941 speech supporting isolationism, Charles Lindbergh pointed to Jewish influence in the press in order to add urgency to his claims that Jews were pushing America towards war.<sup>44</sup> Although Whitfield makes it clear that this anti-Semitic view inflates Jewish influence in the press far beyond its actual significance, this false popular perception is itself important in how Jewish artists, such as Siegel and Shuster, represent journalism.

The significance of the journalist in Superman is that, like Siegel and Shuster, they are the observers of, and commentators on, American culture. Clark Kent is an inner-city adult version of what Superman’s Jewish authors fear they will see if they look in the mirror – an inconsequential milquetoast and an impotent observer of popular culture. Yet the dreams and desires of Siegel and Shuster also seep into Kent’s character. As we have already seen, a young Siegel thought that when he was an adult he would like to become a reporter; Kent is no ordinary reporter, however, nor does

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>41</sup> In her discussions on the role of costume in superhero narratives, Catherine Williamson realises that Superman and Clark Kent are both costumed alter egos of the “original” Kal-El. “”Draped Crusaders”: Disrobing Gender in *The Mask of Zorro*”, *Cinema Journal*, Vol.36, No.2 (Winter, 1997), pp.3-16, p.6.

<sup>42</sup> Sarna, Jonathan, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordacai Noah*, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc, 1981, p.5.

<sup>43</sup> Whitfield, Stephen J., “The American Jew as Journalist”, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 3, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp.161-180. To be sure, Jews in America had historically been drawn towards journalism at a rate disproportionate to their population;

<sup>44</sup> Lindbergh quoted in: Shapiro, Edward S., *World War II and American Jewish Identity*, Modern Judaism (Vol.10, No.1, Feb.1990), p.66.

he struggle on the bottom rung of the industry. He is a professional journalist of some standing at a successful daily newspaper, and thanks to his superhero qualities he is able to repeatedly get the scoops that escape other journalists. What's more, the reporter had been enjoying a brief spell as the romantic lead in Hollywood movies in the early-thirties, such as Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Platinum Blonde* (1931), positioning the journalist as quite a dashing figure in thirties culture. Thus, despite his shortcomings, Kent is still a manifestation of Siegel's and Shuster's youthful desire for a better future.

If Clark Kent is a side of the Superman persona that Kal-El feels uncomfortable in, however, it is because he represents, in part, the prejudicially-consigned position of Jews in America in the 1930s. In reality, Kent needn't be lovelorn, nor be weak or cowardly as this is not his true character, yet he is forced to become these things in the public arena. Whilst this may not be because Kal-El is discriminated against, it is, ultimately, because he is *different*. Kent represents a very specific kind of assumed identity; it is an identity forced upon the "other" in American culture. He represents those Jewish immigrants who were forced to live in minority populated areas or find employment in second-class industries simply because this was the stature afforded to them by hegemonic social processes. Kent also represents Jews whose appearance and personality were out of sync with the 1930s WASP ideal, and, originally, he represented the adolescent dreams and fears of his creators who lived in the heavily Jewish populated Cleveland, worked in the second-class publishing industry, and whose bookish, lean appearance, reflecting personalities obsessed with science-fiction and B-movies, meant that they were often left longing for their own Lois Lane.

Superman on the other hand, the *übermensch*, the super-immigrant, is celebrated for his difference. This is because, as the aforementioned Engle argues, Superman's immigrant qualities improve and protect his adoptive culture. Where Clark Kent represents the real experience of American Jewry, Superman reflects an unachievable Jewish fantasy whereby the immigrant can indulge in and celebrate his or her difference with wholehearted support of a host society whose culture is improved by the immigrant's presence. As Mark Waid argues, when Superman:



...embraces his history and nature and launches out in the one set of activities that will fulfil and satisfy him, he is helping others. There is no exclusive, blanket choice to be made between the needs of the individual and the needs of the larger community. There is no contradiction between self and society...Superman properly fulfils his own nature, and his destiny, and the result is that many others are better off as well.<sup>45</sup>

If Superman was a Jewish dream of hyphenated identity, marked with Jewish and American myth, heritage, history, and pride, he was, whether Siegel and Shuster were aware of it or not, constructed in opposition to the ordinary invisibleness of the everyday immigrant-like Clark Kent. It is important to state here that I am not suggesting that either Clark Kent or Superman are Jewish, look Jewish, or were ever consciously intended to represent American Jewry. More that, in constructing the Superman mythos, Siegel and Shuster inevitably created characters based upon their experiences as Jewish teenagers growing up in 1930s America. As such, when viewed as polemic manifestations of Siegel's and Shuster's outlook on Jewish identity, Superman and Clark Kent collectively reveal their authors' desire for acceptance, their awareness of the realities and possible restrictions of being a Jew in 1930s America, and their fear of the failure and heartache that these restrictions may cause.

These experiences resulted in a synergetic relationship between Superman and Clark Kent, creating an overall character that contains elements not only archetypically Jewish but also quintessentially American. The mutualism between Superman and Clark Kent, neither of whom wholeheartedly embody either Jewish or American cultural signifiers yet contain elements of both, reveals a Jewish American identity with increasingly complicated demarcations between both cultures. The symbiotic relationship indicates a process of adopting and eschewing, acquiring and abandoning various histories, traditions, and tropes of both cultures. Thus, Superman represents that most coveted process of assimilation, acculturation, whereby a compromise is negotiated between

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<sup>45</sup> Waid, Mark, "The Real Truth about Superman: and the Rest of Us Too", *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth Justice, and the Socratic Way*, Open Court, 2005, pp.1-10, p.10.

both Jewish and American cultures. Superman is a lucid dream of a liminal being, both a fantasy of ideal assimilation and an acute understanding of a restrictive immigrant reality.

### **Super-Assimilation: *Captain America* and the Dilution of Difference**

The process of assimilation as presented by Captain America comics, and, crucially, its end result, contains none of the contradictions, intricacies, and complications captured by Siegel and Shuster. When Steve Rogers is refused entry into the U.S. army – an agent of the state that we can confidently conclude represents America at-large – because of his ill-health, the Lower East Side resident decides to accept the offer to transform himself into the *übermensch*, Captain America. That this opportunity to abandon his true self in favour of a new identity is offered by the same state agency that refused him entry into the army on the grounds of his previous identity, and that this new identity is an absurd representation of patriotic perfection, represents a very different interpretation of assimilatory processes to those offered up by Superman’s creators.

This mode of assimilation fails to incorporate any element of give and take, and the way in which it is represented by Kirby and Simon denies any hint of regret or longing for a lost hereditary identity, or of any concomitant confusion regarding selfhood. Rather, Captain America reflects a complete abandonment of ipseity, heritage, and Jewish identity and in favour of an archetypal American persona. Will Eisner once jokingly called Jack Kirby, “the John Garfield of comic books,” and Kirby himself admitted that as a kid on the East Side, he grew up in “...Edward G. Robinson territory [where] movies were my refuge.”<sup>46</sup> Yet for a man whose influences emanated, in part, from the movies of these Jewish stars, there is very little Jacob Julius Garfinkle or Emanuel Goldenberg in the stories of Captain America. The path from Steve Rogers to Captain America is an articulation of uncomplicated Americanization that threatens to compromise the integrity of ethnic identity.

Whilst the socio-political impetus behind Caps’ creation, the all-too-real threat of Nazism, was not borne from an exclusively Jewish concern, it was an issue that was specifically menacing to global Jewry. It was also a concern that, when aired in the public arena, carried the risk of imparting

accusations of warmongering and profiteering from both America's influential isolationist factions and from anti-Semites. By creating an all-American hero, Kirby and Simon were attempting to camouflage an otherwise prickly propagandist sentiment in the patriotism of the American flag and the values it represented. Published one year before America's entry into World War II, the premise behind Captain America comics eschews isolationism and betrays a desire to fight the spread of Nazism. Kirby and Simon were the first in a long line of comic book artists to create a character whose purpose was to propagandise the fight against the axis powers. Jacqueline Foertsch argues that these comic book artists, "many of them Jewish and all of them decidedly left wing, created American avatar-ideals already, explicitly at war with fascist adversaries months before the war began for the United States."<sup>47</sup>

Captain America, however, was also created to battle home grown prejudice alongside fascist foes overseas. Two months after the character's first battle with the Fuhrer, a Christian Front news bulletin argued against entry into "a foreign war" and calls for efforts to purge Roosevelt's government of the five-hundred communists said by the Dies Committee to number in its ranks. The bulletin, unmistakably informed by anti-Semitic sentiment in its condemnation of "...the warmongers, the political parasites, the financial shylocks, the munition moguls, and the people who paraded in the streets of New York last summer to the tune of "Stop-Hitler,"" goes so far as to forcefully suggest, rather repugnantly given the escalating and increasingly pernicious use of such measures in Europe, that, "...Communist party members and other Reds must be put in concentration camps for at least five years so that they will be able to practice Communism among themselves and then they will be able to tell the American people how it is to live under the "five year plan.""<sup>48</sup>

The bulletin was addressed to "...All American People Who Think: Colonel Lindbergh Is A Patriot!" referring to Charles A. Lindbergh, former flying hero, ardent isolationist and would-be upholder of the Monroe Doctrine, who had been protesting U.S. entry into the conflict for some time

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<sup>47</sup> Foertsch, Jacqueline, *American Culture in the 1940s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p.165.

<sup>48</sup> *Christian Front News Bulletin*, May 24<sup>th</sup> 1940. Available online at: [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/THR-CF3.PDF](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/THR-CF3.PDF)

before he gave a speech entitled “Who Are the War Agitators?” on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1941. As well as placing blame on the Roosevelt administration and the British for forcing America into the war, the speech, given on behalf of the America First Committee, a quasi-political outfit formed in July 1940 to promote isolationism, argued Jewish culpability for the increasing likelihood of U.S. entry. The speech was excoriated by the vast majority of the press and the public alike, and even by many of those who favoured isolationism but presumably did not want their position on foreign policy to be allied with the fascist, prejudicial, and un-American attitudes expressed in Lindbergh’s address.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, Lindbergh’s speech attests to the increasingly prejudicial atmosphere that had begun to accelerate, according to Leonard Dinnerstein, in 1933, when:

...a Nazi-led government came to power in Germany and Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated a New Deal at home, [and when] the deepening economic crisis contributed to an explosion of unprecedented antisemitic fervor. Fueled also by the rise of Protestant and Catholic demagogues, deeply entrenched Protestant fundamentalism, and the widespread expression of antisemitic attitudes by respectable social and religious leaders.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the 1930s anti-Semitism became more and more visible in mainstream American culture. As always, it is easy to condemn the loudest rabble rousers, such as Father Charles Coughlin, Reverend Gerald Winrod, Fritz Kuhn and William Dudley Pelley, as esoteric crackpots whose polemic opinions did not reflect American culture at large. To do this, however, is to absolve wider culture for culpability in the nurturing of such prejudicial and discriminatory racist doctrines. The spark of racial and religious hatred was provided with its lifeblood during the 1930s: economic insecurity and widespread social unrest. In this climate demagoguery was able to exploit the fears and anxieties of millions of Americans who would not otherwise associate themselves with discriminatory sensibilities, and, of course, was able to rely on the support of millions of others who would.

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<sup>49</sup> Dinnerstein, Leonard, *Antisemitism in America*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.129-130

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.105.

Yet for Richard C. Rothschild, writing on behalf of the AJC Survey Committee in a 1940 paper entitled, “Are American Jews Falling into the Nazi Trap?” those two ever-recurring facets of widespread anti-Semitism – recognition of ethno-cultural difference and socio-economic distress – were augmented in the 1930s by the “flood of propaganda, direct and indirect, coming out of Hitler Germany...In short, anti-Semitism has been given a new dimension, a political dimension, in that it has been made the *emotional spearhead of a world-wide revolutionary program*.”<sup>51</sup> Taking their lead from Nazi propaganda, numerous public figures who gained notoriety in the 1930s concocted erroneous connections between Jews and a host of social ills, such as communism and warmongering, thereby creating a large group within the American populace united by fear and repulsion which was “not merely passively anti-Semitic, but actively so.”<sup>52</sup>

One such demagogue, Father Charles Coughlin, arguably the most notorious of all the anti-Semites, anti-interventionists and anti-New Dealers, was able to draw upon not only the connections made in the previous few years between Jews, the Roosevelt administration, the New Deal and progressive politics, but also largely upon Nazi propaganda. Dinnerstein describes how, in one radio address on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1938, Coughlin downplayed the Nazi atrocities committed ten days earlier in what was to become known as *Kristallnacht*. In the same programme, he blamed Jews for forcing Communism on Russia and supported Nazi claims that Jews were solely responsible for the socio-economic hardships endured by the German nation. Moreover, he repeated claims, supposedly based on a September 1920 edition of *The American Hebrew*, that Jews were responsible for the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and also claimed that the American press and government were too concerned with reporting and combating crimes committed against Jews in Germany whilst comparatively ignoring those enacted against Catholics in Mexico and Spain.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rothschild, Richard C., *Are American Jews Falling into the Nazi Trap?* Originally published by the American Jewish Committee in January-February 1940, and available online at: [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/RS-18.PDF](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/RS-18.PDF). Quote is from pgs.4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>53</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p.116.

Dinnerstein points out that “to support his contentions Coughlin used counterfeit documents disseminated by the Nazis...It later turned out that most of Coughlin’s “facts” came from Nazi publications like *World Service*.”<sup>54</sup> Whilst the broadcast station that unknowingly aired Coughlin’s diatribe followed the address with a correction of the false defamation of Jews therein, and the programme was widely denounced in the press, the reasoning of Coughlin’s arguments, his anti-Semitic conclusions, and the tone of his sentiments were received by a large number of American citizens as a just explanation for the origins of the dire social and economic conditions in Russia, Germany, and, crucially, America.

Although Jews and non-Jews worked hard to combat anti-Semitism, and the tolerant voice of acceptance and understanding was heard, anti-Semitism was at an all-time high, at least on a visible level, in the U.S. during the 1930s. “In fact, from 1933 through 1941, over 100 antisemitic organisations were created, as contrasted with perhaps a total of five in all previous American history.”<sup>55</sup> As Rothschild recognised, propaganda had a large hand to play in deepening anti-Semitic sentiments in American culture. In June 1938, the National Conference of Jews and Christians (N.C.J.C.) was concerned because “legitimate differences of opinion as to political events or policies abroad are creating mutual suspicions among religious groups here,” and urged “Americans of all races and creeds to abjure attempts to arouse one group of the population against another and to reject all propaganda directed against the reputation of any group.”<sup>56</sup> A *Time* magazine article published a month prior to this warning by the N.C.J.C. shows just how callous and deceitful anti-Semitic forces operating on U.S. soil were prepared to be.

The article, which reported the signing of a decree by Field Marshall Hermann Wilhelm Göring allowing for the confiscation of almost all Jewish property throughout Germany, also detailed the arrival in Manhattan of Fuhrer Fritz Kuhn, the leader of the fascist Fifth Columnist group, the German-American Bund:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.116-7

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.112.

<sup>56</sup> *Time*, “Tensions”, Jun.13, 1938. Available online at:  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,849028,00.html>

Met by two gray-coated, black-trousered Bund officers, Fuhrer Kuhn brought back a message from German Jews to American Jews. "I talked with lots and lots of Jews in Germany," Kuhn said, "and they all told me this: 'Tell the Jews in America to let us alone. We're all right.' Thousands of Jews are returning to Germany and I was really surprised to see how many Jewish stores were open."<sup>57</sup>

This outright denial of Nazi persecution of the Jews' in Europe is a reflection of the extremities of anti-Semitic propaganda rather than a representation of the general tone of anti-Semitism in America at the time, and the German-American Bund were, to be sure, widely despised and discouraged in American culture, although largely for their un-American stance rather than for their anti-Semitic doctrine.

Nonetheless, hatred and fear of Jews in late-1930s American culture ran deep and permeated all levels of the social, economic, industrial and political infrastructure of the nation. Hitler's aggressive foreign policy may have found little sympathy among the American public but his attitudes towards Jews were considered sound by many Americans. Although Jews and non-Jews worked hard to combat anti-Semitism, and the tolerant voice of acceptance and understanding was heard, anti-Semitism was at an all-time high in the U.S. during the 1930s, as Dinnerstein notes, "from 1933 through 1941, over 100 anti-Semitic organisations were created, as contrasted with perhaps a total of five in all previous American history."<sup>58</sup> The ranks of anti-Semitic organizations swelled: America First Committee boasted fifteen-million supporters at the peak of its powers, whilst the ranks of the KKK bulged at over one-hundred thousand members.<sup>59</sup> Although the latter group had its base in the southern US states, as Arthur Hertzberg notes, membership rose in cities where Jews resided. Hertzberg also notes that smaller, but "visible and virulent" grassroots groups like The German-American Bund abounded, with opinion polls showing that "roughly one-third of the respondents

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<sup>57</sup> *Time*, "Land of Justice", May. 09, 1938. Available online at:  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,759598,00.html>

<sup>58</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p.116-7

<sup>59</sup> Sarna, Jonathan D., *American Judaism: A History*, Yale University Press, 2004, p.265.

thought “Jews had too much power.”<sup>60</sup> Even many of those disgusted by the persecution of Jews lent their ear to the demagogues’ charges of Jewish malice, believed in their culpability for American economic instability, and consumed, unmitigated, the argument that Jews were a race of people intent on pushing the nation towards war. In short, for many Americans, Jews were a group who were preoccupied, first and foremost, with international rather than national interests, and those interests were, in turn, regarded as malevolent and traitorous.

Despite the cry of isolationists and the nation’s bigots by the late 1930s, before the arrival of Captain America comics, Superman’s popularity had risen to unprecedented levels. The importance of his heroics was not lost on a world racked by war, as *Time* magazine reported in September 1939, “How to end the war quickly seemed ridiculously simple to readers of comic strips last week: send Superman to clean up Hitler.”<sup>61</sup> The same article also attested to his popularity amongst the nation’s youngsters, noting that in some of cities where the story was syndicated Superman clubs had sprung up, “...in others youngsters have taken to wearing Superman capes and carrying shields. In Milwaukee one enthusiastic young Superman fan jumped off the roof of his house and survived.”<sup>62</sup> If Superman had not been created specifically for the war effort, he was quickly recruited. The mythos that Siegel and Shuster had constructed for their character, founded upon traditional American myth systems, suited the mood of a world in turmoil. As Fingerhuth elaborates:

The Siegel-Shuster Superman concept was in its way the diametric opposite of the contemporary fascist and communist solutions to the modern dilemma of finding meaning and identity in mass society. As expressed through Superman, the self was not to be subsumed to the collective. The self could best serve the whole by being allowed to flourish and thrive and express itself. This was the

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<sup>60</sup> Hertzberg, Arthur, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*, Touchstone, 1990 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 1989), p.286.

<sup>61</sup> *Time*, “Superman”, Sept. 11, 1939. Available online at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8861,711787,00.html>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



same celebration of the individual that had pervaded American popular culture from the solitary cowboy heroes of Owen Wister even onto the baseball fields.<sup>63</sup>

Superman was so successful in combating fascist and communist ideology systems precisely because he was a continuation of age-old American myths built upon the notion of democratically enabled individual endeavour. Yet whilst this model was successful in the United States, a nation familiar with the values and traditions associated with this American legend, those not privy to the historical basis of Superman's ethos found the notion of a fantastical superhero combating the all-too-real evils of Nazism a little harder to swallow. In Spring 1940, after one Superman strip had seen him swoop down to reveal the war as a mockery to the soldiers fighting on the front, whereupon they promptly laid down their weapons and went home to plough their fields, *Time* magazine reported, "Such playboy feats are all very warming to the neutral U.S...but to a country at war, like Canada, this reduction of a life-&-death struggle to the absurdity of a comic strip is no joke. Superman's irresistible strength came up against the impenetrable wall of Canadian censorship, and one day last fortnight there was no Superman in the *Toronto Star*."<sup>64</sup> Thus, these comics tapped into a specifically *American* vernacular; whilst *Superman*, *Captain America*, and a comprehensive flock of caped-heroes proved popular around the globe, they were primarily coded for an American audience who could best decipher the significance of their cultural and mythical constituents.

By December 1940, nine months before Lindbergh's anti-Semitic pro-isolationist speech received widespread public censure, and nine months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour nullified the contentious issue of American entry into the war, the launch of Captain America was a blow struck on the propaganda front on behalf of interventionist anti-Nazis. With propaganda and public opinion playing a large part in the complexion of America's cultural stance regarding the war in Europe and in attitudes towards American and European Jewry, Captain America comics were an important and daring step forward. If Siegel and Shuster had, somewhat unwittingly, built the

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<sup>63</sup> Fingerioth, p.42-3.

<sup>64</sup> *Time*, "Superman Stymied", Mar. 11, 1940. Available online at: <http://www.time.com/magazine/article/0,9171,789685,00.html>.

skeleton of a character genus ideally suited for wartime propagandist heroics, Kirby and Simon knowingly seized its structure to create a superhero character that was specifically anti-Nazi, outwardly pro-American, and undeniably ready for war.

By doing this they risked rousing the animosity of a large majority of Americans for whom entry into the war was to be avoided, and, more worryingly, risked incurring the wrath of those hundreds of thousands of Americans who had joined anti-Semitic and/or anti-war groups and for whom the avoidance of American entry into the war was imperative. That Kirby and Simon were Jewish made the whole venture even more delicate:

The fact that Cap's creators were Jewish wasn't lost on people. "There was a substantial population of anti-war activists... [including] the German-American Bund," recounts Simon in his book. "They were all over the place, heavily financed and effective in spewing their propaganda of hate...Our irreverent treatment of their Feuhrer [*sic*] infuriated them. We were inundated with a torrent of raging hate mail and vicious, obscene telephone calls. The theme was 'death to the Jews.'" New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia stationed police at the company's 42<sup>nd</sup> Street offices to protect it against the threats from homegrown Nazis angered by Captain America's comics stories.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the efforts of the anti-Semitic and anti-war brigade, the first Captain America comic sold out in days and subsequent editions made Cap' the bestselling comic on the newsstands, proving that whilst those who propagandised prejudice and persecution may have been loud of voice, they were, in fact, comparatively low in number.

However, whilst Captain America was hugely successful and their creation had been brought about with the best intentions, the transformation of Steve Rogers to Captain America suggests that ethnic difference must be forsaken in the quest for personal happiness and perfection, and in order to

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<sup>65</sup> Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p.58. Joe Simon's quote is from his book, *The Comic Book Makers*, Vanguard Productions, 2003. The "company" refers to Martin Goodman's comic company at which Kirby and Simon were working when they came up with *Captain America*, it would later become known as Marvel Comics.

impart an ideological stance. A fact mirrored in the real artistic process that brought about his creation, whereby Kirby and Simon used an American avatar as a conduit for sentiments inspired by personal Jewish histories, sentiments that could hardly be expressed in terms other than those that were, aesthetically and thematically, overtly American. This is not to suggest that Kirby and Simon were promoting the idea that ethnic difference should be eradicated and subsumed by WASP ideals. More that, if we read the Captain America mythos through a model of assimilation, Kirby and Simon seem to be suggesting that in order for the ethnic voice to be heard in American culture, and in order for social and ideological goals to be achieved, ethnicity must yield the weaker elements of its cultural signifiers and traditions to a collective whole that characterises the host culture. And whilst this notion journeys perilously close to advocating complete assimilation, the vital difference is that Kirby and Simon's model is dedicated to *preserving* and *improving* ethnicity, whilst forsaking obvious difference. Still, it is hardly an ideal interpretation; by promoting a singular ideal, constructed via patriotic, masculine, and WASP models, Captain America comics deny the notion of cultural pluralism and surrender the pursuit of accommodation within an American paradigm.

Assimilation was understandably a recurrent theme of mid-twentieth century Jewish American culture. In fact, from the cultural divisions addressed in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing!* to the almost invisible Jewishness of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) the process of assimilation was the metanarrative of much of the Jewish artistic output during the 1930s, '40s, and into the '50s. In these texts assimilation is often presented as a struggle fought along generational divisions in which orthodoxy, tradition, and authenticity battle with change, progress, and modernity for control of legitimate Jewish identity. Given that Superman and Captain America were both produced by young, twenty-something Jewish authors, the two drastically different models of assimilation as represented by the two characters suggests that the way in which assimilation should ideally be achieved was also a battle fought amongst America's second-generation Jewish citizens.

The economically dissimilar background of the different superheroes' creators offers some explanation as to the reason behind the division between second-generational aspirations regarding assimilation. The Lower East Side creators of Captain America had a much more acute understanding of the limitations of Jewish identity than the more comfortable, suburban creators of Superman. For those Jewish Americans, like Kirby and Simon, whose immigrant parents had not been able to find a sure footing on the treacherous road leading to the American dream, Jewishness could easily become synonymous with poverty, discrimination, second-class citizenry, prejudice, and weakness. The loss of a Jewish identity must have seemed a small price to pay in return for the riddance of these societal shackles. For second-generation Jews like Jerry Siegel, however, who, whilst not exactly wealthy, was born into a sufficiently comfortable middle-class environment in a heavily populated Jewish area in which ethnic acceptance was not so often brought into question, Jewish identity was often seen as a much smaller hindrance.<sup>66</sup>

For these Jews like Siegel and Shuster, Jewishness was not as tainted by inequality, and whilst they still desired the material spoils that America could offer, the exigency to dissolve their Jewish identity in order to claim them was less imperative. Superman and Captain America therefore reflect different models of cultural interaction, in which generational divisions in Jewish American culture were exacerbated by class and economic disparity. As such, where Superman reflects a Jewish identity ready to adopt the values and ethics that form the foundation of "America", Captain America reflects a Jewish identity eager to adopt merely the signifiers of an American identity. If Superman shows a Jewish identity that desires to be accepted into the bosom of the American mainstream whilst maintaining the elements that signify Jewishness, *Captain America betrays* a Jewish identity eager to disguise its ethno-religiosity beneath the Star-Spangled Banner.

The difference between how the two texts approach ethnic identity also exemplifies how the Jewish imagination articulated notions of masculinity throughout the mid-century. On the one hand,

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<sup>66</sup> Fingerroth suggests that "the lives [Siegel and Shuster] lived as Jews in America was relatively free from overt, violent hatred, especially if they stayed within the confines of home and school." Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p.40.

Captain America shows how brawn and machismo were married to ideas of nationhood to create a centralised and ideal American masculinity. In the same way that the comic articulates how Steve Rogers abandons a symbolic Jewishness, his transformation into Captain America more literally eschews a physical weakness in favour of muscles and virility. Given the character's historical and cultural context this process would appear to represent a desire to replace rather than rejuvenate intertwined notions of individual, masculine, and national identity whilst forgetting and relinquishing a weak, disenfranchised, and enervated thirties manhood. In this way the mythos of Captain America articulates a motivation to move away from the cultural, economic, and ideological environment that had so badly damaged American masculinity towards a simplistic interpretation of muscle-bound national machismo.

The Superman mythos, on the other hand, appears to have attempted a process of masculine and cultural rejuvenation. By maintaining an element of the "damaged" American male in the guise of Clark Kent, and by approaching issues of social responsibility with an overtone of New Deal liberalism, Superman articulated a desire to respect and conserve his cultural birthplace whilst necessarily progressing the interpretation and character of American masculinity. Converging notions of weakness, Jewishness, social impotence, the Depression-era cultural climate, and a "damaged" masculinity are remedied rather than abandoned. Unlike in Captain America where masculine shortcomings, and by extension the thirties cultural environment that they represent, are rendered "unfit for duty" and lead to the complete dereliction of Steve Rogers, Superman shows that thirties ideology and masculine aesthetic can be incorporated into an on-going process of masculine rehabilitation.

Both Captain America and Superman articulate how the relationship between identity, masculinity, and nationhood became entwined within the Jewish imagination in the mid-twentieth century. Superman is perhaps best representative of how Jewish artists most often sought to achieve the rightful accommodation of ethnic, individual and community identity within a centralised American paradigm rather than the complete assimilation or capitulation to the demands of cultural

hegemony that is seen in Captain America. Nevertheless, when considered together both texts show how the Jewish imagination interacted with and influenced fluctuating and fluid interpretations of masculine and national identity, whilst also articulating the experiences of a specifically Jewish identity that represented the plight of the individual, ethnic, or “other” that existed outside of the mainstream.

## Chapter Three

### The Masculine Ideal and the Articulation of Individual, Infra-Cultural, and Critical Identities

The proliferation of the superhero aesthetic in comic books and culture, based upon the patriotic prototypes of Captain America and Superman, helped to fashion a national wartime masculine identity founded upon characteristics of brawn, fortitude and moral principle. This reclamation of the American male body as a site inscribed with dovetailing principles of nationhood and stout-hearted masculinity was augmented within Hollywood cinema where multi-ethnic bands-of-brothers fought together against an enemy determined to tear them apart. Where comics presented an impenetrable and confident masculinity that, along with wartime propaganda, served to position the American male as central to American identity, Hollywood taught us that this masculine paradigm diluted ethnic difference and homogenised the national character, in principle if not in reality. Thus, national wartime identity was designed upon a masculine aesthetic that put forward the power of cooperation as integral to the American national identity.

Jewish comic book authors and filmmakers added their voice to this wartime discourse by continuing to create comic book paladins like *Wonder Man* (Will Eisner, 1939) and *The Green Lantern* (Bill Finger, 1940) alongside the enduring popularity of Superman and Captain America, as well as helping to produce the necessary body of morale-boosting propaganda films like *Mission to Moscow* (Michael Curtiz, 1943) and *The North Star* (Lewis Milestone, 1943). An analysis of these texts would accurately position the Jewish imagination as integral to the construction of American masculinity as *the* representative national identity, and, as we will see, it is at this intersection where Jewish and American interests met most keenly throughout the Second World War. A survey of the

Jewish imagination during wartime, however, also offers up a different mode of masculine representation, with Bill Finger and Bob Kane's *Batman* (1939-onwards), Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945), as well as Arthur Fellig's *Naked City* (1945), Richard Brooks's *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), and number of other noir films all suggesting that some Jewish artists attempted to articulate a more complex masculinity and a different interpretation of American identity and experience.

Most of these texts, although produced and disseminated during wartime, use the Second World War as merely a backdrop or ignore this aspect of their cultural context altogether. Their interest lay elsewhere as they each seek to undermine the characteristics of wartime discourse by examining the dark underbelly of the American Dream. Collectively, these texts critique mass culture; expose native anti-Semitism and discrimination; present death as non-heroic; sexualise women and characterise them as a corrupting force; and, above all, corrode the notion of a collective American wartime spirit. They also complicate our interpretation of how masculinity was constructed in American culture. Instead of the boundaries that set the American male's individual and collective identity being based upon a rather simple relationship between national identity and that of other American males, these texts suggest that masculinity was also enacted within a much broader relationship between the family, the home, femininity, and sexuality, as well as presenting more complex interpretations of those things seen in wider cultural expression such as brotherhood and economic stature. In this chapter I will analyse how the Jewish imagination contributed to the recovery of American masculinity in the early forties, and how the revitalised identity of the American male created a paradigm identity that became integral to the national wartime character. The chapter's primary focus, however, will be on how Jewish artists sought to articulate an experience that wasn't addressed in the wartime propaganda discourse and that undermined the national paradigm identity.



## **The Rehabilitation of American Masculinity and the Rejuvenation of National Identity.**

Captain America was only one of many comic book superheroes inspired by Superman's popularity on the newsstands. Most of these comics were barely veiled imitations of Superman's themes and aesthetics and featured similarly costumed characters complete with protuberant torsos and ineffective alter egos. Throughout 1939 and 1940, Batman, The Green Lantern, Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, Hawkman, The Flash, The Sandman, Atom, Aquaman, Wonder Man, and host of other superheroes began to appear in the pages of comic books across America. Although not all of these early comics were created by Jewish artists, as Kaplan states, "a disproportionate amount of the talent brought into this fledgling industry was Jewish. A list of the major accomplishments of Jewish professionals during the comics' Golden Age reads like a list of the major accomplishments of the comics *industry* during this period."<sup>1</sup> In the early forties comics were a nascent industry that became saturated with a specifically Jewish significance injected by the history, heritage, and ethno-cultural preoccupations of the large number of Jewish artists working in the medium.

Before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the Second World War to America's shores, only some of the many comics being produced in the late-1930s and early-1940s included the European conflict in the stories that filled their brightly-hued pages. Public opinion and political sensitivity regarding the contentious issue of intervention in the European conflict meant that many publishers were reluctant to include anything that could be interpreted as propaganda in their publications for fear of alienating a proportion of their audience.<sup>2</sup> Once America had joined the war effort, however, wartime themes became the mainstay of comic book content and sales soared as the comics were invigorated with a new and vital significance. The Axis powers provided the perfect antagonists to the audacious escapades of the comics' superheroes, as Arie Kaplan succinctly states, "As comics rode the tide of wartime patriotism, their influence on the American imagination became

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Arie Kaplan shows, for example, that although *Detective Comics* and *All-American Comics* were, in effect, sister publications, in the years and months leading up to America's entry into World War Two, the two 'lines' took different attitudes towards the situation in Europe, "DC's stance was liberal and humanitarian, pro-war from the point of view that we must help our allies. AA's philosophy was conservative and isolationist." Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, p.26.

as indelible as a permanent marker.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout World War Two superheroes functioned as fictional sentries on the parapets of the American Way, ready to battle the malevolent forces of Nazism, Fascism, and, most urgently for America, the Japanese.

The pages of these comics were awash with lurid images depicting Captain America, Superman, and countless other costumed heroes defeating grotesque representations of Japanese fighters and scheming Nazi footmen; the general tone of these publications was combatively patriotic and resolutely nationalistic. For Christina S. Jarvis, superhero comics played a large role in repairing the perception of masculinity in the nation’s collective consciousness after the debilitating effects of Depression-era emasculation. The unbelievably bulging biceps and improbably large chests of superheroes “took the artistic shorthand that conveyed heroism through a strong upper body to a new level,” she suggests.<sup>4</sup> Jarvis links the reinvigoration of Uncle Sam’s aesthetics around this time – by presenting America’s paladin in a more youthful, muscular, and bellicose guise – with the emergence of superheroes, and suggests that they were both instrumental in the reinvention of the American masculine ideal:

With the United States’ full-scale mobilization for war came both a stronger, more youthful Uncle Sam and a broader rhetoric of muscles that placed comic-book inspired aesthetics at the heart of early 1940s bodily ideals...The end result...was that wartime imagery primarily constructed the United States as a powerful, virile country as it embraced the serviceman as a key of both masculinity and national identity.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst Jarvis is careful to point out that the dissemination of this ideal was aided, in no small measure, by its representation in propaganda and advertising, she nevertheless concludes that

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<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, p.58.

<sup>4</sup> Jarvis, Christina S, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War Two*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2004, p.52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.55.

superheroes were instrumental in the construction of an American manhood that, having taken a slap in the face during the Depression, was now preparing for a bloody rebuttal.

Comic book superheroes also helped the male body to once again become an agent of national strength without sexualising the notion of masculinity. As Gerard Jones comments, with Captain America, “Kirby celebrated the body, the male body, male sweat and muscles, not with the fetishism of bodybuilding but with savage joy.”<sup>6</sup> This meant that the ostensibly masculine aesthetic of muscularity and physical strength could be transferred literally onto representations of the female body or used allegorically as a symbol of national vigour. The most obvious example of this is captured in the iconography of Rosie the Riveter, where the idea of national strength is captured by the adoption of brawny imagery, but the notion of how the masculine ideal could be articulated within representations of femininity can also be found in *Wonder Woman* comics.

Created by William Moulton Marston and first published in 1941, *Wonder Woman* appears to work against the idea of cultural patriarchy and masculine ideality by presenting a strong female character who can perform the superhero(ine) duties undertaken by her male counterparts. Nevertheless, despite being intended by her creator as an emblem of feminist advancement, Bradford W. Wright argues that the series “often underscored the Victorian assumption that superior female virtues like compassion and empathy were best applied as a restraining influence on aggressive men, not as a means to female self-sufficiency,” continuing that, “Wonder Woman was rooted more in the gendered tradition of progressive social work than in modern notions of feminist self-fulfilment.”<sup>7</sup> Also, although *Wonder Woman* was borne out of Marston’s belief that women were superior to men, the character appropriated the masculine qualities of “force, strength and power” embedded in the predominantly male superhero genre in order to articulate this message, in much the same way that Rosie the Riveter adopted the masculine aesthetic to support the war effort and reinforce national identity. Wonder Woman’s feminist message was further undermined by the submissive sexual

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, Gerard, *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*, Arrow Books, 2004, p.201.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2001, p.21.

imagery that made her the object of the male reader's gaze; moreover, her common identity worked as a secretary and when her superheroine alter-ego was drafted into the Justice League, she too became secretary to the superhero ensemble. *Wonder Woman* is certainly a complex character and almost certainly contains elements that promote feminist advancement, particularly within a 1940s context, but despite his progressive intentions Marston's creation serves to position women as secondary and subservient to men whilst reinforcing the importance of masculine qualities as well as the sexual submissiveness of women.

Comics helped prepare the nation for war by transforming a dilapidated Depression-era male body into a site in which to ascribe machismo, power, prosperity, and fortitude. Of course it was this kind of transformation that, in part, initiated the creation of the superhero genre in the early-thirties when Siegel and Shuster dreamt of ditching their spectacles, bulking up their biceps, and being lucky-in-love. Kirby and Simon, as well as Siegel and Shuster and a roll call of other comic book authors who created the cornucopia of Superman's caped descendants, most notably the litigation-inducing Captain Marvel and the plagiaristic Wonder Man, were able to adapt this framework to fit more global and national concerns rather than juvenile feelings of inadequacy and frivolous affairs of the heart. As Kaplan states, with the onset of the conflict in America, when superheroes were drafted for the war effort:

Jewish comic-book creators who had obeyed the unwritten rule forbidding them from writing overtly Jewish themes into their work were suddenly encouraged to depict their alpha-male superheroes sweeping the floor with Nazi spies and saboteurs. It would be hard to find a more potent metaphor for Jewish empowerment.<sup>8</sup>

Specifically Jewish concerns regarding Nazism – fears that Jewish organisations such as the American Jewish Committee had been attempting to draw attention to for almost a decade – coincided with more general American fears surrounding the threat of Hitler and the Japanese, and comic book

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<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, p.58

artists were able to explore a collision between fantasy and reality that articulated both Jewish and American hope and despair regarding personal, national, and international events.

Hollywood's Jews found themselves in a similar position to Jewish comic book creators in the run-up to American entry in the war. From the mid-thirties, Hollywood's Jewish moguls had agonised over what to do about Hitler and the Nazis. Having "spent the better part of their lives transforming themselves *from* Jews," the events in Europe and their effect on American Jewry forced executives like Harry Cohn, Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer, David O. Selznick, Walter Wanger, Carl Laemmle, and Harry Warner to consider their position as prominent Jews. Practised sensitivity to the vulnerability accrued by openly identifying with their ethnic heritage made the moguls nervous about producing anti-Nazi films. To be sure, as Neal Gabler points out, some moguls helped in other, possibly more important ways. Carl Laemmle, for example, the founder of Universal Studios and a pioneer in Hollywood since its beginnings, set about organising safe passages out of Germany for the town's inhabitants, paying their emigration and immigration fees and thus assisting around two hundred and fifty German Jews who may well have perished in the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, before war broke out in Europe the Hollywood moguls' attitude towards how they could best combat the perilous position of Jews in Germany was faltering; balancing self-preservation against the needs of the community, whilst constantly monitoring how events affected their business interests at home and overseas. As the Nazi threat became more pronounced, however, and Roosevelt issued a "veiled offer" to start producing anti-Nazi movies by declaring that "...I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought...Even a neutral has a right to take account of facts. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience," the Jewish moguls allowed propaganda to steadily seep into the films they helped produce.<sup>10</sup> Films like *Blockade* (William Dieterle, 1938), *Confessions of A Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939), *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940), *Four Sons* (Archie Mayo, 1940), *The Mortal Storm* (Frank Borzage, 1940), *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1940) and *Man Hunt* (Fritz Lang, 1941) all reflect the fact that American public

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<sup>9</sup> Gabler, Neal, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, 1989, p.341.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.343.

opinion, whilst still largely adverse to American involvement in the conflict, was becoming more sympathetic to those victims of the war overseas and more aware of Hitler's maliciousness. These films also reveal the fact that with much of Europe under occupation and their overseas markets severely reduced, Hollywood's moguls could produce films criticising and attacking the Nazis without worrying too deeply about a loss of revenue.

Thus, in the early-forties the movie industry and its Jewish moguls began to come under increasing scrutiny from America's isolationists, who charged that the studios were guilty of producing anti-Nazi, pro-war propaganda in order to stir up the nation ready for war. Implicit in this charge was the anti-Semitic notion that this push for war was informed by the moguls' malign global interests owing to their ethno-religious identity. These accusations culminated in an all-out investigation instigated by Senator Burton K. Wheeler. The Senator appointed a subcommittee on behalf of the Senate's Interstate Commerce Commission, who were, as Neal Gabler notes in his seminal study of Hollywood's Jewish moguls, "supported and assisted by a rabid isolationist group called America First," one of the more vocal isolationist groups that harboured an obvious hostility towards Jews.<sup>11</sup> The subcommittee conveyed on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1941, led by Senator Gerald P. Nye, the "isolationist firebrand from North Dakota, whose charges against Hollywood had triggered the hearing."<sup>12</sup>

Although informed, at least in part, by both anti-Semitic and isolationist sentiments, Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes argue that the committee's investigations did have a reasonable case against Hollywood:

The oligopolistic structure of the movie industry produced a monolithic political product. This distortion of the leading forum of popular culture angered the isolationists. It should have aroused others as well, but when the isolationists tackled the issue in 1941, their partisan bungling sabotaged what might have been an occasion for serious public reflection about the structure of

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<sup>11</sup> Gabler, Neal, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, 1989, p.345.

<sup>12</sup> Black, Gregory D. & Koppes, Clayton R., *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Shaped World War Two Movies*, The Free Press, 1987, p.17

the industry and its role in propaganda...Although the non-interventionist position had little credibility by the fall of 1941, the broad issue of how the movies' messages were determined was of lasting importance. By 1941 moviegoers were receiving a steady, one-sided dose of interventionist propaganda in various guises...The issue was control of the industry and the resulting exclusion of an important political perspective from the screen.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the fight over propaganda had been brought to the moguls' door by those dedicated to the riddance of interventionist sentiments of any kind and those angered by the fact that these sentiments were being expressed in movies produced by Jewish moguls, not by those worried about an imbalance in the representation of political beliefs in a medium that could facilitate an informed civic debate. Under cross-examination by Senator Ernest McFarland, Nye revealed a limited knowledge of the Hollywood products he so readily condemned as malevolent propaganda. As Black and Koppes describe, "The verbal duel between McFarlane and Nye turned into a disaster for the isolationists. The North Dakota senator looked ignorant, anti-Semitic, and rather too cavalier about Hitler."<sup>14</sup> Nye's inability to remember the names and narratives of the films he found objectionable further attenuated his stance on the "indelible effects of propaganda."<sup>15</sup>

The hearings adjourned in late-September; ten weeks later the attack on Pearl Harbour cemented American public opinion on the question of interventionism when the nation's citizens by-and-large already supported America's involvement in the war against Hitler. Thus, as Gabler shows, the issue of Hollywood's role in the dissemination of propaganda thus remained unresolved as Hollywood features began to oil the cogs of America's war machine:

Draped in the flag, the Hollywood Jews were deliriously patriotic, turning out film after film about the Nazis' cruelty, the sedition of Nazi sympathizers here, the bravery of our soldiers, the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.39 & p.45-6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.44.

steadfastness of our people, and the rightness of our mission, and they were no less zealous against the Japanese.<sup>16</sup>

Gabler continues that, like the young Jewish comic book authors, “For the Hollywood Jews, war was peace, a brief idyll where for once their obligations as Jews and their obligations as Americans not only merged, but received official sanction.”<sup>17</sup> The movies, like the comics, fortified national machismo and propagandised the war effort against the Axis powers. Unlike in the comics, however, between 1942 and 1945, one-man panaceas were eschewed in Hollywood products as American films depicted the “bravery and camaraderie” of Allied troops bolstered by ethnic diversity and collective heroism.<sup>18</sup>

In his study of American cinema during the Second World War, Thomas Doherty shows that the war film’s inclusiveness not only extended to those hyphenated identities that had already achieved some degree of assimilatory success (Jewish, Italian, and Irish-Americans), but also those racial and ethnic identities that were by-and-large excluded from mainstream (positive) representation, such as Hispanics, Asians, Italians, Native Americans, and African Americans.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Doherty also points out how the inclusive and ecumenical nature of cinematic unity only extended so far, with the Japanese and Japanese-Americans largely excluded from the united front. As Jonathan Munby points out:

During the war Hollywood...provided audiences with films that posited national unity and maintained a climate of narrative certainty. Films such as *Air Force* (1943), *Destination Tokyo* (1943), and *Pride of the Marines* (1945) took formerly disparate and divided male members of American society...and put them in a confined space/surrogate community (such as a bomber or a submarine) where they were persuaded to overcome their differences (and injuries) in the interests of being good citizens and fighting the good fight.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gabler, Neal, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, 1989, p.348.

<sup>17</sup> Gabler, Neal, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, 1989, p.347.

<sup>18</sup> Foertsch, Jacqueline, *American Culture of the 1940s*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p.116-118.

<sup>19</sup> Doherty, Thomas, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*, Columbia University Press, 1993, p.139.

<sup>20</sup> Munby, Jonathan, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.119-120



Set against a backdrop of jingoism and unabashed xenophobia, directed towards the Japanese in particular, American war films used wartime environments that acted as an ersatz America founded upon a fantasy of tolerance, fortitude, and communality.<sup>21</sup>

According to Lary May, the inclusiveness seen in World War Two films illustrates that they “were engaged in reshaping American culture and political ideology. In these works the cooperation necessary to win the war meant that the heroes and heroines had to identify with large organizations and patriotic causes that stressed class unity.”<sup>22</sup> For May, the ethnic and class coadunation seen in war films helped to foster confidence in the American Way by promoting positive representations of pluralism and material abundance. By marrying cooperation and unity to the notion of a victorious, abundant and more inclusive future, doubts over the effectiveness and appeal of American capitalism, corporations, and institutions were allayed after the damage caused during the thirties. Fractious and fragmented ethnic, regional, and racial identities were brought under the auspices of Americanness; whilst women remained not so much excluded as they did become an aspect of an aspirational vision where victory and freedom “came to center on women and the consumer-oriented home.”<sup>23</sup>

This desire to create confidence in national identity can also be seen in the changes that took place within the Superman mythos. The first incarnation of superman was in a 1933 short story penned by Siegel and Shuster; here the superman figure is a downtrodden vagrant, Bill Dunn, who is plucked from the breadline by Professor Earnest Smalley and offered the part in an experiment in exchange for nourishment and clothing. Smalley drugs Dunn, who turns into a tyrant hell bent on ruling the world only to find that the superhuman effects of the drug are temporary, whereupon the

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<sup>21</sup> Prejudicial attitudes in American war films, however, tended to be reserved for the Japanese. As Koppes & Black point out, films like *The Moon is Down* make important distinctions between *Nazis* and “good Germans”, whilst films about the perniciousness of the Japanese make no such distinction. In Hollywood films of the war years, the Japanese were represented as barbarous, sadistic, and outright repulsive. *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Shaped World War Two Movies*, The Free Press, 1987, pgs.278-316.

<sup>22</sup> May, Lary, “Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films”, in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, Erenberg, Lewis A. & Hirsch, Susan E., The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.72

<sup>23</sup> May, “Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films,” p.72.

homeless man returns to life on the streets. For Thomas Andrae, this “superman” supports notions of how selfhood and cooperation should aid wider society. The story reveals the Depression-era success story (seen elsewhere in the era’s gangster and musical cinema) as myth and the Horatio Alger individual endeavour ethic as a sham that was “belied by the failing economic and inept political situation of the early thirties.”<sup>24</sup> The maniacal success of the superman, like that of the gangster, undermines the integrity of upward mobility by illustrating that it can only be achieved by illegitimate means that damage social institutions and the cultural fabric.<sup>25</sup>

The develop of the superman mythos into saviour of the downtrodden and adversary of the establishment in the late-thirties gave way to the subsequent necessity that superheroes became part of the wartime propaganda discourse. Intrinsic to this development, argues Andrae, was the fact that as confidence grew in the federal government and state institutions became increasingly viewed as “benevolent protectors of society’s welfare, the radical individualism of the early Superman is displaced by a wholesale identification with the state.”<sup>26</sup> The character’s transformation reflects how mass cultural expression concentrated on the “maintenance of ideological hegemony during the crucial institutional shift from entrepreneurial capitalism to the state-regulated monopoly capitalism of the New Deal.”<sup>27</sup> Superman comics, like war films, supported the war effort and preached confidence in federal and state institutions by having their noble and courageous hero become a bastioned embodiment of the establishment.

In this way, Hollywood cinema and superhero comics interlaced complementary cultural fibres to create a national paradigm identity that was masculine, inclusive, and united and that fully supported the establishment and state institutions. Where Hollywood promoted the notion of a collective masculine ideal that incorporated ethnic and cultural difference, comics crafted a masculine aesthetic that advanced the importance of fortitude, strength, and patriotism. This masculine

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<sup>24</sup> Andrae, Thomas, “From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman,” in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, Lazere, Donald, University of California Press, 1987, p.127.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.127.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.131.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.124.

paradigm identity, however, belied a wider reality of more complex cultural diversity, and an analysis of various texts authored by Jewish artists can allow us a peek behind this paradigmatic façade. Batman, *Dangling Man*, and *Double Indemnity* articulate a different experience of American culture and masculinity identity, and by analysing these texts and how they explore an existence outside of the mainstream we can gain a better understanding of how Jewish artists addressed the ambivalence that accompanied the adaptation to wartime culture that created a heightened sense of a national paradigm, masculine character.

### **Individual Endeavour and Cultural Uncertainty in Batman's Wartime Catalogue**

Despite the overwhelming necessity for artistic texts to adhere to the propagandist and patriotic imperatives of a wartime climate, there remain a significant number of films, comics, and novels that were produced by Jewish artists that attempted to articulate the anxiety that lay behind the propaganda façade. To exemplify this point, it is perhaps most useful to look at the curious case of Batman comics between the years 1941 and 1945. In his 1989 publication that celebrated the fiftieth “birthday” of Batman, Mark Cotta Vaz argued that during this period Batman belonged to the coalition of national guardians found in other comics publications; characters who were bound by a desire to fight the good fight and defeat those who threatened the integrity of American national identity:

During World War II everyone in America was called to action...America's superheroes were also pressed into service. After all, it would have been a waste to let such omnipotent beings merely collar crooks at home while Axis troops were marching down the Champs Elysees, London was being bombed, and the Atlantic waters were teeming with German U-boats. Given the strategic East Coast location of Gotham City, it was only natural that the State Department would be on the phone to Commissioner Gordon to

shine the Bat Signal and call the Dynamic Duo into service [and] Batman took to the patriotic calling with surprising fervour.<sup>28</sup>

To support his position Vaz refers to a *Batman* edition in which the caped crusader fights to defeat a fifth-column Nazi spy-ring based in Gotham City (*Batman* #14, January 1943) and a number of editions in which Batman and his young ward, Robin, promote the purchasing of war bonds.

More recently, however, through archival research into the cultural phenomenon of the Batman mythos, the scholar Will Brooker has noted that the Batman comics produced between 1941-1945 largely resisted the necessity to include bombastic propaganda in their storylines, and - cover pages notwithstanding – avoided the jingoistic tone that characterised other comics publications. Whilst the authors of Superman adapted his mythos to wholly incorporate the battle against Axis powers, and Captain America was created specifically with this battle in mind, Batman, despite the “profound changes” that American culture experienced during this period, “is notable...for his consistency and adherence to an established template.”<sup>29</sup> As Brooker shows, given that during the conflict:

...the majority of commercial forms – films, advertisements, posters, radio, comics – were given a common focus and enlisted into the war effort...Batman proved remarkably immune to the wartime “recruitment” process, and largely managed to retain his own unique style while so many other popular texts – and certainly most comic book characters – were drawn in to serve as part of a propaganda monologue.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst Brooker concedes that Vaz’s version of how Batman comics reacted to the wartime climate “makes sense” in historical and industrial contexts, the author argues that this reasoning is “largely

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<sup>28</sup> Vaz, Mark Cotta, *Tales of the Dark Knight: Batman’s First Fifty Years: 1939-1989*, DC Comics Inc., 1989, p.32.

<sup>29</sup> Brooker, Will, *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon*, Continuum, 2000, p.33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.34-5

contradicted by a study of the original comics from 1941 to 1945.”<sup>31</sup> By analysing the content of the three publications in which Batman appeared during this period – *Detective*, *Batman*, and *World’s Finest* – Brooker calculates that out of a total of eighty-eight editions, only eleven featured what the authors call “patriotic covers.” What’s more, of these eleven not one edition continued this patriotism throughout. Brooker shows that Batman’s effort at propaganda overwhelmingly relied on the promotion of war bonds that were for the most part confined to the comic’s cover. This suggests superficiality and a “form of tokenism or a meeting of minimum requirements...a lip-service to the wartime context which almost feels tacked on to the very different agenda of the established Batman ‘mythos,’” argues Brooker.<sup>32</sup>

Brooker also points out that any overt racism depicting the Japanese enemy is also conspicuous by its absence in *Batman*. The author suggests that this unwillingness to include propaganda in *Batman* and reluctance to change the content and tone of the comic is symptomatic of a desire on the part of the character’s creators to truthfully represent their immediate experience of American culture rather than adhere to a doctrine of what may be termed ‘dominant representation’. Brooker reasons that Batman’s reluctance to engage in the war effort, whether through the character engaging in actual combat with foreign enemies or through perpetuating propaganda, can be attributed to his authors’ liberal outlook and determination to reflect their immediate environment and experience.<sup>33</sup>

Although Brooker’s analysis is thoroughly researched and makes its point superbly, the author’s argument is attenuated by his decision to downplay the importance of how the ideological standpoint inherent in Batman’s mythos may support wartime imperatives and bring Finger and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.35.

<sup>33</sup> “It does not seem too far-fetched to imagine that Finger may have felt little interest in penning scripts about the frontline action in which he was never going to participate and of which he had no experience. Better surely to write from what he knew – a childhood in the Bronx and a lifelong immersion, during periods of sustained illness, in cinema and pulp fiction...As in the case of Batman’s isolation from overtly militaristic discourse, we can only guess at the reasons behind this relatively liberal, even-handed portrayal of ‘Orientals’ during the year preceding Pearl Harbor and the apparent absence of any anti-Japanese in the stories of 1941-1945. Again, it can probably be attributed to a combination of the creative freedom afforded to Batman’s writers by the editors at DC and the personal beliefs of Finger and his colleagues, who after all had grown up as working class New Yorkers and may well have seen Chinatown as no more ‘exotic’ or ‘other’ than the Bronx.” Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon*, p.82 & 87.

Kane's superhero into harmony with the widespread "propaganda monologue". The superhero's dedication to protecting Gotham city and its inhabitants shares the same benevolent crusading as his caped counterparts, built as it is around civic and national guardianship supported by superior masculine physical strength. In this way, the visionary ethos of Batman supports of the war effort or at the very least echoes the protective, combatant, and resolute righteousness that characterises much of the national propaganda around this time. In addition to this the introduction in April 1940 of Batman's sidekick, Robin, hints at the brotherhood and masculine guardianship seen elsewhere in the propaganda monologue. Moreover, if we return briefly to Andrae's analysis, the "incorporation of Superman into the establishment culminates in what becomes a major convention of the comic books: social evil is transmuted into personal evil."<sup>34</sup> Batman comics, with their absurd and grotesque supervillians, conform to the notion that evil exists in American society only in the hands of crackpots and tyrants, thus absolving the establishment of any blame for the cultivation or presence of wrongdoing, villainy or crime.

Nevertheless, an examination of the Batman mythos reveals that the reluctance to include boundless propaganda in the various editions extends beyond the authors' desire to articulate their immediate experience and challenges the idea that Batman comics ultimately support the war effort. The trait that sets Batman apart from all other superheroes is the fact that he doesn't possess any actual supernatural abilities or superpowers; his superior physical and mental strength has been earned through years of dedicated study and training. The catalyst behind acquiring these qualities and the character's *raison d'être* is that he witnesses the murder of his wealthy socialite parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne, at the hands of a small-time crook, Joe Chill. Thereafter, the young Bruce Wayne vows to enact revenge and rid the streets of its evil elements, taking on the persona of Batman to strike fear into the hearts of Gotham's criminals.

This origin story situates Batman as a vigilante; in the early stories, up until around 1942, the character operates outside of the law and is a thorn in the side of the city's police department. Although the animosity between Gotham's cops and Batman thawed during the war years, in the

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<sup>34</sup> Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman," p.131.

same way that Superman came to be more involved with federal institutions and thus encouraged confidence in the establishment, as Brooker shows, the template of Batman's mythos remained largely untouched during this period and the comic's emphasis remained on low-level crime. Weinstein points out that both Bill Finger and Bob Kane were registered 4-F and experienced the war as civilians; coupled with Brooker's analysis of how typical propaganda elements are left out of Batman comics, we can confidently deduce that Batman comics represent not so much a life on the homefront as they did an immediate experience of American culture.

Brooker is incorrect, however, when he suggests that Batman comics during the war years were ahistorical; in fact they fit within exactly the same cultural patterns that Superman, Captain America and the host of other superheroes articulate.<sup>35</sup> The difference is that whereas the vast majority of caped characters were concerned with allayed fears about the ability of federal and capitalist institutions to deliver the nation into a brighter future and remedy the economic and social maladies experienced throughout the thirties, Batman is interested in articulating the flipside of this and addressing cultural anxieties. Rather than adhere to the propaganda monologue and polish the confident veneer of the wartime cultural façade, Batman probes the dark corners of American culture and finds crime, macabre villains, and unrest. Andrae shows how Superman illustrates the "erosion of individual autonomy under monopoly capitalism." Batman also represents this aspect of American culture but undermines the confidence in federal institutions that Superman seeks to reinforce as part of his wartime tour of duty.

The death of Batman/Bruce Wayne's wealthy parents, who we can consider representatives of the establishment and successful capitalists, functions as an analogy for the vulnerability of the state in protecting and nurturing individuals and communities. That Batman lacks superpowers and achieves superhero status by his own merit and will subverts the abandonment of individual endeavour seen in Superman comics. By forwarding the individual as more important to American identity than cooperation, and more effective as a protector of American culture, Batman suggests a lack of confidence in the establishment, a reluctance to support the ideological hegemony,

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<sup>35</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon*, p.84

and doubts the economic and social safety net offered by state-regulated monopoly capitalism. The Dark Knight unsettles cultural anxieties rather than soothes them, and the comic's mythos questions the integrity of an establishment and identity that the wartime propaganda monologue was desperately attempting to legitimise and reinforce.

Brooker's analysis marks *Batman* comics as different to similar publications of the early- and mid-forties. When we combine the ideological backbone of Batman comics with the lack of overt propaganda and the absence of a bombastic, bellicose tone in the Dark Knight's wartime catalogue, we are left with a feeling of ambiguity that runs throughout the *Batman* comics of this period. Wartime *Batman* comics are at once quintessentially American cultural products in that they uphold national ideals regarding fairness, justice, and fortitude whilst simultaneously possessing a marked bleakness and detached tone that articulated real anxieties about the ability of the establishment and monopoly capitalism to protect American interests. It is this ambiguity, the disparity between mainstream representation, experience and identity and individual, ethnic and community identities that characterises the Jewish imagination; Batman seeks to uphold the national character and American masculinity but articulates a determination to do so without sacrificing individuality or without capitulating to mainstream imperatives that demand blind allegiance to consumer-capitalism and jingoistic masculine ideality.

### ***Double Indemnity*: Film Noir, the Individual, and the Critique of Mass Culture**

A similarly ambiguous approach to the war effort and the capitalist establishment can be seen in the noir films of the war years; here again, as with Batman comics, the texts can be interpreted as either supporting the war effort or as existing outside of the mainstream by representing an American culture marked by anxiety, futility, and fear. Although noir cinema only really started in earnest after the war had come to a close, indeed, the corpus itself is often interpreted as articulating a post-war zeitgeist, the earlier examples of the cinematic form were produced under the shadow of the conflict. *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), *When Strangers Marry* (William Castle, 1944), *Christmas Holiday* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *My*



*Name is Julia Ross* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1945), *Strange Illusion* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), *Uncle Harry* (Robert Siodmak, 1945), *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), *Conflict* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1945), *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) are all 'established' film noirs that were both released during the war years and produced by Jewish writers and directors. This is not to mention, of course, the scores of noir films released in 1946 that surely had their artistic genesis firmly within a wartime rather than post-war cultural climate, films like *The Dark Mirror* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger, 1946), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), and *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946). These were the Cimmerian films that inspired French critics to coin the term *film noir* in 1946; the disillusioned mood and stygian aesthetic was resident in Hollywood production long before the war came to a close.

Rather than rely upon such arbitrary and capricious criteria as dates to define war noir, Daniel M. Hodges posits that war noir – as texts belonging to a sub-genre of crime films – can be defined by the fact that “there is a key contrast between the kind of property for which crimes are committed during World War Two and then after. In the war noir property is **personal**. In the immediate post-war years it is increasingly **public**, and nearly always so after 1949.”<sup>36</sup> In making this distinction Hodges forwards the notion that war noir, sandwiched between the gangster films of the 1930s and the bleak noir of the post-war era, signals a hiatus period in which American crime cinema ceased to focus its thematic and ideological attention on attacking State and capitalist institutions. In this way, and despite its seemingly detached, pessimistic, and fatalistic mood, war noir, argues Hodges, actually helped to perpetuate propaganda messages.<sup>37</sup> Hodges also argues that when considered within a historical context, war noir illustrates a truce in how the culture industry represented class conflict as artists attempted to follow the doctrine of propaganda and promote a unified commitment to the war effort. In this way, Hodges analysis of war noir sits alongside Andrae’s analysis of Superman; both show how texts that had once harboured critical perspectives on the

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<sup>36</sup> Hodges, Daniel M., “The Rise and Fall of the War Noir”, *Film Noir Reader 4: The Crucial Films and Themes*, Limelight Editions, 2004, p.207.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.215.

American state and which had previously sought to legitimise endeavours outside of the establishment acquiesced to perpetuating propaganda messages during wartime.

Hodges, however, also suggest that war noir remained a forum in which to articulate discontent and class conflicts, arguing that the same conditions that brought about the need to include displaced and coded “win-the-war” messages within wartime noir features also allowed for a “leftist” representation of working class self-sufficiency, concluding that “What is wonderful about the war noirs is that they consistently show the side of the underdog – instead of the overlord – victorious. In this way, these B movies reveal A politics.” The author also suggests that this mood intensified within Hollywood products towards the end of the war, a time when Jewish American filmmakers produced a number of the earlier noir films.<sup>38</sup> Much like Brooker’s analysis of Batman’s wartime catalogue, Hodges suggests that war noir accommodates a dualistic attitude towards the war effort. *Batman’s* masquerade of social responsibility belied a lack of confidence in the establishment; noir films produced during the war reveal that beneath their semblance of bleak discontent and cultural disillusionment an ambiguous framework of social and political obligation exists alongside an opportunistic articulation of anti-authoritarian ideals.

Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, in particular, echoes Batman’s distrust of monopoly capitalism and continues the trend of situating an individual alone amongst a threatening and alienating American cultural landscape. Wilder, however, extends this scepticism regarding the establishment and undertakes a critique of American mass and consumer culture; *Double Indemnity* dramatizes an administered world in which murder is rationalised as part of a mechanized culture and where Wilder’s protagonist, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) symbolises the plight of the American individual. Neff mirrors Batman’s attempts to survive through individual endeavour; the failure of Wilder’s protagonists to do so and his demise at the hands of the state (in the original cut ending) indicate a much more pessimistic outlook on American wartime culture than Kane and Finger’s creation. Before we look in detail at *Double Indemnity*, it is useful to analyse how war noir in general,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.218, 224-225.

and especially the plethora of Jewish-authored noir films produced towards the end of the conflict, reflect the pessimistic and distrustful attitudes towards American culture.

In her book-length study of the noir films produced during the Second World War, Sheri Chinen Biesen's analysis promotes a similarly nuanced approach to the study of war noir to that offered by Hodges that situates these films within their historical context. Biesen emphasises the relationship between noir cinema and the wartime climate, reasoning that far from being discordant, the artistic attributes and thematic preoccupations present in these films can be appropriately located within the cultural and industrial context of the home-front. Quoting Paul Schrader's by now familiar assertion that "...were it not for the War, film noir would have been at full steam by the early Forties. The need to produce Allied propaganda abroad and promote patriotism at home blunted the fledgling moves toward a dark cinema, and the film noir thrashed about in the studio system, not quite able to come into full prominence," Biesen nevertheless counters that "Studio records, the films, and the history of how they were produced tell a different story. Wartime productions such as *Double Indemnity*, *Phantom Lady*, and *Murder, My Sweet* represent the most expressionistic, stylistically black phase of film noir," and argues that film noir exists during the war years precisely *because* of the industrial constraints brought about by the conflict.<sup>39</sup>

As well as arguing that the industrial consequences of the Second World War upon Hollywood production were integral to accelerating the inception of noir into the cultural landscape of the 1940s – the rationing of film stock, lights, and electricity, for example, that resulted in noir's dark aesthetic – Biesen highlights that whilst post-war noir refigured noir's existing cinematic sensibilities in order to negotiate Cold War anxieties, war noir articulates a specific set of concerns that permeated American culture during the conflict:<sup>40</sup>

These [wartime] experiences culminated in an anxious combat and home-front mentality, in a cultural psyche obsessed with grave concerns about the conflict and possible invasion, and about

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<sup>39</sup> Biesen, Sheri Chinen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2005, p.3 Schrader's 'Notes on Noir' can be found in *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Editions, 2001, pp.53-63.

<sup>40</sup> The effect of the Second World War upon the industrial factors that affected film noir has already been addressed by Arthur Lyons in his analysis of lesser known noir cinema, *Death on the Cheap: The Lost B Movies of Film Noir*, De Capo Press, 2000, p.41.

the bleak hardships of everyday life, such as government rationing of basic daily items, war-related shortages, and the sheer deprivation of the war...The seductive world of film noir captured wartime fears and anxieties through violent action in unglamorous or disreputable working-class settings. A sombre war-related zeitgeist grew out of harsh realities in America. As life on the home-front became increasingly hardboiled, so too did American film.<sup>41</sup>

The author suggests that the inner-city settings and shadowy aesthetics of noir reflected the changing circumstances of American citizens who, thanks to internal migration from towns to cities and twenty-four hour working patterns, would have become more familiar with a night-time urban environment and more inclined to view this new world with suspicion and trepidation. What's more, the reaction to the threat posed by the changing role of women in American culture, most often articulated in film noir through the motif of the *femme fatale*, as well as the disillusion and cultural maladjustment experienced by returning war veterans were already embedded within the structure of noir cinema before their redefinition and proliferation in post-war noir. Indeed, as David Reid and Jayne L. Walker have argued the cultural conditions that post-war noir is said to embody actually existed in American culture before the conflict, and thus we can deduce that the noir produced during the war years had an abundance of already-existing anxieties to articulate.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Joel Dinerstein has promoted a periodization of noir that incorporates a category of "emergent noir", which includes seven films that sought to validate the suffering caused by the Great Depression and ameliorate the experience by instilling a sense of retribution brought about by fresh ideals of masculinity and individuality.<sup>43</sup> Thus, all things considered, the film noirs that were produced before 1946 should not be seen as a mere foreshadowing of post-war trends in cinema that reflected a certain post-war cultural mood; rather, the body of films represents the immediate experiences of wartime audiences as they endured deprivation and reacted to wartime fears and anxieties. Jewish artist's disproportionate involvement with creating this body of films

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<sup>41</sup> Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, p.3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Reid, David & Walker, Jayne L., "Starange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned Cities of the Forties," in *Shades of Noir* (ed. Joan Copjec), Verso, 1993, p.65.

<sup>43</sup> Dinerstein, Joel, "'Emergent Noir': Film noir and the Great Depression in *High Sierra* (1941) and *This Gun for High* (1942), *Journal of American Studies*, 2008, 42, pp.415-448.

illustrates how the Jewish imagination was concerned with articulating an ambivalent mood towards the wartime changes taking place within American culture. Although some Jewish artists addressed the need for patriotism and championed a wartime masculine ideality, the shadowy aesthetics of noir cinema, along with the tales of low-level crime and discussion of uncertainty and disillusion within masculine identity show how filmmakers like Wilder were interested in exploring a different area of American culture that approached mainstream American culture and masculinity with doubt and trepidation.

Biesen also discusses how labour shortages in the film industry brought about by the Second World War led to an increase in opportunities for émigré directors to step into the void. In terms of the aesthetics and sensibilities most readily attributed to film noir, as well as the influence of stylistic devices such as chiaroscuro lighting and Expressionistic principals, the indebtedness of noir to émigré directors and filmmakers has long been established within the literature.<sup>44</sup> In his recent study of Billy Wilder's American cinematic oeuvre, however, Gerd Gemünden addresses the challenges levelled at this orthodox cinematic historiography of film noir's European influences, which, at their most extreme, such as in Marc Vernet's revisionist essay "Film Noir at the Edge of Doom", question the very existence of noir, deny any foreign influence upon the genre if indeed it does exist and prefer instead to argue that "the cycle's stylistic components can be accounted for entirely within US film history."<sup>45</sup> Tempering this position somewhat, Gemünden nevertheless takes aim (once again) at Schrader's notion that noir cinema allowed for German émigré directors to exercise their expressionistic tendencies and imprint a distinctly European auteurist signature on American film noir. Gemünden's problem with this perspective is that it "draws a direct line of cross-cultural influence between two (or more) national film industries at different points in time without giving much

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<sup>44</sup> First noted by Borde and Chaumeton in their seminal study of noir, *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953*, most investigations of the genre at least acknowledge the presence, in not the influence, of European sensibilities. See, for example, Paul Schrader's influential 1972 essay 'Notes on Noir', Foster Hirsch's *Dark Side of the Screen*, Naremore's *More Than Night*, and Mark Bould's *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City*.

<sup>45</sup> Gemünden, Gerd, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films*, Berghahn Books, 2008, p.35. Vernet's essay can be found in *Shades of Noir* (ed. Joan Copjec), Verso, 1993, pp.1-33. In turn, a thorough and vehement critical appraisal of Vernet's arguments is offered by Alain Silver in the introduction to *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Edition, 2001, pp.3-15.

thought to what historical circumstances motivated such appropriations.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Gemünden points out that very few of the directors, cinematographers and producers cited in Schrader’s (and other’s) work had any actual first-hand experience of working within German Expressionistic cinema, thus they lacked the basic cinematic vocabulary necessary in order to translate expressionism to a new cultural and artistic landscape (indeed, Lang may be the only émigré well versed in expressionism).

The presence of a European influence on Hollywood noir of the 1940s is often left unexplained in the literature; it is all too easy to presume that the influence is felt in noir because those filmmakers who had produced films in the expressionistic tradition would naturally continue to do so in America. This assumption reduces the function of expressionistic imagery in German and American cinema to mere aesthetics and disregards their actual use as visual expressions of the relationship between the emotional state and the cultural climate. Whilst the presence of expressionistic sensibilities in film noir may be explained, to some degree, by similarities in industrial circumstance between 1920s Weimar cinema and 1940s Hollywood production, Gemünden makes Wilder’s position as an exile and his journey to Hollywood central to the understanding of how German and French modernist tendencies came to be present in the artistic complexion of Wilder’s wartime noir, *Double Indemnity*. Like Biesen and Hodges, Gemünden’s study suggests a more precise historical approach to the study of noir is needed; thus, the author seeks to accurately position *Double Indemnity* within a study of exile rather than consider the film within its existing de-historicised context as a prototypical film noir.

As émigré directors, artists like Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, and Robert Siodmak were twice-removed from mainstream American culture – firstly as Jews and secondly as foreigners. Their path to America was identical to that taken by generations of Jews who had sought sanctuary in the land of the free having fled persecution in their homeland; generations who had fed the rich body of Jewish American culture. Not only did these filmmakers bring with them an artistic influence and

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<sup>46</sup> Gemünden, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder’s American Films*, p.35.

experience that gave their Hollywood products a distinctly European aesthetic and more modernist sensibility, their “double” outsider perspective afforded them a unique insight that imbued their films with an adroit critical edge that penetrated the façade of mainstream American culture. Still, as Gemünden points out, given the fact that by the beginning of the war most of the émigré directors had been in the US for some time and successfully assimilated into American life, indeed many had become naturalised American citizens, we must also understand the émigrés as insiders, affording these filmmakers a unique synergetic perspective on American culture and imbuing their films with an ethno-cultural cinematic argot: this outsider-insider dynamic helped create a mood of ambivalence within their cinematic output.

Hindsight has enabled us to identify film noir as a cinematic phenomenon constructed from an array of artistic, cultural, political and ideological influences; historical distance, however, has meant that the concurrent thematic and aesthetic preoccupations that help reinforce noir as a distinct cinematic corpus are often drawn in terms that disregard precise temporal considerations. When read simultaneously, Hodges, Biesen, and Gemünden’s analyses champion a fastidiously historical approach to film noir that has perhaps suffered in the literature due to a preoccupation with taxonomy and a tendency towards generalization. The ambiguity recognised by Hodges reflects a struggle that artists felt during the war years; the pressure to include propaganda within cultural products sat uneasily against a desire to articulate the mood of discontent that, as Biesen illustrates, continued in film noir despite the can-do attitude seen elsewhere in the era’s wartime cultural production.

Thus we can be confident in confirming film noir as a body of films that are not only quintessentially American, but which also reflect a continuation of the malaise of the 1930s. Whilst propaganda was concerned with mitigating fears about the competency of American federal institutions and the establishment to support the nation and steer her away from the problems of the thirties, noir cinema, like *Batman*, agitates cultural concerns not only about the ability of the state to do this, but also what this means for the fate of individualism and community. The ambiguity felt by

the wartime producers of culture extends to the plight of the protagonists in film noir, and especially Neff in *Double Indemnity*; they find themselves enmeshed in an American culture that promises so much but which also rationalizes the abandonment of individual and parochial worth. By sketching a menacing and murderous state-regulated mainstream American culture *Double Indemnity* suggests social anxieties about the future of the American character; whilst also representing the trepidation felt by Jews regarding the movement away from a communal and ethnic character.

Jewish artists seemed particularly inclined to articulate the negative aspect present in American culture. Although there are other examples of noir from this period that were not produced by Jewish artists, the body of cinematic work that occupies the last two years of the war seems to suggest that Jewish artists working in Hollywood were particularly sensitive to the dark and pessimistic mood indicative of noir cinema; that is, they all share "...a collective style or mood in which urban America is depicted as a dangerous, dark, and insecure place...characterized by paranoia, menace, violence, personal betrayal, greed, lust, and corrosive effects of a society based on the pursuit of money."<sup>47</sup>

This final characteristic of noir cinema, in particular, hints at the role Jewish artists played in shaping the flavour of film noir. As we have seen in the early *Superman* stories and the work of Clifford Odets, a critique of capitalism and mass culture was a theme that occupied Jewish American art at this time. In this respect Wilder's *Double Indemnity* – long considered one of the most quintessential films in the noir tradition – crystallises the flavour of Jewish art around this time and Jewish artist's attitudes towards American culture. Indeed, although Hodges speaks of war noir in general rather than specifically Jewish authored texts, his analysis does forward *Double Indemnity* as a key text that marks the transition between noir being preoccupied with personal property to being concerned with public property, a factor that further heightens the cultural ambiguity present in the text. As Naremore has highlighted, an often overlooked aspect of *Double Indemnity* is that it is set in the recent past (July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1938, to be precise) and thus allows for the shelves in Jerry's Market to be

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<sup>47</sup> Pratt, Ray, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film*, University Press of Kansas, 2001, p.48.



fully stocked and free from wartime rationing.<sup>48</sup> This, as we will see, enables the film to both articulate the certain sense of detachment from wartime imperatives seen elsewhere in Jewish American artistic production whilst also representing the specific cultural concerns of an American homefront audience.

Adapted by Wilder and Raymond Chandler from James M. Cain's novel of the same name, *Double Indemnity* follows Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) as they embark upon an adulterous affair with murderous intent. Neff, a Californian insurance salesman is seduced by Dietrichson and becomes entangled in the femme fatale's plan to kill her husband and collect the insurance money. As is the case with most classic noir films, the plot is rather complicated; in short, Neff and Dietrichson contrive to kill Mr. Dietrichson and then stage a scenario whereby it appears that the murder victim has been killed accidentally by falling from the back of a train (thereby qualifying for the 'double indemnity' insurance pay-out). Due, however, to the tenacity of Neff's boss, Barton Keyes, a stout and astute man with a strong nose for a dubious insurance claim, along with the tumultuous relationship between the two lovers turning sour, the seemingly perfect murder plot begins to unravel. Ultimately, the pair turn the gun on each other, with Neff holding out long enough to recount the story to Keyes on a Dictaphone and earn himself an element of redemption.

The critical edge honed by the double-outsider perspective of the émigré filmmaker was most often whetted on that intersection between aspirations and reality where much of the Jewish American art from this period concentrated, from *Awake and Sing!* through to *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (Ralph Nelson, 1956, written by Rod Serling) via *Superman* and *Death of a Salesman* (Arthur Miller, 1949). It was this intersection that was regularly exploited by the culture industry, where the consumer, political, and ideological allegiances of American citizens were manipulated via their material aspirations and cultural consumption. As such, *Double Indemnity* as well as the other aforementioned films noirs produced by these artists, sought to articulate a pessimistic, dark, and critical perspective on American culture where their protagonists are often trapped in mesmerising

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<sup>48</sup> Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, University of California Press, 1998, p.292n64.

and unfathomable landscapes of corruption, consumption, and crime. Unlike Superman, where Sigel and Schuster attempted to reconcile the disparity between aspirations and reality by creating the utmost example of American citizenship, and thus engineering a character who acquiesced to the circumscriptive effects of American culture on individual identity, or *Awake and Sing!* where Odets attempted to articulate the necessity that American culture adapt to incorporate deviant identities, the movies produced towards the end of the war (and afterwards) offer little hope that the gap between aspiration and reality can be bridged. Lacking the means with which to reconcile these two extremes via legitimate avenues, the dichotomy between aspirations and reality in these films often manifests itself in criminal behaviour, moral ambiguity, and fatalistic tendencies.

The pessimistic and critical attitudes towards American culture expressed in the films produced by Jewish European émigré directors were also expressed in the theories of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like many of the European directors who arrived in Hollywood throughout the 1930s and early-1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer were Jewish émigrés who sought sanctuary from European fascism in the safety of American Democracy. Their seminal polemic of mass cultural critique, however, attacked the culture that they witnessed and experienced upon arriving in the US. Chief among their concerns was the controlling, inescapable, and instructive nature of an American “culture industry” that perpetuated and promoted capitalist designs on ideology. For Adorno and Horkheimer, all cultural output, whilst possessing inconsequential differences that allowed for superficial classification, was characterised by an overwhelming unity with regards to its imminent meaning and inherent ideological composition. The artistic terms through which these were expressed – plots, aesthetics, themes, et cetera – were, according to the two theorists, largely indistinguishable from one another, regardless of the medium, and demanded very little, if any, input or mediation by the viewer, reader, or listener. This created a monolithic artistic, cultural, ideological, and political product; that very same thing that, ironically, had so worried the isolationist faction before the onset of war in America.

In his study of Wilder, Gemünden discusses the relationship between the director's artistic outlook and Adorno's theoretical perspective, indicating that although their similar biographical experiences both in Europe and as exiles, along with their encounters with 'Amerikanismus' in post-World War One Germany and Austro-Hungary, converged at an ideological intersection upon their arrival in America, their critical interpretation of American culture nevertheless became manifested in drastically dissimilar attitudes towards modernity and mass culture. For Adorno, "his exile in Hollywood amplified his already existing scepticism toward mass culture into a dark and pessimistic account of the overall project of modernity." The theorist saw parallels between the use of mass culture in the rise of fascism in Europe and the utility of the culture industry to American capitalist interests, concluding that the liberation offered by the Enlightenment had in fact led to "the glorification of reason [that] had itself become the myth it had set out to shatter, leading to an instrumentalization of reason that served to dominate the self." Conversely, for Wilder, "cinema was the institution, medium, and art form that became the very engine of modernization," and a tool in "the democratization of society." If Adorno's take on modernism creates a divide that relegates lower forms of culture to a lesser realm, Wilder is:

...indebted to a version of modernism that tries to overcome or undo that divide. Wilder's cinema follows an aesthetic that challenges that divide by blending high and popular culture, art and artefact. His films strive to articulate and mediate the experience of modernity as it manifested itself in journalism, fashion, advertising, architecture, photography, radio, and of course the cinema itself.<sup>49</sup>

For Wilder, cinema was a mass cultural medium that could be used to marry both low and high art and culture and facilitate a democratised society. *Double Indemnity* exemplifies how Wilder believed cinema could function as a forum in which to articulate concerns regarding the more pernicious aspects of an American mass culture, such as commercialism and consumerism, whilst operating within a mass medium.

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<sup>49</sup> Gemünden, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films*, p.9

The connection between the critical composition of *Double Indemnity* and Adorno's theories has also been drawn by Paul Mason Fotsch, who sees the "passive acceptance of capitalist technocratic rationality" identified by Adorno as present in Wilder's film, in which:

The logic of this murder is an ultimate corruption of enlightenment thinking. The murder plan demonstrates the power of technocratic rationality to support the severest form of human exploitation...The aesthetic appeal of the perfect murder marks the ultimate detachment of scientific rationality from critical thinking...If, as in *Double Indemnity*, all factors are calculated and the procedure is followed correctly, then its moral consequences are insignificant. Neff's rationalization for murder illustrates Adorno and Horkheimer's concern that faith in scientific formulas makes the 20th-century appropriation of the enlightenment totalitarian and barbaric.<sup>50</sup>

The 'triangulation' between mass production, mass consumption and mass murder that Gemünden recognises in Adorno's theories regarding mass culture is also registered by the author in *Double Indemnity*. Gemünden shows that by drawing parallels between the insurance business and Hollywood, and critiquing both by intimating that they devalue human life by measuring human beings as commodities, Wilder shares Adorno's pessimism regarding cinema's role in mass culture. What's more, given the strong case for the presence of an allegorical articulation of Germany's death camps in the film, along with the motif of the insurance business, Gemünden forwards the notion that Wilder, like Adorno but in less explicit terms, addresses the idea that mass culture and mass society creates an 'administered world' that can lead to the mass murder seen in Europe.<sup>51</sup>

Gemünden, however, is quick to point out that "Wilder would have shied away from any implicit comparison between Hitler's Third Reich and an American democracy that was sparing no resources...to end the reign of terror in Western and Central Europe," concluding that although *Double Indemnity* may critique certain aspects of mass culture and the Hollywood film industry, the analogies to mass murder are perhaps overwrought and that Wilder "still considered film an effective

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<sup>50</sup> Fotsch, Paul Mason, "Film Noir and Automotive Isolation in Los Angeles," *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies*, 2005, 5, pp.103-125, p.104-5.

<sup>51</sup> Gemünden, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films*, p.49.

medium to confront political grievances, no matter what compromises were necessary.”<sup>52</sup> If we agree that any parallels to the Third Reich’s systematic genocide are purely incidental in the film, *Double Indemnity* nevertheless offers a damning and relentless criticism of American mass culture.

Gemünden’s analysis of *Double Indemnity*’s modernist interpretation of mass and consumer culture, as well as the film’s attack on the insurance business and the film industry, is indebted to Naremore’s study of the movie in these contexts. Although Naremore discusses the influence that the film’s other ‘authors’ had upon the modernist bent of the feature (James M. Cain, the author of the book upon which the film is based, and Raymond Chandler, Wilder’s co-scriptwriter), it is Wilder who channelled this into a Weimar-esque critique of “Fordist Amerika”. The author argues that *Double Indemnity* is steeped in metaphorical language, evocative imagery, and settings that all allude to the “industrialized dehumanization” of both the private and public sphere. The language imbues the film with “grimly deterministic metaphors of modern industry”; the imagery of the workplace “signifies the tendency of modern society to turn workers into zombies or robots”; and the public world that Neff inhabits – bowling alleys, drive-in restaurants, and Jerry’s market – is “massified.”<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, Neff inhabits these worlds alone, for although he is personally involved with Phyllis and, perhaps even more so, with Keyes, these characters are cast as cogs within the cultural machinery. Phyllis, as Naremore has shown, is reminiscent of the flappers seen in Weimar cinema and suggests “an urbanized, mass-cultural type...she is so bad that she seems like modernity and kitsch incarnate – a realist version of the “false Maria” in *Metropolis*...[she is] blatantly provocative and visibly artificial; her ankle bracelet, her lacquered lipstick, her sunglasses, and above all her chromium hair give her cheaply manufactured, metallic look.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, if *Double Indemnity* presents a vision of an administrated world, Keyes could stake a claim as chief administrator; the fastidiousness and dedication with which he goes about his work at the insurance company reveals him to be a “loyal agent of industrial rationality – a talented bureaucrat who, in effect, has helped to create the office

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<sup>52</sup> Gemünden, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder’s American Films*, p.50.

<sup>53</sup> Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, p.88-9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.89.

building, the drive-in restaurant, the supermarket, and all the other landmarks of modern Los Angeles that the supermarket relentlessly criticises.”<sup>55</sup>

For Naremore the infamous ‘lost ending’ where Keyes witnesses Neff’s executed in a Californian gas chamber is crucial to the understanding of Wilder’s vision as it brings into focus the key themes and reveals *Double Indemnity*’s “grimly sardonic vision of a “Taylorized” or assembly-line America” where mass consumer culture is a corrupt and destructive force that maligns individuality and natural human endeavour.<sup>56</sup> Putting aside analogical readings relating to Nazism, the American mass cultural climate as it is presented in *Double Indemnity* creates a coded, systematized, and inorganic regimentation of existence that denigrates human life. For Fotsch, Neff’s involvement in the “highly scientific” murder of Phyllis’s husband is symptomatic of this culture:

...the apparent flawless rationality of the plan is a central element of its appeal to Neff. He is at first very antagonistic to the idea of helping to kill Phyllis’s husband, but as he begins to imagine the perfect murder plot, he changes his mind...Equally important, the predetermined assumption or goal of technocratic rationality in the film is profit...what makes the murder perfect and appealing in Neff’s eyes is the possibility of double indemnity—achieving the most return possible on the murdered body. The logic of commodity fetishism reaches its ultimate consequence when murder is committed for money. The desire for profit is never questioned; the only question is how science and technology can best achieve this profit.<sup>57</sup>

In this reading Neff becomes merely another component in the mechanics of industrial rationality, subject to the same laws that govern Keyes, Phyllis and all the other denizens of capitalist America whilst also facilitating the smooth running of mass culture. But Neff seems different; he is compassionate, affectionate, and likable; his ironic awareness of the world around him speaks of a pronounced distaste for destructive modernism. By choosing the locations of Jerry’s market and the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.92.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.83.

<sup>57</sup> Fotsch, “*Film Noir* and Automotive Isolation in Los Angeles,” p.104-5.

train to plot and stage the murder, he portrays an acute understanding of the anonymousness of consumer culture and mechanics of mass culture.

By casting Fred MacMurray for the role of Neff, an actor who was, at that time, better known as a “saxophone-playing good guy,” Wilder gives the audience a self-consciously human character with whom to sympathise, as well as an ironic voice to narrate their encounter with a melodramatic vision of mass culture gone awry.<sup>58</sup> For the audience Neff’s quest may well be immoral, but rather than his murderous act being sanctioned by the industrial rationality of mass culture, the very *irrationality* of Neff’s environment means that the audience accepts the extremities to which he has to go in order to extricate himself. In this way, Andrew Pepper’s understanding of the reason behind Neff’s criminal activity is much more accurate than that suggested by Fotsch. Building upon similar analyses already undertaken by Frank Krutnik and Claire Johnson, which both isolate Neff’s relationship to Keyes as the reasoning behind the younger man’s revolt, Pepper nevertheless believes that this reasoning lies outside of the Freudian-influenced psychoanalytical readings offered by the two scholars.

Eschewing Krutnik’s and Johnson’s psychoanalytical approach that reads Keyes as a father-figure and Neff’s desire to revolt an Oedipal rejection of a ‘castrating’ paternal power, Pepper’s analysis echoes Naremore’s reading of Keyes as an embodiment of not just an administered industrialised rationality, but also a character whose function “...is founded upon the same logic that underpinned the consolidation of the modern, bureaucratic state and the kind of ‘Taylorist’ approach to the industrial planning production that made the United States such fertile territory for Fordism.”<sup>59</sup> If we also regard Keyes as a symbol of patriarchal authority, and understand that Neff’s plan implicates not only the destruction of a familial unit but also a direct attack upon the function of Neff’s job within the rational hierarchy of the workplace, the insurance man’s revolt can be seen to strike at the very heart of organised mass culture. What’s more, “Walter’s desire to ‘crook the house’ and his refusal to take up a job under Keyes constitutes an instinctive acknowledgement that this

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<sup>58</sup> Gemunden, *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder’s American Films*, p.46.

<sup>59</sup> Pepper, Andrew, “Post-War American Noir: Confronting Fordism,” *Crime Culture: Figuring Criminality in Fiction and Film*, Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2010, pp.90-109, p.95.

rationalization of the workplace has produced a social environment characterised by control on the one hand, and emptiness and alienation on the other.”<sup>60</sup> We can thus view Neff’s revolt as a desire to extricate himself for a suffocating and inorganic culture that denies the notion of selfhood.

Keyes’s embodiment of a centralised, administered mass culture also positions the older man as emblematic of paradigm masculinity; a manhood that, like Superman and Captain America, reinforces confidence in American capitalist and state institutions. Walter’s refusal to capitulate to this way of life and masculine ideality suggests that, like Ralph Berger and Batman, the character rejects identification with a massified, mainstream masculinity. In this way, without being necessarily subversive, socialist, or dissident, Walter undermines the integrity of mass culture and seeks to reinforce the importance of individuality. There is, once again, real ambiguity within the character, however, in that he is tempted by a love with Phyllis and a brotherhood with Keyes, both superb examples, as we have seen, of massified, industrialised consumer culture. By almost accepting the invitation enlist to mass cultural identification, Walter illustrates the overwhelming temptation and presence of mass culture within wartime America; by ultimately shooting Phyllis and deceiving Keyes, the protagonists champions the cause of the individual.

*Double Indemnity* continues the tone present in the Jewish American cultural artefacts that we have looked at so far. Like Odets’s *Awake & Sing!* there is a real anxiety about “life being printed on dollar bills,” a sentiment that was echoed in the early Superman stories where, if we recall the analysis of the *Blakely Mine Disaster*, contemptible capitalists show little regard for human life in their pursuit of profit. The futility felt at the end of Odets’s play is matched in *Double Indemnity*; accommodation within American capitalist culture is made insurmountable unless capitulation and assimilation occurs. Indeed, it is only by metamorphosing into superheroes that Steve Rogers and Clark Kent are allowed to escape their position as put-upon weaklings; Rogers’ urge to escape his Lower East Side environment and identity reminds us of the aching lust for extrication experienced by those trapped in the Berger household. For those without supernatural abilities or the willing to abandon individual, communal and ethnic identity, only death, dishonour, and futility remain. Thus in

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.95.



these texts American culture is made threatening and unwelcoming, and the experience of living within the confines of wartime America is one filled with ambiguity, anxiety, and fear.

### ***Dangling Man: The Other American Masculinity.***

For those experiencing feelings of ambiguity about encountering the mainstream, the wartime climate of uncertainty didn't help. Although propaganda and popular culture promised a bright post-war future, the memory of thirties unrest and privation lingered on, as did the experience of home-grown anti-Semitism for these young Jewish authors. American culture seemed at once welcoming and menacing, and appeared to demand too much in return for subscription to the national identity and culture. Within a wartime context, the connections between an Adorno-inspired interpretation of American culture as an organised, administered, mechanised, Fordist environment and the industrial mobilization of the war-machine should also not be downplayed. Although *Double Indemnity* is not set during wartime, Neff's desire to escape the unrelenting movements of the cultural machinery, and his ultimate inability to do so, articulate immediate masculine anxieties regarding the very real threat of what fate may be waiting for them now that the war-machine was fully in motion. Everybody else in the film is either too young, too old, or a female; Neff is the only character eligible for conscription. In this way, Neff is the Californian counterpart to Saul Bellow's Joseph in the author's debut novel, *Dangling Man*, in that he is stuck on an immutable journey towards death. Both characters articulate an awareness of this and thus portray a hopeless, resigned and ultimately suicidal acquiescence to mass cultural mechanisms. Neff's fetishization of the perfect murder, his obsession with 'crooking' the system is his version of Joseph's 'ideal construction'. Together, *Double Indemnity* and *Dangling Man* present an image of wartime America where young men struggle under a constricting culture that petrifies individuality and mortifies difference. They present a master culture of asceticism, obligatory acquiescence, and inescapable submission.

Although the masculine ideal that comic books promoted was a rehabilitation of an American machismo that had been damaged by the Depression, it did have its artistic antecedents within earlier American cultural representation. Its ancestry, as I have already discussed, can be

traced back to American myths like Paul Bunyan and John Henry, but it also found expression in art and culture more contemporaneous to the early days of comics. Bernarr MacFadden's magazine, *Physical Culture*, and the fitness-guru-cum-publisher's muscle-bound protégé, Charles Atlas, were two of the more memorable faces of the fitness fad of the early-twenties. Given that Joe Shuster was an aspiring amateur bodybuilder during his adolescence and early-adulthood, this fad had a direct impact upon the aesthetics of *Superman*. As Gerard Jones argues, "MacFadden's *Physical Culture* was...as much a part of Joe's consciousness as *Amazing Stories* and *Tarzan*. In fact, MacFadden helped shape that make-believe world: Tarzan wore a full lion skin on his early book covers, but switched to a loincloth as Bernarr made it his trademark."<sup>61</sup>

This "alpha-male" incarnation of the American masculine ideal can also be seen in the popular gangster and western films of the 1930s and, even more so, in the novels of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Horace McCoy, and most acutely in the novels written by the father of the "hardboiled" genre of modernist fiction: Ernest Hemingway. As promoted by the comics in the early-forties, subscription to this hardboiled mode of masculinity was the only way in which American males could participate in the war effort, engender respect, enact male heterosexuality, gain personal success, and facilitate the rehabilitation of American masculinity and, concomitantly so, American society.

Yet in his debut novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), Bellow presents a contemporary attitude in which social responsibility and collective consciousness jostled with a searing tendency towards solipsism. Bellow's novel also pits itself against the national fashion of stout, forceful, and socially-conscious masculinity. *Dangling Man* is a fictional diary that chronicles the complex past, uncomfortable present and uncertain future of its protagonist, Joseph, who, having quit his job in order to be drafted, is engaged in a seemingly endless wait for his number to come up. In his attempts to stem the tide of self-mortification and asceticism that, for Joseph, characterise the "era of hardboiled-dom,"<sup>62</sup> he distances himself from his wife, mistress, brother, friends, and the world

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, Gerard in *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*, Arrow Books, 2004, p.70.

<sup>62</sup> Bellow, Saul, *Dangling Man*, Penguin, 1996, p.9.

around him. *Dangling Man* sublimates a plethora of personal and cultural problems into a struggle between Joseph and the draft board; within this struggle is an amalgamation of contemporary cultural imperatives and metaphysic theorising.

Joseph's attempts to comprehend his position in wartime America, and the position of those around him, through epistemological and existential reasoning results in the young man retreating into himself. As such, as the novel progresses the war becomes an increasingly abstract phenomenon, albeit one towards which Joseph is hurtling. As Peter Hyland suggests, in *Dangling Man*, as in Bellow's second novel *The Victim* (1946):

The protagonist is dislocated from his normal life and subjected to a testing situation that exerts pressure on his sense of who or what he is. The essential bleakness that the two books share can be accounted for in part by the fact that they were written under the immediate shadow of World War II, but they seem to reflect a more general unease about the insecurity and fragmentation of urban life.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst *Dangling Man* never lets us forget that the war weighed heavily in the hearts and pockets of many American citizens, the conflict, at least for those on the home front, becomes a monolithic abnormality towards a resolution of which Americans strive, but against which they are forced to measure their identity. Yet the novel suggests a social and psychological malaise that, for the most part, the war only lent its name to. A malaise constituted from hereditary cultural preoccupations and an existential struggle for self and understanding in a modern environ characterised by a pressure to align oneself with a collective psyche, to neutralise one's own identity, and to fulfil a preordained duty. It is a malaise that was both aggravated by the collective and reductive nature of the war's narrow aim, and alleviated by the opportunity to sublimate one's own struggles into its universal goal. *Dangling Man* suggests that for all its cultural and economic impact, the omnipresence of the war enables it to become metaphysical, an arena in which anxieties, fears, hopes, and dreams can be played out.

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<sup>63</sup> Hyland, Peter, *Modern Novelists: Saul Bellow*, St. Martin's Press, 1992, p.15-16.

Although *Dangling Man* indicates a wartime identity that can be distinguished by its quest for morality in a morally questionable world, we must also understand that it frames itself within its own contradiction. Bellow conceived the novel as an affirmation against the “Hemingway” or the hardboiled, model of masculinity, and thus recognised another identity present within American culture quite apart from that of Joseph’s. The hardboiled character is presented as a master-identity under which Joseph feels stifled and forced to rebel against. It is an identity that is “schooling in quietness and, if one of us takes his measure occasionally, he does so coolly, as if he were examining his fingernails, not his soul, frowning at the imperfections he finds as one would at a chip or a bit of dirt.”<sup>64</sup> These hardboiled characters are boyish in their pursuit of heroism and their denial of the individual self, a class of people who substitute physicality and frivolous adventure for introspection in the measure of their identity and who suffer psychological inertia as a result.

Of course, these are the characters that inhabit the comic books and war films of the era; a national masculine paradigm. For Bellow, they are absent antagonists in Joseph’s quest for identity.<sup>65</sup> Joseph seemingly reads this hardboiled quality in everybody but himself, suggesting the all-consuming nature of the propaganda monologue and paradigm national identity, an act that leads him to converse exclusively with his own ego, only venturing out of his metaphorical and literal “six-sided box” to explode with anger and resentment towards those who he deems to have failed to recognise the validity of his insubordinate individual identity, and at those he feels betray the true essence of community, humanity, and selfhood.<sup>66</sup>

Within these explosions of frustration lies the quintessence of how Bellow views identity within American culture in 1944, and whilst it is a perspective that is heavily influenced by existential thought it is one that is vital to the understanding of identity in wartime America. Bellow presents a masculine identity that is formed through a conversation between the inner self – the individual who

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<sup>64</sup> Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p.119.

<sup>65</sup> Leslie Fiedler says of Hemingway: “in every sense except the genital one, they [Hemingway’s heroes] remain children, so that the controlling values of his books are a boy’s notion of bravery and honour and devotion, tricked out in the child’s image of bullfighting and big-game hunting and playing war.” Fiedler, Leslie A., *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics*, The Beacon Press, 1952, p.193.

<sup>66</sup> Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p.92.

is convinced his or her identity is the standard – and wider culture. This cultural debate is present in all of the texts analysed in this thesis, indeed, it is the ambiguity created by the attempt to negotiate these two extremes that characterises the Jewish imagination and helps Jews artists to articulate both specifically ethnic and more general concerns regarding identity. Bellow articulates the notion that individual American males are incapable of creating an identity set against the full depth of American social, political, and economic criteria and as such measure themselves against their own microcosmic culture, a process Joseph refers to, in the course of one of his conversations with the Spirit of Alternatives, as “an ideal construction”.<sup>67</sup> For Joseph this ideal construction is the draft board; for his brother it is money and materiality; for Alf Steidler it is his complete immersion in a life of high drama; for Mr. Fanzel “the world is buttons, needles, cloth, and money.”<sup>68</sup> Although Bellow posits that these ideal constructions are vital, as “apparently we need to give ourselves some exclusive focus, passionate and engulfing,” he realises that “the obsession exhausts the man. It can become his enemy. It often does.”<sup>69</sup> The draft board is an attempt by Joseph to variously sublimate the symptoms of his disillusionment; to resolve his self-imposed solitary confinement; to eradicate his dislocation from his wife and their circle of friends; and to solve his ostracization from his leftist past and his inability to engage successfully in the representations of human and cultural interaction, be they sex, conversation, or the reading of literature.

Yet, as John Jacob Clayton points out, “the ideal construction is held not only at the expense of perceiving reality but at the expense of lived experience.”<sup>70</sup> Joseph’s engagement with reality, his widespread struggle with dislocation, disillusion, and alienation suggest that whilst his involvement with the draft board is certainly obsessive and exhausting, it is hardly an ideal construction, as it doesn’t involve an unmitigated acquiescence, on Joseph’s part, to its due process and an ignorance of wider reality. Joseph’s attempt to establish a masculine and cultural identity

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<sup>67</sup> Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p.140.

<sup>68</sup> Clayton, John Jacob, *Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man*, Indiana University Press, 1968, p.79. Clayton highlights these “ideal constructions” and generally discusses *Dangling Man*, the “ideal construction” and existential literature in beginning of the forth chapter ‘Construction of Self and World’, pp.77-96.

<sup>69</sup> Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p.141.

<sup>70</sup> Clayton, *Saul Bellow: In Defence of Man*, p.79.

outside of an ideal construction necessitates a process whereby culture adjusts to and incorporates his individual imperatives, that is it allows him to assimilate despite his neuroses', prejudices and theoretical ponderings, or, figuratively, his individual identity. Seeing this is impossible, Joseph realises it is he who has to adjust to cultural imperatives and as such the resolution of his disquiet is only brought about in the conclusion to the novel when Joseph realises his true ideal construction lay in a submission to the regimentation of military life.

Bellow's "ideal construction" suggests a process of identity formation prevalent in American culture during the war years whereby, incapable of incorporating their own identity into wider culture, American males submitted to measuring their identity through an intense involvement with a small part of culture. Whilst one could choose an identity that doesn't involve concocting or selecting an ideal construction Bellow concludes that this will inevitably be created in opposition to the mainstream. It will be a masculinity whose boundaries are set by dissent, rebellion and individuality, virtues not particularly vital during wartime, and will end in alienation, frustration and loneliness. *Dangling Man* illustrates a culture of enforced conformity to a centralised ideology and American male character; Joseph's attempts to exist outside of the hardboiled mode of masculinity, with his past in the present and a determination to examine himself results in a situation whereby he is ostracised from society and must retreat into himself. Ultimately he is driven to not only abandon his true self and join regimented normality, but to do so in the most extreme way possible, by enrolling in the US Army and thus endorsing the uttermost agent of state hegemony.

Masculine identity in *Dangling Man* can only be found in the striving for achievement and success, and trying to avoid the failures and shortcomings, within a selected infra-culture. The novel is littered with people searching for yardsticks against which to measure their character – the common denominator of which is a pursuit of monetary and material gain – the war is presented as providing the opportunity for this search to come to fruition. The bleak and overriding message of the novel is that, when viewed from afar, these individual efforts to survive become the war effort.

Wartime communality is merely failed individuality seen without the knowledge of past struggles for selfhood.

Much like Batman's quest to avenge the death of his parents and rid Gotham of its evil elements and Walter Neff's lustful pursuit of the perfect murder, Joseph's obsession with the draft board indicates a deep displeasure and dissatisfaction with American culture. *Dangling Man* is perhaps most removed from this culture, with Batman and *Double Indemnity* at least offering some suggestion of the brotherhood and confidence seen elsewhere in wartime culture. Nevertheless there is an overriding mood of detachment that pervades these three texts that creates a disparity between a paradigm identity and experience and one that seeks absorption within an immediate infra-culture. Like Superman and Captain America, the outsidership or otherness present in these texts exposes a prevailing alterity within American culture set apart from the mainstream.

Captain America is the only one of these texts whose mythos supports the wartime propaganda monologue, with Superman attempting to articulate a desire for ethnic accommodation within American culture through the complex character of its superhero protagonist, despite its confidence in the establishment and wholesale support of monopoly capitalism. Whilst it would be difficult to argue, given their varying degrees of criticism and disconnect from mainstream culture and identity, that Batman, *Dangling Man*, and *Double Indemnity* venture into a cultural dialogue, these texts do articulate a counterpoint to the experience described in mainstream wartime culture. The anxiety and discontent seen in these texts represents a distinct cultural division that Jewish artists displayed a tendency towards addressing in the mid-twentieth century, accentuating the distance between the masculine and national paradigm identity and a parallel experience marked by doubt in the establishment and discord with the mainstream. Although individual texts like *Awake & Sing!* and *Double Indemnity* offer scathing censure of certain aspects of American mass, consumer, and capitalist culture, the overall effect of the Jewish imagination is not one that is necessarily diametric but rather articulates the space between paradigm and alternative identities and experiences, and ultimately exploring an ambivalent no-man's land.

### Arthur Miller, Jewish Identity and Post-war Transition

The acceptance extended to Jewish Americans within 'ethnic platoons' in wartime cinema was representative of the changes that took place within wider American culture regarding Jewish identity. Jews took great strides forward during the conflict and by its conclusion in 1945 their acceptance into American culture paved the way for the community's integration into the mainstream throughout the post-war period and into the fifties. This culture of unity, however, belied the continuation of anti-Semitic sentiment and suggested a national identity that was much more tolerant than that suggested by *Batman*, *Dangling Man*, and *Double Indemnity*. We have already seen how these texts articulate a culture of distrust and uncertainty that existed regarding the establishment, federal institutions, mass culture and consumer capitalism, as well as what they reveal about the superficiality and fragility of a masculine paradigm identity. Arthur Miller's debut novel, *Focus*, explores the intolerance that still existed towards Jews within American culture and adds to the sense of how Jewish artists articulated an experience that was neglected by mainstream representation during wartime.

Miller's novel, however, also suggests that the boundaries between Jewish and American identity became blurred by the notion of national unity and that a decline in anti-Semitism ran parallel to the fading of Jewish specificity. Lawrence D. Lowenthal shows that *Focus*, like Miller's later stage play *Incident at Vichy*, supports Jean Paul Sartre's notion that "a Jew cannot be defined by religion, race, or national identity: one is a Jew if a gentile says one is a Jew."<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, the novel appears to predict the accelerated dissolution of Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Lowenthal, Lawrence D., *Arthur Miller's Incident at Vichy: A Sartrean Interpretation*, Critical Essays on Arthur Miller, G.K. Hall & Co., 1979, p.148.



distinctiveness in the post-war period and posits that without the boundaries of prejudice and discrimination to determine its existence, Jewish identity would cease to exist. In the years after the war, when Jews gained acceptance in America like no other time in their history, this notion embedded within Miller's novel began to become actualised in American culture. But the widespread interest in the Jewish condition in the years after the Second World War, the increased visibility of the Jewish artistic output, and the heightened congruity of the Jewish experience with that of an American audience also suggests that Jewish identity became revitalised in the mainstream. This final point also suggests that the Jewish artistic voice became more pronounced in the mid- to late-forties and into the fifties not simply because Jews were increasingly becoming 'just-like-everyone-else,' but also because the wider American experience was encountering the anxieties and problems that Jewish artists had been addressing in their work for some time. That is, there occurred a closer alignment between the experience of Jews and a more general American cultural experience, especially that of the American male, which meant that those issues that had occupied the Jewish imagination since the early thirties gained a wider pertinence within the American cultural psyche. The articulation of an outsider identity and the necessary performance of masculinity that we have seen feature in work by the likes of Wilder, Bellow, and Odets continued to be addressed in Jewish American culture and these themes tapped into the prevailing post-war masculine zeitgeist.

The universalism apparent in *Focus* continued in Miller's theatre plays of the 1940s and by the time of Miller's magnum opus, *Death of a Salesman*, in 1949 Jewish identity within Miller's oeuvre appeared, at least to some, to have disappeared altogether. The ethnicity of the play's protagonist, Willy Loman, as well as the "Jewishness" of the play itself, has long been debated. As Julius Novick details, this debate goes back to George Ross' review of the play in 1951 when the critic all but accuses Miller of attempting to disguise his ethno-religious origin. Allen Guttman, Novick shows, continued along this track when in 1971 he placed Miller alongside Nathaniel West and J.D. Salinger as writers who were only nominally Jewish and whose works eschewed the exploration of Jewish assimilation and identity. Mary McCarthy, argues

Novick, was also irked by the lack of ethnic markers in *Death of a Salesman*, finding that a “disturbing aspect” of the play is that Loman is a “capitalized Human Being without being anyone....Willy is only a type.” Finally for Novick, Leslie Fiedler bemoans Miller’s creation of “crypto-Jewish characters,” finding the playwright guilty of “pseudo-universalizing,” apparently exclusively ethnic experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Enoch Brater’s assessment of ethnicity within Miller’s work in 1983 is typical of this attitude, arguing that the playwright subsumes “the particular flavor of his own ethnic background within the broader context of a pluralistic America culture.”<sup>3</sup> For Novick, the tone of accusation within these studies takes the form of personal attacks on Miller and the playwright is “caught in the act of trying to hide his origins.” These accusations, however, function as part of a wider discourse in Jewish American scholarship; as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the likes of Guttman and Fiedler are identified by Levinson as scholars interested in charting an inexorable movement away from Jewish distinctiveness within Jewish literature and culture. In this way, debates about the presence of ethnicity within Miller’s work echo wider anxieties within the earlier literature regarding the disappearance of Jewish specificity at this time. For example, if we return to *Focus*, Allan Guttman argues that “If one seeks arguments for the maintenance of the Jewish community,” Miller’s novel is “worse than trivial,” continuing that Miller’s novel attempts:

...to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles are really indistinguishable. Only the name is different. But this argument weakens rather than strengthens the demand that Jews affirm their unique faith. Moreover, the tendency of some to rely on anti-Semitism as the *raison d’etre* for the community makes quixotic the fifty-year crusade of the Anti-Defamation League.

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<sup>2</sup> Novick, Julius, *Beyond the Golden Gate: Jewish American Drama and Jewish American Experience*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, p.47-50.

<sup>3</sup> Brater, Enoch, “Ethnic and Ethnicity in the Plays of Arthur Miller,” *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish American Stage and Screen*, (Ed. Cohen, Sarah Blacher), Indiana University Press, 1983, p.123.

Guttman is justified in his examination of the novel in search of clues as to how best to maintain Jewish identity. As David Savran realises, Miller's artistic vision is built upon a belief that art should enter into a political and ideological dialogue with the audience and offer instructive, if not necessarily didactic, guidance, "[Miller] insisted that writing is a form of political practice and that the writer who is forbidden to take a political stand cannot function as an artist...Miller's understanding of the ideological network in which artistic productions are necessarily entangled has earned him a singular position."<sup>4</sup>

This "singular position" would explain why Miller is held to account like no other Jewish artist from this period; by articulating the relationship between Jewishness and Americanness in the post-war period, a time at which both Jewish and American identities underwent profound changes, and offering advice on the directions that Jewishness should take, Miller is made *culpable* for the dilution of difference and the increasing Jewish presence in the mainstream. Guttman's analysis of *Focus* reflects the general attitude towards Miller in earlier scholarship that reads the playwright's work negatively and views Miller's approach to how Jews should negotiate ethnicity, Jewishness, and national identity in the mid- to late-forties as inspired by a desire for the disappearance of Jewish distinctiveness.

Stephen J. Whitfield suggests a more nuanced approach that places Miller's artistic vision within an awareness of contemporary Jewish cultural consciousness in the 1940s, stating that "The 'tragedy of assimilation' was hardly the preoccupation of leftist writers of the 1930s and 1940s...To ask earlier generations to address later problems is anachronistic and unfair."<sup>5</sup> Writing specifically about the popularity of *Death of a Salesman*, Whitfield argues that the "worldwide acceptance does not mean that the ethnic provenance of Miller's play is automatically negated."<sup>6</sup> If we apply this more widely to Miller's work we can see that an articulation of the universal doesn't negate the presence of the specific in the playwright's

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<sup>4</sup> Savran, David, *Communists, Cowboys and Queer: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Whitfield, Stephen J., *In Search of Jewish American Culture*, Brandeis University Press, 1999, p.119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.121.

output in the 1940s. As Whitfield elaborates, the desire to locate ethnic markers within *Death of a Salesman* often seems like a quest for ownership of the text:

The story of American Jewish culture can be told as an incessant struggle to retrieve what might otherwise be hidden, to re-interpret what might not have been initially recognized as relevant, and to spurn the temptation to erect impenetrable boundaries between what belongs to Jews and what belongs to other Americans.<sup>7</sup>

The acceptance of duality within Miller's work is echoed by Novick (building on work by Henry Bial), "What the Lomans are and do and suffer is never uniquely or parochially Jewish – crucially, they are Americans. But it is not unreasonable – and can be illuminating to think of them as Jewish."<sup>8</sup> Jewishness, therefore, can be read as complementary to the articulation of universal experience in Miller's work.

This exemplifies the leitmotif of the Jewish imagination in the mid-twentieth century, that is, Miller's *Focus* (1945), and his two post-war plays, *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman*, exhibit the ability to articulate anxieties that were simultaneously and distinctly "Jewish" and more generally "American." This characteristic of Miller's work also supports the notion that the experience of Jews and the experience of a more general American identity underwent a period of mutual coherence. Miller's output in the mid- to late-forties encapsulates the interests of this thesis and functions in much the same way as those texts already analysed. When the playwright's work is placed within the context of how Jewish artists approached Jewish identity in the mid-twentieth century, the interrogation that he and his character's endure regarding their fulfilment of Jewish identity seems arbitrary. The debates regarding the ethnicity or Jewish *identity* of Miller's characters are secondary to the fact that they, and the American environment in which they exist, are undoubtedly the

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<sup>7</sup> Whitfield, *In Search of Jewish American Culture*, p.120.

<sup>8</sup> Novick, *Beyond the Golden Gate*, p.50

manifestation of their author's Jewish imagination; the very invisibility of the Lomans' ethnicity comes to represent anxieties regarding the situation of Jewish and American identity.

Besides, despite Miller's desire to use his art to intervene in political, ideological and cultural discourse, we cannot view the author exclusively within debates surrounding the presence or absence of Jewishness within his work. After all, other Jewish and similarly leftist artists working in the mid-twentieth century, such as Abraham Polonsky and Paddy Chayefsky, are not burdened with the expectation of being an exclusively Jewish voice, nevermind one that should petition for Jewish cultural distinction. If we divorce Miller of his duty as protector of all-things Jewish, if we rid him of his culpability for the extinguishing of ethnic specificity, and accept that the universal exists alongside the specific in the playwright's work, then *Focus* and *Death of a Salesman* allow us to continue the narrative of our investigation into how Jewish artists articulated the ambivalence of transition during the mid-twentieth century. Integral to this is the understand that not only did Jewishness undergo changes that brought it more in line with a more general identity, the post-war period also saw American masculinity encounter a period of confusion and tumult that meant that the practised outsider perspective of the Jewish imagination was well positioned to intercept these anxieties.

### ***Focus* and Post-Jewish Identity**

Writing some thirty-nine years after the publication of *Focus*, a text that addressed the issue of native anti-Semitism in wartime America, Arthur Miller seems to agree with *Dangling Man's* conclusion that the war effort was something other than an altruistic endeavour taken up voluntarily by a free and philanthropic American citizenship. "It is a fiction," argues Miller, "that national unity around the war reached very deep in a great many people in those times."<sup>9</sup> Miller's novel, published as the Second World War was coming to a close, tells the story of Lawrence Newman, a man whose job it is to interview prospective employees for a large corporation in order to dismiss from the shortlist any Jewish candidates. When Newman's

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, Arthur, *Focus*, Methuen, 2002, p.213. This comment is taken from the afterword that appears in this edition, which was originally written in 1984.

eyesight begins to fail him however, the spectacles that he then has to wear give him an unmistakably Jewish appearance. From this point on his prejudicial and self-serving outlook on life crumbles under the scrutiny of the very gaze that Newman himself has for many years cast upon the Jew in American society. Eventually, he is forced to build a new, more enlightened mind-set on the opposite side of the ethnic divide.

In his contemporary review of *Focus* for *The New York Times*, Charles Poore argued that Miller's novel "is better as a lecture – and certainly a much needed one – than it is as a story about human beings," charging that, "everything is too pat; the bigoted friend right next door who also works for the same company...the fact that his wife had known the same kind of organisation Newman is up against when she lived in California; the bitter irony of his dilemma."<sup>10</sup> Add to this the fact that the presence of the Finkelstein's candy shop on the corner of Newman's street offers a convenient Jewish *bete noire* to the neighbourhood's bigots and a useful yardstick against which to measure the story of Newman's renaissance and one could easily dismiss *Focus* as an, albeit well-intended, liberal fantasy, where the characters of discriminatory cultural discourse collide to bring about an egalitarian awakening of an anti-Semite. Yet whilst the artistic mechanics of Miller's novel are transparent, the author uses the framework of the social problem text to not only address an issue that questioned the integrity of America's commitment towards its wartime goals of democracy, unity and freedom, but to also realign these values in such a manner that incorporates Jewish identity and, more generally, individual agency.

*Focus*, like Bellow's *Dangling Man*, treats the war as something other than popular memory and wartime propaganda would have us remember. In these novels the conflict is not presented as an arena in which the strong-arm of American masculine democracy creates national machismo, everyman heroes and tickertape parades but an event that, for Bellow, amongst other things, allowed for the mobilisation of manufacture and industry, created an

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<sup>10</sup> Poore, Charles, *The New York Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> Nov., 1945. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-focus.html>

opportunity for adventure, and provided an opportunity for untethered identities to subscribe to a common character. For Miller, what America gives with one hand she takes with the other; by presenting home-grown anti-Semitism as rife, where fascism is fought abroad but allowed to continue on home soil, Miller posits that the war is a moral contradiction. This aspect of both novels reflects the fact that, as Richard Polenberg argues, "For most Americans World War II spelled neither hardship nor suffering but a better way of life...Midway through the war nearly seven out of ten Americans could say something with which few people in Russia, England, or France could have agreed: that the war had not required them to make any "real sacrifices."<sup>11</sup>

In both novels the war is presented as a mere obstacle or a means to an end; in *Dangling Man* it is a vehicle to prosperity and affluence, and permits selfishness under the guise of philanthropy, whilst in *Focus* Miller opens up for us a perspective overshadowed in cultural memory, an opinion whereby the war was a biding of time before a coming pogrom against Jews.<sup>12</sup> Fred, Newman's neighbour and Christian Front member, complaining about the addition of Jewish residents to his once Gentile-only neighbourhood explains to Newman the intentions of the Front: "Soon as the war's over and the boys get back you're goin' to see fireworks like there never was around here. We're just layin' low till the boys come home...We just want to clean out the neighbourhood, that's all...all we gotta do is make it hot for them and they'll pack up."<sup>13</sup> Whilst both novels overtly reference the war it is also treated with a kind of distance. For each of our protagonists the war is impalpable on an immediate and personal level, for Joseph it exists in the future, for Newman, in the past. It is only observed in the present through such impersonal things as food prices and newspaper reports of casualties.

Yet whilst this authorial method occurs in *Dangling Man* because its existential model de-emphasizes historical and cultural context in favour of introspection and self-examination,

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<sup>11</sup> Polenberg, Richard, *War and Society: The United States 1941-1945*, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972, p.131-2.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph says he "would rather die in the war than consume its benefits...I would rather be a victim than a beneficiary. I support the war, though perhaps it is gratuitous to say so; we have the habit of making these things issues of personal morality and private will, which they are not at all." Bellow, *Dangling Man*, p.84.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Focus*, p.11.

*Focus* is a social problem text that creates for itself a cultural vacuum. Miller reduces the components of the novel's contemporary context to concentrate more keenly on the social cause that he is attempting to highlight. As such the war becomes merely a backdrop, its primary purpose being to act as an opportunity for Newman to ally himself with Fred by recalling how he had once killed a German soldier.<sup>14</sup> In *Focus* the war is almost inconsequential; it deserves little mention and is for the most part absent throughout Newman's transformation from everyday anti-Semite to reformed libertarian. The extent to which this can be used to confirm *Dangling Man's* notion that the war effort was little more than a guise for private and collective anxieties is in part undermined by the nature of Miller's reductive approach necessitated by the restrictions of the social problem text. Nevertheless, by creating a distance between the conflict and Newman's everyday experience, Miller suggests a discord between the experience promoted by the propaganda monologue and the experience lived on a daily basis by many Americans.

The novel's personification of prejudice and suffering allows for a view into a facet of wartime American culture often overshadowed by the notion of a war undertaken on behalf of the greater good. *Focus* gives us a window into a part of history where America's entry into the war was opposed with increasing fervour in 1941 by ardent isolationists on the basis that the nation was being coerced into participation in the conflict by a Jewish conspiracy. Despite the widespread condemnation of this attitude, as one might expect after such virulent outbursts of anti-Semitism, not least by clergymen and members of the Government, the issue did not disappear with the onset of war. In fact, as the early-forties continued, anti-Semitic feelings became increasingly widespread and zealous as "the spirit of common interest," which characterised the war effort, "also augmented suspicions against outsiders; entry into the war

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<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Focus*, p.68.



increased intolerance.”<sup>15</sup> Although other minorities, particularly Japanese Americans, endured prejudices, Jews continued to be particular targets for discrimination.

Anti-Semitism prevailed to such an extent that in 1942, given a free choice, 45 percent of high school students said they would not have a Jew as a roommate and 42 percent of factory workers would not want a Jew to move into their neighbourhood. Newman’s occupation in *Focus* reflects the fact that “approximately 30% of the employment advertisements in 1942 in the New York *Times* and New York *Herald Tribune* expressed a preference for Christians.”<sup>16</sup> Anti-Jewish sentiment, feelings that were already prevalent in America before the war, became increasingly engrained in the nation’s psyche as the war years came to a close. By 1945, 58 percent of Americans thought Jews possessed too much power in the United States compared to 36 percent in 1938.<sup>17</sup> Although hard lined self-confessed anti-Semitic attitudes were, for the most part, confined to a minority of the population, there still existed a deep permeation of ill feeling towards Jews within American wartime culture. As much as *Focus* shows us the dramatic and fearsome side of anti-Semitism and the violent enforcers of its doctrines, the actions of the Christian Front were widely excoriated by the American people and occupied a small, yet still significant, part of native anti-Semitism.

What the novel tells us more of is the underground anti-Semitism enacted on a daily basis by passive observers of dominant ideologies. Newman doesn’t comprehend the greater impact of prejudice and persecution in which his occupation plays a large part. For him, the ramifications of his actions in dismissing Jewish candidates are merely that his company does not employ them. He doesn’t seem to recognise a correlation between cultural racism and private prejudice; or the contradiction in his purchase of his daily newspaper from Finkelstein and the daily discriminatory demands of his job; or, indeed, the connection between the discrimination he willingly hands out and the titillating opprobrious nature of the inflammatory racist

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<sup>15</sup> Dinnerstein, Leonard, *Antisemitism in America*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.131.

<sup>16</sup> Shapiro, Edward S., *World War II and American Jewish Identity*, Modern Judaism (Vol.10, No.1, Feb.1990), p.69.

<sup>17</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, p.131-2.

comments daubed on the subway train. As Christopher Bigsby states in *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*:

To Newman, if Jews, Blacks, Hispanics are despised and rejected, he is, by the same token, the admired and accepted. This is not, to his mind, evidence of prejudice, merely a description of reality...he never asks himself why, having simply internalised the values of those around him as if they were no more than a definition of normality. The anti-Jewish graffiti he reads scrawled on the subway station spark a thrill of recognition in him merely because they voice what seems to him an unspoken conviction, a revealed truth shared by all. It is as though he were a member of a secret society of good fellows.<sup>18</sup>

As Bigsby shows, Newman's inertia and passivity extends beyond his unconscious acceptance of anti-Semitism, he is "a man with no clear awareness of his own identity, indeed with no clear identity. He is so meticulous about externals because he has no centre."<sup>19</sup> Along with his desire for acceptance, Newman's passive flexibility makes him, for Bigsby, exemplar of David Reisman's concept of the "other directed," people who surrender their individuality to serve the interests and preferences of the majority.<sup>20</sup> Newman's passive relationship to a higher cultural authority also addresses the necessity to capitulate or belong to an overwhelming paradigm masculinity and national character, positioning this identity as the unthinking majority. As we will see, Newman's identity renewal contains within it a rebuttal of this paradigm, and undermines the performance of the masculine ideality that it engenders.

Bigsby shows that Newman's renaissance, his drive to act rather than be merely acted upon, is initiated by Finkelstein and is linked into a historical lineage of how Jews have responded to anti-Semitism. Having recounted a story of a pogrom in Poland, whereby Jews are complicit in their own murder and accept that the fate of Jews is to be persecuted, Finkelstein

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<sup>18</sup> Bigsby, Christopher, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.67-8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.68.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.69.

resolves to defend himself against the neighbourhood's bigots and arms himself with a baseball bat (that great symbol of the *American* masses). By this time, Finkelstein has already forced Newman's fresh eyes to view him differently, and as the boundaries of prejudice fade into the periphery the two men meet at the newly blurred intersection. In the finale to the novel, Finkelstein and Newman fight together against the Christian Front-like thugs; whilst being questioned in a police station, bloodied and bruised by his encounter with the anti-Semites, Newman accepts the police officer's identification of him as a Jew.

It is this tacit acceptance of Jewishness by Newman and the Jew's and the Gentile's concatenation that made Guttman to declare that *Focus* offers little in the way of positive messages for the fate of Jewish distinctiveness. Bigsby, however, illustrates that Newman's disavowal of his former self – his desire for validation, his acquiescent relationship to the wider world, and his passive acceptance of the inferiority of others – has more to do with imbuing Newman's negative and inert centre with purpose and existence. Bigsby draws a link between Newman's amelioration and Finkelstein's reaffirmation and the theories set forward by Bruno Bettelheim regarding his fellow Jews' complicit relationship to their own annihilation. Miller realised the conviction that, as expressed here by Bettelheim, "All people, Jews or gentiles...who submit to punishment not because of what they have done but because they are who they are, are already dead by their own decision."<sup>21</sup> In this way Miller's novel is not so much a limp attempt at asserting Jewish distinctiveness, after all, Nazism and anti-Semitism functioned on that very basis. The two men merge not at a point of ethnic identity, but rather at a conviction that individuals affirm their own identity; it is this convergence, the movement of Newman towards a characteristically 'Jewish' experience that would become a feature of the pronounced alignment between post-war American culture and the Jewish imagination.

Whilst the novel may be primarily concerned with illuminating American anti-Semitism therefore, it is more fundamentally a novel about *identity*. Although there is a sense of

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<sup>21</sup> Bigsby, Christopher, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.73-4.

detachment in the novel from its contemporary context, the players of discriminatory discourse also function as components in the same wartime debate regarding nationhood and masculinity explored in *Dangling Man*, *Double Indemnity* and *Batman*. Miller almost accidentally invites us to view his characters as ciphers simply because they are rather thinly crafted as ‘types’. Newman, Fred, and Finkelstein assume roles in a scenario whereby the notions of brotherhood and unity forwarded by the propaganda monologue are revealed as a sham, and Miller exemplifies his belief that art should enter into political and ideological discourse by attempting to realign masculine unity.

Firstly, Fred is an embodiment of a threatening and devious interpretation of the wartime monologue, and in this way Miller lampoons the character of wartime paradigm identity. Fred is a man for whom brawn and machismo unquestioningly and exclusively equal masculinity; yet this masculinity is not used in service of an accepting and egalitarian majority that supports the wartime propaganda imperatives of national unity. Rather, Fred’s masculinity serves the unity of a distinctly un-American anti-Semitic group; his belief that this unified group will in some way rise-up “Soon as the war’s over” ridicules the values that sit at the heart of America’s wartime character. Fred fulfils the wartime cultural requisites of masculinity and unity, but he does so in a perverse manner that undermines nationhood and masculine ideality, and reveals this identity as brittle and dishonest.

The routine of Newman’s home life and the methodical dedication with which he goes about his work position the protagonist initially alongside *Double Indemnity*’s Keyes as an objectified embodiment of the state and mass culture. Keyes and Newman both possess a unique aptitude for their work; indeed, their only real instinct – their gut feeling – affords the two men their special capabilities and allows both to perform vital functions for large organizations. Newman is less of a man, and less a human being, than he is a component or a functionary within massified society; he is part of the unthinking majority, governed by rules established and enforced by a paradigm consensus. In this way, the character is more generally a

cipher for national identity and American culture; his uncaring inertia early on in the novel reflects American isolationism, the fact that he is forced to change his outlook echoes the fact that the nation had to alter its attitude towards entry into the Second World War in the months leading up to Pearl Harbour, the event that cemented America's participation.

Newman represents massified American culture, a conscienceless and anxious majority; Fred reflects his author's interpretation of a contradictory wartime monologue that concealed a baneful reality. Finkelstein is the hero of the piece and Miller's Jewish voice, his eventual appropriation of defiant agency and his pride in his identity articulate Miller's perspective on Jewishness:

I am entirely innocent, he said to himself. I have nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. If there are others who have something to be ashamed of, let them hide and wait for this thing that is happening, let them play the part they have been given and let them wait as if they were actually guilty of wrong. I have nothing to be ashamed of and I will not hide as though there were something stolen in my house. I am a citizen of this country.

Newman only begins to imbue his hollow centre with humanity when he is forced to eschew the fraudulent masculine unity represented by Fred and accepts the authentic brotherhood offered by associating with Finkelstein. Like Keyes, whose knotted stomach, usually agitated only by a doubtful insurance claim, is disturbed by the compassion he feels towards Walter, Newman only becomes human and fulfilled through his alliance with Finkelstein, who challenges the unquestioned authority that Newman has heretofore granted to the paradigm world around him.

Individuals are used as archetypal representatives of groups and communities; Newman represents the masses and the state; Fred represents the wartime majority; Finkelstein represents the Jews. That Finkelstein earns an individual identity from Newman, he ceases to be

‘the Jew’ and ‘becomes’ Finkelstein, illustrates Miller’s utopian vision of Jewish acceptance. In the process Newman himself becomes ‘human,’ and Fred, who embodies difference and discrimination, is disregarded. Miller isn’t suggesting that Jewishness itself will improve American identity or that American culture should become characteristically Jewish, but that the process of including Jewishness within Americanness, the very act of *acceptance* would be beneficial to both Jewish and American identity. Before his reinvention, Newman’s job reflected his character, he compartmentalised American culture into a hierarchal structure based upon the inferiority of ethnic and cultural Others. After his transformation, and after the disavowal of discrimination on Newman’s part, the distinction of difference fades and this compartmentalised culture becomes a homogenised centre. Fred is excluded from this centre, yet Miller appropriates the aspects of wartime American culture that the character fraudulently embodies – brotherhood, unity, and masculinity – and grants them to the newly formed coalition of Newman and Finkelstein.

In this way, universalism is undoubtedly present within *Focus*, but whereas Guttman argues that the playwright’s vision depends upon showing that Jews and Gentiles are only distinguishable by their name, Miller’s novel simply argues that Jews should not be discriminated against because of such capricious and subjective criteria. In his review of the novel in *The New Republic* in 1946, a young Saul Bellow wondered why Newman didn’t simply “carry his baptismal certificate around to the neighbors as proof that he was not a Jew.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Donald Weber shows, “What Miller understood sixty years ago – in an insight that carried...a substantial charge of social criticism – is that there can be no *rational* proof of Newman’s hereditary “gentile” identity, since the act of being “taken” as a “Jew” exposes the “raving” unconscious of the anti-Semite himself.”<sup>23</sup> *Focus* posits that the boundaries of prejudice and discrimination should not be used to determine the existence of Jewish identity; indeed to do so would be to submit to the authority of anti-Semitism.

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<sup>22</sup> Bellow, Saul, “Brothers’ Keepers” *The New Republic*, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1946. Available online at: <http://www.tnr.com/book/review/brothers-keepers>

<sup>23</sup> Weber, Donald, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs*, Indiana University Press, 2005, p.102.

We can see in Miller's novel, as Weber suggests, not a desire to abolish difference, but rather an attempt at promoting what might be termed a *post-Jewish* identity; an identity whereby Jewishness is not determined by the prejudice of others, nor by a history of discrimination. Of course, concomitant to this is the fact that this post-Jewishness is also post-ethnic and post-religious; Miller is not concerned, however, with *Judaism*, but with a cultural and already largely secular Jewish identity. As a social problem text, *Focus* isn't concerned with the private realm; moreover it lacks the heart and human voice that Miller would use in his later work. Instead the novel is concerned not only with the public problem of anti-Semitism in mainstream American culture, but also Jewish and, more generally, American identity. As Donald Weber realises, Miller is intimating a utopian post-war universalism, "a vision of society no longer consumed by difference...Newman's personal apocalypse registers Miller's own larger, hopeful vision concerning race relations, at least in New York City. In this respect, he voices a Sartre-like argument for the eventual elimination of difference in the next era of social relations."<sup>24</sup>

If there is a flaw in Miller's novel it is that the author offers little in the way of instruction as to the direction that Jewishness should take after it sheds the burden of the prejudicial past and discrimination in the present, the author doesn't answer the question as to what exactly this post-Jewishness should be composed of. Yet perhaps this criticism is once again guilty of placing too much emphasis on Miller as a guardian of the Jewish community in the mid-twentieth century; Miller's intention in *Focus* is not to compose a manifesto for the future of the Jewishness in America but to turn the page on an aspect of the Jewish community's past in order for a new chapter in Jewish American culture to be written. In the process the novel anticipates not only the renewed pride and visible interest in Jewish identity in the post-war period, but also, through the coalition of Newman and Finkelstein, the mutual movements taken towards each other by a specifically Jewish identity and a wider American character, and how these experiences converged on a bruised and confused masculine identity

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.109.

## Post-war Jewish Identity and the Liminal American Male

As representative of the general American male and the Jewish community respectively, the difficulties that Newman and Finkelstein experience regarding their individual identity, and the transformations that these identities undertake in order to achieve some level of selfhood, anticipates the position of Jewish and American male identity in the post-war period. We have already seen how the dichotomy between opposing masculine identities was used by Jewish artists in order to negotiate Jewishness and Americanness in the thirties and early-forties, during the Depression and the Second World War. The relationship within the superhero dynamic, in terms of the dissimilarity between *Superman* and *Captain America* and their alter-egos promotes a masculine ideality based upon physical and emotional toughness that supports hegemonic ideology and monopoly capitalism. *Batman*, *Dangling Man*, and *Double Indemnity* illuminate the flipside of this masculinity, seeking to undermine its one-dimensionality and reveal its effects on individual identity. Nevertheless, whatever perspective favoured by the various Jewish authors of these texts, it is the relationship between conflicting notions of masculinity through which they articulate their treatise on individuality and national identity and attempt to represent the position of Jewishness and Americanness.

The ternary relationship between Newman, Finkelstein, and Fred reveals how the dynamics between differing modes of masculinity helped to define wider notions of ethnicity and individual identity. The masculine unity created in the wake of Newman's recognition of Finkelstein's individual identity, and the subsequent revelation of Newman's own newly-fulfilled selfhood, illustrates how Jewish artists, like Miller, Bellow, Wilder, Siegel, and Kane, explored the relationship between both Jewish and American, and paradigmatic and individual identities via the motif of brotherhood. Newman's disavowal of Fred as an embodiment of masculine toughness, however, shows that discord existed alongside agreement within masculine relations. Newman's liminal experience between two masculinities exemplifies the ambivalence of transition that characterised the Jewish American imagination at this time and which secured the universal appeal of Jewish cultural expression. The novel exemplifies how movements within the make-up



of Jewish identity mirrored movements within the American male character, and as we will see the continuing evolution of the two protean identities in the post-war period meant that Jewish artists were ideally positioned to articulate more general anxieties and trends.

Mike Chopra-Gant shows in his study of masculinity and post-war Hollywood cinema that performativity was a crucial characteristic within the composition of masculinity throughout the war and in the immediate post-war period. The transition from civilian-to-soldier and soldier-to-civilian demanded a “self-conscious performance of gender,” and with over ten million men being conscripted into the armed forces during the conflict, this had a transformative effect upon the way in which masculinities were conceived and understood in the US.<sup>25</sup> Summarising contemporary writings by W. Waller, Leo Cherne, and H.I. Kupper on the subject of the dichotomous civilian-soldier identity, Chopra-Gant shows that these writers were “prepared to accept that masculinities are in some respect performative, and also...acknowledge the central role of the immediate cultural and social setting in producing particular performances of masculinity. This way of conceptualizing masculinity recognises a fluidity of identity...”<sup>26</sup>

Newman’s movement between identities articulates this performance of masculinity in the mid-twentieth century, as does Fred’s intimation that only after the war will his true masculine identity and purpose come to the fore. The performance of masculinity is echoed most successfully in superhero comics, where Batman, Superman, and Captain America are all assumed or performed identities, as are their public-face alter-egos. Indeed, the relationship between the civilian and the combative aspects of the superhero’s character articulates the transition between soldier and civilian identities that many American males were undertaking during the Second World War. Fred and Newman in *Focus*, and the evolving ideological outlook of Superman’s identity as well as the fact that Steve Rogers needs to transform into Captain America in order to

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<sup>25</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Post-war America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*, I.B Tauris, 2006, p.98-99.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.101.

play a part in the Second World War, all illustrate how masculinities responded to changing cultural and political climates.

Moreover, as we have already seen in *Dangling Man*, Bellow's characterisation of American culture suggests a mood of performed phlegmatic asceticism, where outward identities are simulated and introspective individual identities are denied. Joseph's capitulation to a life of "regular hours," "supervision of the spirit," and "regimentation" in the finale to the novel is similar to Wilder's sardonic take on mass culture in *Double Indemnity*; both suggest that individual identity is subsumed by an inauthentic mechanised manner-of-being.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, throughout *Double Indemnity* Walter assumes or acts-out various identities; there's the flirtatious initial encounter with Phyllis where he briefly pretends to be a police officer; he assumes the identity of the deceased Mr Dietrichson on the train; he attempts to appear anonymous amongst the shelves at Jerry's Market; and finally, both he and Keyes "swap" masculine roles in the conclusion to the film, when the older man lights Walter's cigarette and thus reverses a motif that is played out throughout the film.

During the war years, therefore, Jewish artists seem to display a tendency towards revealing a masquerade of masculinity; a hardboiled, tough, and bellicose masculine ideal was most often presented as a sham or a façade used in service of a controlling mass culture and monopoly capitalism, perhaps in a backlash against the heightened atmosphere of machismo necessitated by the wartime environment. Whilst this 'hard' masculinity may have served its purpose for wartime propaganda, exemplified by Superman and Captain America, the associations made in *Focus* between this mode of masculinity and a discriminatory and threatening doctrine that undermined democratic ideals augmented the negative connotations already explored by the likes of Wilder, Bellow and the authors of *Batman* and *Superman* that figured this masculinity as exclusive, reductive, massified, unthinking, and threatening to individuality and selfhood.

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<sup>27</sup> Bellow, Saul, *Dangling Man*, Penguin, 1996, p.191.

Yet, as K.A. Cuordileone shows, the relationship between opposing masculine identities became increasingly integral to the post-war political landscape where a “new premium [was placed] on hard masculine toughness [that] rendered anything less than that soft and feminine and, as such, a real or potential threat to the security of the nation.”<sup>28</sup> Political discourse between the late-forties and early-sixties, argues Cuordileone, was imbued with virility, resilience, and sexuality, and this masculine posturing was often employed in lieu of meaningful political debate. As Cuordileone suggests, in the Cold War climate there was an urgent necessity to cement a solid masculine identity; Barbara Epstein argues that the panics that swept across America in the late-forties and into the fifties surrounding homosexuality and Communism were symptomatic of more specific anxieties regarding the decline of masculinity in the US.<sup>29</sup> There was exigency to create what Michael S. Kimmel defines as a *hegemonic* masculinity, an ideal American male that was young, married, white, heterosexual, a parent, in gainful employment, and of a physical type that might be best described as ‘sporty’.<sup>30</sup> The security of this hegemonic masculinity functioned as a defence against elements that threatened the cultural and political integrity of national identity.

As Warren Sussman has shown, by the end of the war America “had achieved many of its goals,” but “this moment of triumph was accompanied by something disturbing: a new self-consciousness of tragedy and sense of disappointment. The post-war success story was also the “age of anxiety.””<sup>31</sup> As the nation moved into the fifties, these anxieties would become amalgamated under the umbrella of anti-Communism; fears regarding homosexuality and juvenile delinquency would also flourish as America attempted to isolate and extinguish cultural and political malignancies. Anxiety surrounding masculine identity would also increasingly become measured within the arena of home life and the work environment where the hegemonic male

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<sup>28</sup> Cuordileone, K. A., “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Sep., 2000), pp. 515-545

<sup>29</sup> Epstein, Barbara, “Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Post-war U.S.,” *Critical Sociology*, October 1994, Vol.20, No.3, pp.21-44.

<sup>30</sup> Kimmel quotes the sociologist Erving Goffman’s description of the “one complete, unblushing male,” that describes a similar masculine paradigm. Kimmel, Michael S., “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, *The Masculinities Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.271.

<sup>31</sup> Sussman, Warren, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Post-war America,” *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p.19.

could become realised. In the mid- to late-forties, however, the transition from wartime to peacetime, the crisis in the national conscience regarding the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the changing role of women, the advancement in social stature and increased opportunities afforded to minorities, mounting fears about the Russian threat, and America's new position as world-leader meant that post-war American culture was in a period of transition and uncertainty.

It is the beginning of the struggle to fulfil a performative hegemonic masculinity that *Death of a Salesman* articulates in the late-1940s; but it also represents a post-traumatic masculine malaise that affected the American male in the post-war period. The performance of masculinity became a difficult task simply because the atmosphere of American culture and the boundaries by which American males traditionally set their masculine self-consciousness were in such a state of flux. Cuordileone and Epstein both begin their analysis from 1949 onwards, thus exemplifying Jacqueline Foertsch's idea that the events and character of American culture during the years immediately following the Second World War are best interpreted through a framework of the 1950s. Yet, in the three or four years following the war, an element of confusion and uncertainty regarding masculine and national identity pervaded general American cultural representation. Confusion is the operative word here, for perhaps the reason for the preponderance of the fifties aesthetic in our interpretation of the mid-century is that the anxieties in the immediate post-war period appear "free-floating." It is not simply that this cultural unease had yet to become tethered to more specific anxieties; it is the fact that cultural representation reflects a nauseous quest to locate masculine and national identity amid tremendous cultural tumult and transition.

An analysis of the discrete political, ideological, economic and sociological factors that contributed to this anxiously uncertain cultural environment is beyond the ambitions of this thesis; the interest here is that Jewish artists were best positioned to articulate the experience of an American masculinity caught in the eye of the storm. This is because during the Second World War, much like both national and American masculine identity, Jewish American identity

underwent a period of change that meant that the end of the conflict signalled a new era of understanding and self-awareness regarding Jewish identity. Jewish males found themselves in a peculiar position; in the increasing drive towards cementing a hegemonic masculine identity in the immediate post-war culture, masculinity became defined by what it isn't rather than what it is. As part of the widening mainstream and as members of the Jewish community, Jewish males found themselves invited to be part of this centralised or paradigm masculine ideal, but only if they acquiesced to surrendering the signifiers of their cultural and identity distinction. At a time when Jewish identity was highly visible within the national and global conscience, American Jews were offered the invitation to become part of a white mainstream. Here I will show how in some parts of culture, the position of Jews and the Jewish male enjoyed a period of heightened acceptance and the Jewish identity was celebrated as symbolic of the American wartime success story. Elsewhere in culture, however, artists like Arthur Miller and Abraham Polonsky continued to expose the currents of anxiety and uncertainty that sat below the surface of the mainstream by exploring the peculiar experience of Jewish American males.

## **Jewish Identity Enters the Mainstream**

For Edward S. Shapiro the transformations that Jewish identity underwent during the Second World War can be best encapsulated by the disparity between two key events. The first occurred in June, 1941, when the Jewish Congressman M. Michael Edelstein died from a heart attack seconds after giving a profound rebuttal to fresh claims that America was being hoodwinked into participation in the War by a Jewish consortium. The response came after the fiercely anti-Semitic Congressman John E. Rankin had addressed the House of Representatives warning of the international intensions of a conspiratorial Jewish cartel. Rankin's diatribe did not only echo sentiments already aired by the aforementioned Charles Lindbergh, as well as those expressed by Senators Burton K. Wheeler and Gerald R. Nye, but also seemed to be the bellowing reverberation of a nationwide whisper regarding the supposed malicious intent of Jewish warmongers. What's more, Rankin's speech was particularly disquieting as it indicated that these hateful sentiments were not just held by a smattering of kneejerk patriots and bigoted religious zealots; it also

infected the upper echelons of American democratic and judicial institutions. Edelstein's desperate plea for reason, understanding, and egalitarianism, followed so poignantly by his untimely death, made him into a martyr and served as "further evidence to American Jews of their precarious and vulnerable position."<sup>32</sup>

The second event occurred on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 when Bess Myerson, a working-class Bronx Jew whose parents were Russian immigrants, who spoke both Yiddish and English, and who refused to disavow her Jewish heritage by anglicizing her surname, became the first Jew to be crowned Miss America. As Shapiro states, "Jews took an intense vicarious pleasure in Myerson's victory. Not only did it vindicate their pride in being Jews, but it was also reproach to those who questioned their status as Americans. Myerson's victory was doubly sweet because she was so identifiably Jewish."<sup>33</sup> The contrast between these two events symbolises the reconstruction of Jewish identity that occurred because of the sociological and psychological changes that took place during the war. Shapiro suggests that these changes were, in some ways, concomitant to a general easing of racial, religious, and ethnological divisions and prejudices, noting that, "While World War II was truly a watershed in Jewish identity, it was also a watershed in the American perception of American identity. The white-Anglo-Saxon Protestant ceased to be equated with American nationality."<sup>34</sup>

Given the stinging irony that this was a conflict in which Jews were both accused of warmongering in America and singled out for extermination in Europe, its conclusion held a special resonance for America's Jewish population. The acts of inhumanity visited upon European Jews during the conflict not only invited sympathy for Jews everywhere, but also served to equate anti-Semitism and intolerance with the most despicable examples of depravity and unfettered hate. Anti-Semitism could no longer be passive in the post-war period, a feeling of general dislike and subtle inferiorities; to be an anti-Semite was, in light of the Nazi atrocities,

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<sup>32</sup> Shapiro, Edward S., *We Are Many: Reflections of American Jewish History and Identity*, Syracuse University Press, 2005, p.68.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.77-8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.81.

to be bedfellows with murderous tyrants, to be complicit in the slaughter of millions, and, crucially, distinctly un-American. Whilst the war years were not a time of complete metamorphosis for Jewish identity and Judeophobia was in no way eradicated, by the end of the conflict the shackles of intolerance had been loosened and important steps had been taken towards a more inclusive American identity.

As Shapiro argues, "Never had American Jews felt more physically and psychologically secure than after World War II. For perhaps the first time in their history, American Jews believed that they had at last become fully American, and that the relationship between their Jewish and American identities was to be one of symbiosis and not conflict."<sup>35</sup> Whilst the death of Edelstein symbolised the despair and fear that often accompanied Jewish identity in the early 1940s, the investiture of Myerson was indicative of a new era in Jewish American history in which Jewish identity, flavoured with pride and defiance in equal measure, was celebrated, or at least tolerated, by the majority of Jewish and non-Jewish Americans alike.<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, American Jews were confronted not only with the horrible realization of Nazi atrocities, but also that, despite the on-going native anti-Semitism, they had occurred whilst Jews in America were enjoying a culture of tolerance, freedom, and abundance incomparable to their European brethren. This disparity placed a heavy burden on the shoulders of the Jewish community in America. The preeminent scholar of Jewish American history, Jacob Rader Marcus, tells us that in the post-war years:

...the Jews of the United States have fallen heir to the mantle of world Jewish leadership – whether or not they wish it – for America's Jews constitute the only sizable Diaspora Jewry still free and surviving. *Noblesse oblige* has now been added to all the other reasons driving American Jewry

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.65.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna makes argues similar point in *American Judaism: A History*, and offers up the publication of Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, a spiritual and psychological "self-help" bestseller in 1946, and the success and respect bestowed upon the Jewish baseball star Hank Greenberg in 1945 as further proof of a "renewal" of the way in which both Jews and non-Jews approached Jewish identity. *American Judaism: A History*, Yale University Press, 2004, p.272-3.

to organise on a local, regional, and – above all – national level. For now, not only is such organization essential if the community is to function smoothly – and the community is a corporation of almost 5,600,000 – but it is no less essential if the community is to fulfil the ineluctable obligation that history has imposed on it: to help all Jews everywhere in the world.<sup>37</sup>

With vital financial and organizational support from their within their own community, in 1948 Jewish Americans saw the creation of the State of Israel, a tithe paid to global Jewry to whom a great debt was owed. Both the Holocaust and the founding of Israel understandably altered the character of American Jewishness. Gerald S. Strober argues that the Holocaust reminded Jewish Americans that “...Jewish identification could not easily be shed even through conversion and assimilation...If it had heretofore been difficult for American Jews to understand that there was indeed something unique in Jewish identification, the Holocaust enabled many persons to confront the specificity of Jewishness.”<sup>38</sup>

If the Holocaust had, with shocking starkness, revealed the vulnerability of human mortality, it had also highlighted the indelibility of Jewish identity. Yet, for a Jewish American community marked more by material abundance and eager acculturation than it was by religious observance and ascetism, the creation of Israel and the horrors endured by European Jews during World War II led many members of the Jewish community to feel like ersatz Jews. The “sense of positiveness” that prevailed in the post-war Jewish American consciousness regarding their ethno-religious self-identification, argues Sarna “...led to the development of a new and troubling complication to the problem of Jewish identity in America. An increasing number of Jews exhibit anxiety over the extent and degree of their Jewishness. Many Jews, perhaps due to

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus, Jacob Rader, “Background for the History of American Jewry” (pp.1-26): *The American Jew: A Reappraisal*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964, p.17.

<sup>38</sup> Strober, Gerald S., *American Jews: Community in Crisis*, Doubleday & Company, 1974, p.217.



comparison with the Israelis, feel inadequate for the task of being assertively Jewish.”<sup>39</sup> For Jewish Americans, the progress they achieved in the measure of their identity and the easing of native anti-Semitism must have seemed meagre compensation for the price paid in the lifeblood of millions of their kinsmen.

It is this anxious embrace of acceptance that Miller articulates in *Focus*, and which is echoed in much of the cultural output of Jewish artists in the years following the War. In other works that tackled Jewish identity and anti-Semitism head-on in the post-war period, however, especially *Crossfire* (Edward Dymtryk, 1947) and *Gentleman's Agreement* (Laura Z. Hobson, 1947: adapted into an Oscar winning film of the same name directed by Elia Kazan), the message about Jewish uniqueness is laid aside. The latter novel was considered by Guttman alongside *Focus* as evidence of the disintegration of Jewish distinctiveness, and perhaps Hobson's novel does offer less of an argument for the continuation of a Jewish identity that is imbued with history and heritage than does Miller's novel.

*Gentleman's Agreement* follows widower Philip Green as he takes it upon himself to assume a Jewish identity in order to write an article on anti-Semitism for a forward-thinking magazine. Having just moved to New York with his young son and ailing mother, his ploy is allowed for by the fact that hardly anyone in the city knows his family and that he is, in fact, a Gentile. Hobson's novel is, in many ways, a continuation of the malaise presented by Miller in *Focus*. The realisation by Green's love interest, Kathy, that she is guilty of participating in and aiding the continuation of the deep-rooted modes of cultural anti-Semitism echoes the moral conversion of Miller's protagonist. Both novels also present an American anti-Semitism that is both overt and hidden; in some instances discriminatory practices are divorced from their racist implications and become merely a product of practised cultural interaction, whilst in others racism is indulged in unabashedly and without shame.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.218.

Yet in 1947, amid the abundance of the post-war years, the malaise explored by *Gentleman's Agreement* assumes a decidedly bourgeois appearance. It seems curious that both Miller and Hobson deem it necessary to use Gentiles as a window into the world of anti-Semitism, yet whilst Miller employs this technique to illuminate the moral regeneration of his protagonist, Philip Green seems to be a somewhat patronising libertarian, suggesting an American WASP public so prosperous that they can now indulge in the noble act of acceptance and thus reinforce the civility afforded them by their affluence. This is not to say that the novel was not written with the best intentions or that Green is not genuinely deplored by the discrimination he witnesses and repulsed by the injustice he feels around him, more that Green's anger is the indignation of the privileged.

The novel certainly questions the morality of denying freedom on the basis of race, creed or ethnicity, but one can't shake the notion that it questions not so much the ethics of depriving the rights of the heart to worship whichever god it sees fit, nor the right to an individual or ethnic identity, but merely the freedom to enjoy the luxury of a country club, or to be employed by a prestigious company. Freedom in *Gentleman's Agreement*, insofar as it can be denied on the basis of ethno-religiosity, amounts to little more than admission to an elite sect characterised by consumerism, abundance and prosperity; in short, to take away freedom is simply to deny an individual the benefits of a new affluent "Americanism."

The sentimental hopefulness of *Gentleman's Agreement* is evidence of a peculiar moment in American post-war society where the hope of Jews being accepted into the mainstream without compromising their religiosity or their ethnic identity seemed like a reality. It is also evidence of the popular interpretation of Jewish artistic expression at this time; it supports the idea that by the mid-1940s, the cultural signifiers of an ethno-religious Jewish heritage had largely evaporated amid the increasingly heated cultural, racial and ideological climate. This attitude is expressed by Samuel C. Heilman, who argues that for Jews:

American culture was inviting because it was ubiquitous, accessible, and offered advantages to those who embraced its norms and values. In the emergent social order of post-war America...the identity one held as a consequence of birth...mattered little if at all. What counted was what a person achieved by dint of his or her own efforts and accomplishments. And since being Jewish was an ascribed status...it became less and less salient...In this new America, where everyone seemed to be starting again, Jews did not have to be outsiders. And they *wanted* to be like everyone else.<sup>40</sup>

In this way, *Gentleman's Agreement* is representative of how the Jewish experience in the immediate post-war years came to articulate a national attitude; the dovetailing of Jewish and general American interests during the war continued and the acceptance of Jews into the national character, as evidenced by Hobson's novel, seemed to indicate the success of American democracy and wartime unity. But the text is also indicative of how certain Jewish cultural artefacts can be used as examples to illustrate how Jewish pride and distinctiveness disappeared during this period.

There is a tendency to view the Jewish American imagination around this time collectively as evidence of the demise of Jewish identity and of a wholesale commitment to a new American way of life. Arthur Hertzberg, for example, argues that:

No one had any illusions that *Gentleman's Agreement* was an important work of literature, but it did express the dominant mood, even among serious writers. During and immediately after the war many younger Jewish intellectuals, who had been born and raised in the immigrants' ghettos, were eager to accept what the new

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<sup>40</sup> Heilman, Samuel C., *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, University of Washington Press, 1995, p.16.

American nationalism seemed to offer: minorities would be allowed into society if they adopted the manners and culture of Protestant Christians, or if they became “universal men.”<sup>41</sup>

Hertzberg reads *Gentleman’s Agreement*, *Dangling Man* and *Focus*, as well as *Death of a Salesman*, within the framework of mid-twentieth century Jewish assimilation; his analysis ignores any presence of a desire for the continuation of a distinct Jewish identity and instead reasons that they each signal a turning-away from Jewish cultural heritage and identity. Whilst it may be fair to say that these texts reflect a period where Jewishness became more absorbed into the American character and the traces of Jewish identity left behind remained faint, to read these texts purely as evidence of this shift is reductive and plays down the sense of ambivalence that exists in both the cultural artefacts themselves and the Jewish community at this time. Somewhat perversely, the marriage between Jewishness and Americanness in the post-war years, and the fact that the Jewish experience enjoyed a period of heightened relevance, does in fact cloud the wider importance and utility of Jewish American cultural expression in articulating the tumultuous years and masculine malaise in post-war America.

### **Punch Drunk: *Body and Soul* and Post-war Confusion**

The accelerated presence of an identifiably Jewish voice that came about in American culture around the end of the war and in the post-war period, and the first distinguishable body of “Jewish American” literature that had begun to take shape towards the mid-fifties, is symptomatic of how Jewishness and the Jewish experience coincided with a more general experience in American culture at-large. For Sheldon Gredstein, in literature:

The Jewish Movement responded to an urgent cultural need. In short, and this is a truism, the Jewish writer was made the beneficiary of Hitler’s death camps...from hatred, feared, or

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<sup>41</sup> Hertzberg, Arthur, *The Jews in American: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1989, p.304.

ridiculed figure, lurking on the fringes of the culture, he was transformed into the Man Who Suffered, Everyman. To Americans especially, ever respectful of eye-witness reports and ready to listen to the man who was there, the Jew compelled attention...who could better instruct us than the Jews, those most expert and experienced sufferers.<sup>42</sup>

Jewish authors did not just articulate the drive towards Americanization; in fact, despite its accentuation within the understanding of mid-twentieth century Jewish American culture, the self-conscious representation of Jewish interaction and assimilation with American culture, let alone a wholly positive perspective, only occupies a minority of the total Jewish output in the mid- to late-forties. As Gredstein's analysis of the Jewish Movement shows, there was a wider trend within Jewish literature and culture that simply meant that Jewish *authorship* became more pronounced within the cultural consciousness. Dealing with feelings of social alienation and cultural disillusionment, these Jewish American cultural artefacts suggest that America was happy to have the well-trained voice of Jewish suffering act as a mouthpiece whilst it licked its own war wounds and fretted about a new, uncertain future.

Yet if the Jewish experience enjoyed a post-war *belle époque*, a widely recognised period of congruity to the American experience and relevance to the American psyche, the community's cultural expression was a continuation of the aesthetics and themes that had previously occupied the Jewish imagination. The ambivalence and trepidation of transition that had been the leitmotif of Jewish expression in the thirties and early-forties, fashioned upon the experience of masculinity, is what secured the pertinence of the Jewish imagination in the post-war years. Far from signalling a movement away from Jewish identity and, as Hertzberg argues, an ethno-cultural past marked by left-wing politics and Lower East Side ideals, this output of

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<sup>42</sup> Gredstein, Sheldon Norman, *Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement in Contemporary American Jewish Literature: Critical Essays*, Indiana University Press, 1973, p.176-7.

Jewish artists continued to bear the distinct characteristics of Jewishness whilst simultaneously articulating a wider American experience and a critique of American mass culture.

The quintessence of the Jewish imagination in the post-war period is captured by Abraham Polonsky in his 1947 boxing movie, *Body and Soul*. As Peter Stanfield has illustrated, the boxing film formula has proven fertile artistic terrain for Jewish filmmakers and screenwriters, and in the forties and fifties especially, Jewish artists used this sub-genre of both crime films to articulate a critical perspective on American culture:

...the boxing story offered a particularly viable vehicle for broad social commentary, a vehicle that could be personalized by evoking a nostalgic vision of a ghetto community...with its proletarian protagonist, his struggles with organized crime, and an unforgiving social and economic order... [The boxing formula]...proved to be highly conducive to the articulation of a radical voice in American culture. Like a ventriloquist's act, the intellectual works through crime and boxing stories to speak in a common voice to the common man.<sup>43</sup>

In the forties and fifties Jewish writers and filmmakers like Carl Foreman, Budd Schulberg, Irving Shulman, Robert Rossen, Abraham Polonsky, Joseph Pevney, Herbert Kline, Gordon Kahn, Aben Kandel, Robert Wise, Art Cohn, Bernard Gordon and Rod Serling contributed to a body of boxing films that included *Body and Soul*, *Champion*, *The Harder they Fall*, *The Fighter*, *City for Conquest*, *The Ring*, and *The Set-Up*.<sup>44</sup> These films used the motifs and moral framework inherent in the boxing formula to explore the relationship between Jewish, American, and masculine identities and the post-war cultural landscape.

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<sup>43</sup> Stanfield, Peter, "A Monarch for the Millions: Jewish Filmmakers, Social Commentary, and the Post-war Cycle of Boxing Films," *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, Rutgers University Press, 2007, p.80.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.81.

*Body and Soul* is typical of this approach, functioning, argues Stanfield, as an allegory for “an individual’s and a community’s struggle with the vicissitudes of capitalism.”<sup>45</sup> Stanfield also points out that the film was self-consciously a “Depression-era parable,”<sup>46</sup> and in this way the film articulates a similar perspective on American mass and capitalist culture to that we have already seen in the earlier Superman stories, as well as in *Batman*, *Dangling Man*, and *Double Indemnity*, illustrating the corrosive effects that a pursuit of monetary and material gain has upon personal relationships, individual morality and internal contentment. Within the immediate post-war environment, however, where masculinities were performed and American males struggled to cement their identity, the notion of two men slugging it out in the ring taps into the idea that American males found it difficult to locate boundaries against which to define their identity.

The two pugilists are fighting for masculine superiority, battling each other not in an attempt to assert an identity based upon individual endeavour but in a futile quest to gain a greater foothold in a cut-throat capitalist culture. *Body and Soul* shows how the critique of capitalism continued within the Jewish imagination, and that so too did the distinction between how individual and ethnic identities struggled against the exigency to capitulate to a performed American masculine paradigm identity characterised by alpha-male muscularity, gaudy material abundance, and moral bankruptcy. It also, however, signals a specifically post-war shift in the construction of masculine identity whereby cultural transition created an atmosphere of confusion; with its shadowy aesthetic, underworld ambience, and questionable characters, *Body and Soul* represents an American male who could feel the pain of the punches but wasn’t too sure who was throwing them.

Cultural disorientation and the bewildering quest for masculine selfhood was not limited to boxing films, however; indeed, the theme itself wasn’t limited to Jewish American expression at this time. A masculine malaise and portentous miasma permeated American

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.89.

cultural expression in the post-war period. From the fateful foreboding anxiety that characterised the cinematic corpus of film noir to the crime, horror, and sex-ridden stories that changed the face of comic books and imbued the medium with gratuitousness, violence, and sleaze, a dark shadow was cast over American culture and masculinity from 1945 onwards. What is interesting for the purposes of this thesis, however, is that although necessarily altered by the impact of an evolving American culture, the main facets of the Jewish imagination enjoyed an elevated pertinence in post-war America whilst remaining fairly static. That is, the concerns voiced by Clifford Odets or Siegel and Schuster regarding a threatening mass and capitalist culture, alongside the particular anxieties that accompanied the attempt to negotiate masculine, individual, and Jewish identities with a paradigm national character were carried over into the Jewish cultural output in the mid- to late-forties and into the fifties.

A whistle-stop tour of the Jewish imagination in the years 1945 to 1948, for example, reveals a myriad of cultural artefacts from the fields of film, literature, and theatre that explore this leitmotif. *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), *Home of the Brave* (Arthur Laurents, 1945), *The Brick Foxhole* (Richard Brooks, 1945), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *The Dark Mirror* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger, 1946), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), *All My Sons* (Arthur Miller, 1947), *Magic Town* (William A. Wellman, 1947, scripted by Robert Riskin), *The Victim* (Saul Bellow, 1947), *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948) and *The Naked and the Dead* (Norman Mailer, 1948) examine variously the impact of a tenebrous past on the character of post-war masculinity; the attempt by American males to locate a viable masculine identity; the performance of that masculine identity and the quest to find boundaries against which to judge the character of American manhood; the fate of individual identity amid a culture of material abundance and an unyielding movement towards mainstream identification; a critique of a threatening American mass culture that demands conscription to a paradigm consensus; and, finally, apprehensions regarding a future in which the burgeoning “threats” posed to masculine



identity and nationhood by Russia, femininity, homosexuality, ethnic minorities, and racial Others offered ominous prognostication.

The continuation of the central thematic and aesthetic preoccupation of the Jewish imagination throughout the Depression, the Second World War, and the post-war period suggests that the reason for the heightened recognition of the Jewish presence in post-war popular culture was not simply that Jews were beginning to enter the mainstream at a higher rate than they previously had done, but that more general American cultural concerns were fashioned along lines that Jews had been exploring through their cultural and artistic voice for a number of years. There was created a reciprocal re-alignment within the Jewish and American cultural relationship; as Jews became more characteristically “American”, American anxieties, insofar as they were expressed in popular culture, became more characteristically “Jewish.” Thus, wider cultural trends meant that the Jewish imagination was recognised and encouraged to envisage not just ethnically specific concerns, but also more universal fears, anxieties, and experiences.

**“I still feel kinda temporary about myself.” (Willy Loman, *Death of a Salesman*, 1949)**

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* captures perfectly how the closer alignment between Jewishness and Americanness articulated the discrete but interwoven post-war experiences of Jews and Americans. Whether he’s Jewish, American, or somewhere in between, Willy Loman embodies the experience of the American male in the post-war period. Miller’s play about the American Dream is a nightmare-like vision of one man attempting to locate his identity amongst a cultural maelstrom. As Novick realises, *Death of a Salesman*, like *Focus*, is a product of Miller’s “generalizing impulse,” and the play can be read as ahistorical. In this way, the dearth of mid-twentieth century American cultural signposts, argues Novick, helps to secure the text as truly universal, tapping into themes that not only capture issues at the heart of a general American

character, but also wholly a universal human experience.<sup>47</sup> Loman's struggle, however, to cement some kind of masculine and individual identity means that the play is representative of the Jewish imagination in the mid-twentieth century; the protagonist's difficulty in finding any fixed notions in which to secure his masculinity and no steady parameters by which to judge how his individuality fits the American cultural environment makes the text exemplar of wider American male experience in the years after the war.

There is a sense that being caught at a crossroads between Jewishness and Americanness would be somewhat of a luxury for the protagonist; instead, Willy is stranded at an unfathomable intersection between youth and experience; meritocracy and agnatic nepotism; lust and love; pride and humility; and, above all, the past, the present, and the future. Willy has become lost in a culture that has seen an investment in the masculine ideal lead him to perform a vacuous and fraudulent manhood. Worse than this, however, is the fact that he has encouraged his son, Biff, to follow in his footsteps and in this way the younger of the two men is the representative accumulation of the bewildered post-war American male; he is the cultural heir of the wartime promotion of a masculine ideal; an ideal that could not be maintained throughout the cultural turmoil that bombarded the boundaries of traditional masculine definition within American post-war culture.

As Willy's wife, Linda, remarks in the very first scene: "He's finding himself, Willy...I think he's still lost...I think he's very lost." Miller suggests that faith in the masculine ideal and an inherited confidence in masculine ideality leads not to the endowment of financial success or social stature but to emotional discontent, unfulfilled selfhood, and, crucially, social redundancy. The two men are the corporeal counterparts to Superman's fantastical embodiment of a liminal being; Willy's admission that he feels "temporary" and Biff's inability to "find himself" illustrates how the two men are in a state of suspension within American culture, unable to find anything tangible against which to measure their place in society or any fixed notions against which to

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<sup>47</sup> Novick, Julius, *Beyond the Golden Door: Jewish American Drama and Jewish American Experience*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, p.49.

formulate their masculine selfhood. The whisper of an ethnic voice within Willy and Biff's identity and the problems that the two men encounter as they attempt to locate themselves within American culture converge at an apex of masculine confusion and anxiety. Miller's play is concerned with how ethnic, individual, national, and community identity meets at a vanishing point of masculinity, positioning *Death of a Salesman* as an exemplar post-war American text. But it also places *Death of a Salesman* within a lineage of cultural artefacts that articulated the preoccupations of the Jewish imagination in the mid-twentieth century. Texts like *Batman*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Body and Soul* that reflected wider trends within both a specifically ethnic and a more universal experience regarding the ambivalence of transition between changing concepts of Jewish, America and masculine identities.

## Chapter Five

### Colouring Consensus: Ethnic Representation in *The Goldbergs* and *12 Angry Men*

“But in an instant, as though green gelatins had been slid one by one in front of every light in the ballroom, she saw the scene differently. She saw a tawdry mockery of sacred things, a bourgeois riot of expense, with a vulgar Jewish sentimentality. The gate of rose behind her was comical; the flower-massed canopy ahead was grotesque...The huge diamond on her right hand capped the vulgarity; she could feel it there; she slid a finger to cover it....she was Shirley, going to a Shirley fate, in a Shirley blaze of sill costly glory.”<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Marjorie Morningstar* (Herman Wouk, 1955)**

On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955, one of the era’s less well remembered authors, Herman Wouk, graced the front cover of *Time* magazine; the occasion was the long-anticipated publication of the author’s novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*. The story follows Marjorie Morgenstern, a member of an upwardly-mobile Jewish American family, as she flirts with bohemia, unsuccessfully pursues a career as an actress (the Marjorie Morningstar of the title), and agonises (at length) over whether or not to lose her virginity to the talented, quixotic Noel Airman, a representative of the liberated intelligentsia. Ultimately she gives herself to Noel, who attempts to become a respectable suitor only to eventually desert Marjorie. The young heroine goes to great lengths to track down her absent beau; eventually, finding him in Paris, she realises that the bohemian and his way of life are not for her. In the end she meets Milton Swartz, an observant Jew and a fifties organization man who offers her a loving family home in the suburbs.

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<sup>1</sup> Wouk, Herman, *Marjorie Morningstar*, Hodder, 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1955), p.556-7

For Wouk, a keen believer in the compatibility of Jewish and American conservative interests, *Marjorie Morningstar* not only cements the passage of the Jewish character into mainstream American identity but also restores the respectability of a pious, satiable, conformist middle-class. For this reason, along with accusations that the novel relies upon codified misogyny and anti-Semitic stereotypes in some of its characterisations of individuals and communities, Wouk's novel has been the subject of much criticism. I see little to gain from exploring at length the charges levelled against *Marjorie Morningstar*, this has already been done well enough elsewhere. Suffice to say, the most vehement attacks come from critics who rightly disagree with the fact that Wouk's novel wholly celebrates the integrity of the bourgeois ideal. Despite her transgressions, Marjorie finds acceptance and self-worth by sacrificing her selfhood at the altar of suburbia. Here, she finds that her true destiny lies not on the stage, but within the fifties family home as a Jewish American wife and mother; indeed, that she is a ruined woman only adds to the suspicion that any deviation from the suburban paradigm proves malign.

Bohemia, meanwhile, is rendered withered, crippled, dirty and deviant; those who choose this path are destined to an unfulfilling life of regret. The "green gelatins" that momentarily discolour Marjorie's vision of her wedding day belong not to the critical eye of the author, but to the imagined pessimism of the bohemian; it is a vision of ceremonious love rendered not in the spirituality of religion, but in the grotesque and absurd rituals of vulgar American consumerism and suburban excess. But the distorted tint quickly disappears, and Marjorie takes the first happy steps down the aisle towards marriage, a nuclear family, and an affluent suburban home full of consumer goods. By the close of the novel we are left in no doubt as to where the author's sympathy lay; the axe that Wouk has ground slowly for the majority of the novel regarding bohemia is swung with a ham-fist and delightful abandon in the final fifty or so pages.

The metaphorical imagery could barely be more obvious; where should Wouk's beautiful protagonist find her wayward lover but in Paris, where the rogue takes her on a tour of Montmartre, the heart of modernism, the bosom of the European bohemian aesthetic, "the fabled world of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway."<sup>2</sup> Noel, a musician who Wouk had already burdened with a deformed arm, has undergone further physical punishment in the form of an illness picked up in Casablanca. Marjorie also finds him in a curious domestic-scenario-cum-romantic-set-up in which Noel pays his rent and funds his way of life by fulfilling the sexual and domestic duties demanded by his landlady, a famous German photographer, Gerda Oberman. The young duo's whirlwind trip around the bohemian mecca of a crepuscular Montmartre culminates in a candle-lit dinner in an exclusive gloomy restaurant; Monsieur Bertie, the proprietor, a World War I pilot and poet who has kept famous French actresses as his mistress, digs out a bottle of Dom Perignon '11, just for Noel (throughout their tour of Montmartre, Noel, "the connoisseur of connoisseurs" has known in each establishment the tippable-of-choice and with a "wink and a whisper to the waiter...out came the special bottle with the special ambrosia."). And so, with the scene of modernist bohemia set, Noel, reminiscent of one of Hemingway's heroes, asks Marjorie to marry him, offering, in the process, an opportunity to be allowed access to the very heart of bohemia. Marjorie's answer is a calm and confident "no".

By the very end of the novel, set some fifteen years after Marjorie's time in Paris, Noel has married Gerda and "ended as a third-rate baldish television writer, with his wife more or less supporting them both."<sup>3</sup> Marjorie, on the other hand, lives a life of suburban indulgence with an affectionate, reliable husband and four children. In short, she has inherited her mother's role in life; her experience of bohemia is a hazy vicarious memory, mostly forgotten, partly revised, like the recollection of a mediocre novel where only those parts that reinforce the superiority of the reader's existence remain. The message is clear – anything outside of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.536.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.560.

normative, nuclear, suburban life with clear delineations of gender roles is an unfulfilled existence. Whilst Marjorie's sexual dalliances have, in both her and her husband's eyes, left her "deformed", her ultimate shunning of bohemia in favour of bourgeois life allowed the young women a redemptive future; Noel, meanwhile, is punished for his continued identification with a life of bohemia, he is crippled, emasculated, ugly, and unsuccessful.

In 1956, Robert E. Fitch argued that what so offended contemporary reviewers like Leslie Fiedler and Norman Podhoretz is the novel's reasoning that bourgeois identification became an inevitability upon reaching maturity, "First of all, childhood and true innocence. Then the adolescent, the rebel, in the shallow innocence of sophistication – the Bohemian. And so at last, the mature, the adult, the respectable – the Bourgeois!"<sup>4</sup> Wouk's intention was to synonymise bohemia with mock adolescent sophistication, and promote the bourgeois life as the true American destiny. The author "is the confident champion of the respectabilities – decency, honor, discipline, authority, sexual fidelity, mother, home, country, and God...His whole novel is a restoration to status and to respectability of that middle class which for so long had been held in derision and contempt."<sup>5</sup> By starting the narrative in the early-1930s, Wouk positions Marjorie's adolescent and rebellious flight-of-fantasy squarely within the culture of liberal expression and left-wing politics that symbolises that decade. Her mature awakening to the puerility of bohemia comes at the cusp of America's entry into World War Two, a time at which the nation began to realise its own interventionist responsibility as a preponderant global power, and a time at which, true to Wouk's beliefs, American and Jewish interests found common ground and a common enemy. When we next meet Marjorie she is comfortably ensconced in the suburban ideal; we can infer that, like every other American, she worried her way through the war, played her part in the baby boom, and indulged in the victorious rewards of American material abundance.

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<sup>4</sup> Fitch, Robert E., "The Bourgeois and the Bohemian," *The Antioch Review*, Vol.16, No.2 (Summer, 1956), pp.131-145, p.132.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.134-5.

Wouk's novel, therefore, is an attempt to embed a conservative cultural myth within the American national consciousness; the analogy of Marjorie's awakening presents the 1930s as a time of immature adolescent rebellion and promotes the 1950s as *the* time at which America has arrived at its true destiny and when all Americans must heed the call to conform. Marjorie's wrong turn into bohemia is a cautionary tale of what happens when you betray your origins and destiny; her refusal of Noel's proposal is presumably intended to be not only an eschewing of all things bohemian, but also a disavowal of anything outside of the suburban nuclear ideal. The author characterises suburbia as a wholly agreeable featureless consensus; free from dissent to which all Americans must capitulate, and where any critique of this middle-class utopia only exists outside of the hermetic, suburban communities and hails from society's malignant dissenting voices.

Other Jewish American texts from this era, however, articulate a much more complex interpretation of the era's attitude towards conformity, suburbia, and consensus. In this chapter I will explore how Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* and Gertrude Berg's long-running comedy-melodrama, *The Goldbergs*, especially the final season of its TV series, articulate ambivalence regarding fifties consensus and conformity. As the social and ethnic mobility of Jewish Americans in the 1950s created greater access to mainstream identity, the experience of Jews mirrored that of many Americans for whom identification with a privileged and affluent white middle-class also meant a sacrificing of a degree of individual agency. Whilst *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs* both contain positive messages regarding consensus culture, they also articulate the need for elements of discord and diversity to continue despite the patriotic and ideological necessity to conform to a restrictive paradigm identity. Wouk's novel represents an idealised middle-class interpretation of how Americans acquiescently adopted conformity; *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs* articulate a complex mainstream identity that colours the myth an anaemic consensus culture.



## **12 Angry Men**

Having been issued with a sombre warning that they “...are faced with a grave responsibility” by a world-weary and listless judge, the twelve assembled jury members take their seats in a sealed and sweltering room overlooking New York City in the midst of a summer heat wave. As an initial vote takes place, however, only one of the jurors in Sidney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men* (1957) seems to heed the caution; the remaining eleven are prepared to send the accused to his death without even a hint of discussion. The defendant is an eighteen-year-old Hispanic kid from a slum neighbourhood; in what is a seemingly open-and-shut case, the young man is accused of having murdered his abusive father during a row. One witness testifies to seeing the killing take place from across the street, another claims to have heard the body hit the floor from his apartment below and to have seen the defendant fleeing the scene. There are some other pieces of circumstantial evidence; hours before the murder, the boy had bought a knife identical to that used for the crime, which he claimed had fallen out of his pocket; neighbours had reported overhearing a heated argument in which the boy had shouted the words “I’ll kill you”; and the boy’s alibi of having been at the cinema at the time of the killing was weakened by the fact that he couldn’t remember simple details about the movies he had seen.

Juror number eight, played by Henry Fonda, although not wholly convinced of the defendant’s innocence, nevertheless resists the majority because he has reasonable doubt about the young man’s culpability. When asked by another juror why he had chosen to vote “not guilty” in the preliminary vote, the dissenting voice answers, “Well, there were eleven votes for guilty, it’s not easy to raise my hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first.” As the film develops, other members of the jury capitulate as the once irrefutable facts of the case are transformed into subjective interpretations and half-truths by Fonda’s reasonable arguments.

Fonda's position of authority doesn't quite share the sense of messianic power that a comic book hero like Superman enjoys; nevertheless, his individual crusade invites deference that simultaneously asserts individual identity and reinforces a cultural consensus founded upon the celebration of masculine ideality. Fonda's character and his construction of consensus refigure national masculinity as an inclusive, altruistic, intelligent, and socially conscious identity that denies agency to unthinking, brawny, paradigm masculinity. Through Fonda the film celebrates a white, middle-class, professional, suburban manhood as the epitome of the American mainstream ideal; yet by inviting disparate identities together in a common dialogue to defend an inner-city slum kid, the film also democratises this aspirational identity and allows room within consensus for the accommodation of individuality and difference.

None of the twelve jury members deciding the fate of the accused have names, merely numbers; in fact, and rather ironically for a film that purports to complicate ascribed identities, the dozen men are merely archetypes, symbolic representatives of a wider American citizenship. In the heated atmosphere of the hermetic jury room, the identity politics of Cold War American culture are played out. Headed by an everyman football coach as foreman, the jury consists of a milquetoast bank clerk; an embittered self-made man; a rational and unemotional intellectual; a restless and solemn slum-kid-done-good; a tough blue-collar worker with old-fashioned principles; an indifferent wise-guy salesman eager to get to the ball game; a passionate and measured liberal; an observant and wise old man; a bigot; a European immigrant; and finally, an "organisation man". We may add the defendant to the list of archetypes; although he appears Hispanic, as Peter Biskind points out, while "...the film suggests that the defendant is a member of a minority group, it is a bit coy about saying just which one. Like the jurors, he is a "symbol"; he stands for all of them."<sup>6</sup> The young man in the

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<sup>6</sup> Biskind, Peter, *Seeing is Believing: Or How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s*, Bloomsbury, 2001, p.11.

dock is a representative of two sections of American society that occupied much cultural discourse throughout the 1950s: the juvenile delinquent and the ethnic other.

There is, however, disparity between the privilege afforded to the jury member's disparate archetypes when measured against the disadvantageous predicament of the singular ethnic defendant. As the film progresses, and despite group differences, the eponymous twelve angry men amalgamate their amorphousness and dissolve their individual peculiarities into a collective consensus identity. Various frictions resolve into one united faction as ideological and sociological fissures are healed through a masculine and cultural compromise. Conversely, after a brief glimpse in the opening scene the defendant is abandoned; although he is the fortunate recipient of consensus reasoning, the beneficiary of ideologically informed collective kindness, he is by this very process excluded from this superior societal grouping. Despite being exonerated, the young man is destined to remain on the other side of the tracks and will never become inculcated by consensus ideology or bestowed with its cultural benefits.

As Peter Biskind has already indicated, only the white, male members of an American mainstream identity are privileged with the task of deciding the fate of the young defendant. Less well studied is the deeper complexion of this pallid consensus, and what this may tell us of ethnic identity within 1950s consensus culture. Within this united group of twelve white men at least half represent an ethnicity of some sort, the most prominent of which is Jewish. A quarter of these assembled men can be seen as Jewish-Americans, given the ethnicity of the actor portraying them; alongside juror number one (Martin Balsam) and juror number five (Jack Klugman) the Jewish trio is completed by juror number three, the most obstinate and unyielding obstacle in this judicial process, played wonderfully by Lee J. Cobb complete with his usual brand of seething antagonism and irritated bruxism.

The contrast, or more precisely the disparity, between the position of the ethnic defendant and that of the ethnic jury members highlights the fact that whilst Jews were allowed to become part of the suburban mainstream middle-class, other ethnicities continued

to be characterised negatively and associated with inner-city, crime-ridden environments that bred poverty, delinquency and criminality. *12 Angry Men* not only articulates the importance of masculine consensus and suburban living within 1950s culture, but also how Jewish distinctiveness, as a form of 'favourable' ethnicity, became absorbed by this collective and centralised identity.

### **Jewish Identity in the 1950s.**

The social politics that *12 Angry Men* articulates, and that which is indicated in the era's social commentary discussed later in this chapter, is representative of how Jews came to be accepted into the fold of mainstream American culture. The movements within American culture that resulted in a wider, more inclusive, but ultimately more homogenised mainstream identity coincided with American Jews' increasing willingness to surrender all but the most superficial aspects of their ethnicity to this consensus American identity. Of course, Judaism remained present in the United States; indeed, the faith enjoyed renewed interest and unprecedented acceptance as a mainstream religion throughout the 1950s. But even this is symptomatic of the fact that, on the level at which most American Jews interacted with their Jewish heritage, religion, and ethnicity, Jewishness had begun to wilt on American soil. Owing in part to American culture becoming increasingly characterised by conformity and homogeneity and in part to a desire on behalf of the Jewish community to revel in the spoils of an affluent, democratic society – a desire that Jews in America had harboured for centuries – as the 1940s moved into the 1950s Jewish Americans adapted more and more to life in the mainstream.

Since their arrival in America, and particularly since the 1820s, Jews had been altering the ways in which they enacted their Jewishness, whether it was via a formal redesign of religious practices, such as that undertaken by Reform Judaism, or a redirection of their belief systems into communal, cultural, and political endeavours such as Communism, Socialism, or the B'nai B'rith. By the post-war years, however, the majority of Jews in America were second or third generation, and whilst many of these Jews were conscious of their ethno-religiosity, they had

been raised in an American environment that promoted their national identity much more than it did their ethnicity. What's more, given the anti-Semitic activity that had escalated throughout the thirties, not to mention the attempted annihilation of Europe's Jewish population, a memory of the persecution endured in Tsarist Russia was not necessary for these post-war Jews to understand the perils of religious or ethnic identification. Thus, after the faith's celebration during the immediate post-war years, in the 1950s the cultural signifiers of a distinct Jewish ethno-religious heritage evaporated, to some extent, amid the increasingly heated cultural, racial, and ideological climate. As Samuel C. Heilman argues:

...in the 1950's the underlying theme of the *Brown* decision – as indeed of the times – was that democracy was a cherished American value and that, as a consequence, no one should be excluded from the mainstream. At the outset, many took this to mean that diversity had to be resolved into homogeneity. The aim of the Supreme Court decision was a fuller integration of black and white, which in 1954 still meant giving blacks (and all others) a chance to be assimilated into white Christian America.<sup>7</sup>

The dilution of Jewish identity was symptomatic of the necessity to follow the flow of the mainstream in post-war culture; yet, historically, Jews had always adopted the traits and traditions of their host culture and managed to maintain a specifically Jewish identity. This identity was, however, usually characterised by discrimination and persecution; Guttman argues that Jews in post-war America discovered that “acceptance in the new world undid them as persecution in the old had not.”<sup>8</sup> Whilst the notion of Jewish identity becoming “undone” in the post-war years is a touch hyperbolic, the spoils of American consumer capitalism did prove tempting and as the mid-twentieth century progressed, the assimilation of Jewish identity accelerated.

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<sup>7</sup> Heilman, Samuel C., *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, University of Washington Press, 1995, p.15.

<sup>8</sup> Guttman, Allen, *The Conversion of Jews in Contemporary American Jewish Literature: Critical Essays*, Indiana University Press, 1973, p.40.

Michelle Mart argues that “amid Cold War pressure to diminish differences among Western peoples, Jews were effectively “Christianised” in the public culture.”<sup>9</sup> Mart posits that hegemonic pressures, combined with a historical connection in Judeo-Christianity, and the pronounced Christian dominated religiosity of American society meant that Judaism became characteristically “Christian” throughout the fifties. Yet Judaism also found acceptance in its own right, as Jonathan D. Sarna points out in his authoritative study, *American Judaism: A History*, “...Judaism’s status as an accepted American faith won striking confirmation in a 1955 bestseller entitled, memorably, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.”<sup>10</sup> The study, written by the Jewish social philosopher, Will Herberg, posited that in order to identify oneself as an American, one must first identify oneself as a follower of Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism. Sarna continues that Herberg’s book:

“...captured the national imagination and shaped subsequent religious discourse. It provided a vocabulary, an explanation, and a new set of boundaries for the restructured American religion that had by then been developing for half a century... [and] also reaffirmed the elevation of Jews to insider status within the hallowed halls of American religion.”<sup>11</sup>

When taken together, Mart’s and Sarna’s arguments suggest that as Judaism gained greater acceptance and enjoyed renewed interest by intrigued Gentiles during the 1950s, it was also had to adapt many of its traditions, practices and most overt ethnic elements.

Sarna further points out that in the post-war years, religion gained greater importance in American culture, due in no small measure to the “threat of “godless” Communism.”<sup>12</sup> To be a good American was to be a religiously observant American, yet the demands of 1950s American life, particularly for the suburban middle classes, made it impractical to observe

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<sup>9</sup> Mart, Michelle, *The “Christianisation” of Israel and Jews in 1950s America*, Religion and American Culture, Vol. 14, No.1. (Winter, 2004), p.131.

<sup>10</sup> Sarna, Jonathan D., *American Judaism: A History*, Yale University Press, 2004, p.275

<sup>11</sup> Sarna also points out the shortcoming of Herberg’s study: “...Herberg practically ignored Evangelical Protestants and blacks and seemed to write off non-believers, Muslims, Buddhists, and other minority faiths entirely.” *American Judaism: A History*, p.275-6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.274.

traditional religious practice. Thus, attendance of the local church or synagogue and celebration of key religious holidays became the accepted way in which Americans could maintain their piety, and that piety surpassed religious proclivity in the measure of an individual's status as an "American". In this environment the religious heterogeneity that had caused cultural fissures during previous decades were transformed into a homogenised and diluted set of multi-faith obligations – at least on the level at which the majority of Americans practised their religion – and Jews largely accepted the invitation to join this newly amalgamated mainstream American religion. In the ideologically charged cultural climate of the 1950s, religion was a way in which American citizens could prove their allegiance to the nation's ideologies and values; for Jewish Americans this meant that for the first time in their history, by overtly enacting their religiosity they were also celebrating their patriotism.

Lest we forget, Heilman reminds us that whilst the post-war assimilatory process was, in many ways, dictated by a movement towards cultural consensus and homogeneity, it was also a process welcomed by a Jewish American community who had continually redesigned both Judaism and Jewishness from the grassroots:

"American culture was inviting because it was ubiquitous, accessible, and offered advantages to those who embraced its norms and values. In the emergent social order of post-war America...the identity one held as a consequence of birth...mattered little if at all. What counted was what a person achieved by dint of his or her own efforts and accomplishments. And since being Jewish was an ascribed status...it became less and less salient...In this new America, where everyone seemed to be starting again, Jews did not have to be outsiders. And they *wanted* to be like everyone else."<sup>13</sup>

The movements within Jewish identity in the post-war period were, therefore, a result of both Jewish choice and societal coercion within American culture. The adaptation to a more mainstream identity resulted in a concomitant 'weakening' of ethnic specificity; and although

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<sup>13</sup> Heilman, Samuel C., *Portrait of American Jews*, p.16.

Judaism and Jewishness itself by no means disappeared, the dilution of ethnic and religious specificity and the collateral subsidence of a rich Jewish culture flavoured with age-old tradition and divine spirituality was the sting in the tail of the pursuing the WASP ideal.

The acceptance of Jews into mainstream America is not only indicative of racial and ethnic transitions within fifties culture, but also of the reconfiguration of class delineations that took place during that decade. Indeed, it is the intricate intertwining relationship between race and class that brought about the Jews' social promotion. As Karin Brodtkin describes, the mass immigration of southern and east Europeans that occurred towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, many of whom were Jews fleeing persecution in their homeland, increased the volume and visibility of ethnic others in America. The concentration of these immigrants within urban environments along with the community's marked poverty created associations between Jewishness (and ethnicity in general) and the working class (the poor tenement dwellers that feature in Odets's plays or small-time gangsters in Polonski's movies).

Concerns regarding the swelling ranks of this ethnic underclass began to reach breaking point after World War I. And with the first Red Scare in 1919, anti-immigrant feelings were coupled with anti-working class sentiments, resulting in an ideologically and racially informed antipathy towards Jews.<sup>14</sup> This antipathy, particularly when practised by the Protestant elite, characterised the Jewish community as poverty-stricken, "unwashed, uncouth, unrefined, loud, and pushy."<sup>15</sup> Connections were made between this characterisation and Jewish ethnicity, meaning that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Americans became racially "different". This not-quite-whiteness was intensified by the curtailment of opportunities for Jews in both education and employment, and, as we have seen, this discrimination was further

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<sup>14</sup> Brodtkin, Karen, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*, Rutgers University Press, 1998, p.27-29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.30.



reinforced when national economic concerns in the 1920s and 1930s fuelled organised and widespread anti-Semitism.

The wealth and material abundance that abounded in the post-war period, however, rapidly expanded the mainstream by augmenting the existing middle-class with a more inclusive white-collar workforce. As Andrew Hoberek explains in his discussion of the Jewish novel in 1950s America, within this cultural climate the position of the Jew and the complexion of Jewish identity became imbued with a familiar ambivalence. The community's entrance into the mainstream was tempered by the enduring presence of Jewish distinctiveness; their elevation to middle-class status nevertheless marked by their ability to embody a synergetic relationship between acceptance and difference.<sup>16</sup>

The post-war affiliation between the Jewish community and the American middle-class necessitated a paradigmatic shift in Jewish economic, social, and political identification as compared to before the war:

Jews entered this period as non-white outsiders associated with foreignness, the working class, and disreputable left-leaning politics, and left it as mainstream white middle-class Americans whose politics, if still to the left of the majority, were now respectably in line with the mainstream liberalism of the era.<sup>17</sup>

The assimilation of Jews into mainstream American identity and their accession of middle-class status indicate that the Jewish community's long quest for acceptance on American soil underwent accelerated fruition during the post-war period. This was due to what Hoberek calls a "complex and over determined process" that was fuelled, in part, by the "American reaction to the Holocaust...; the delayed effect of prewar anti-immigration laws, which cut the number of foreign-born people in the United States to around 8 percent by 1945 and 5.4 percent by 1960; and the "massive internal American migration" of Jews from "East Coast and rust-belt

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<sup>16</sup> Hoberek, Andrew, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.70-1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.71.

inner cities” to “local suburbias and....sun-belt communities...following 1945.” For Hoberek and Brodtkin, however, these ethno-cultural innovations were underlined by two key factors that fed into and catalysed all of the other determinants behind Jews’ acquisition of social status and acceptance: the post-war boom and favourable accommodation of Jews within post-war legislature.

“[The] reorganization of the American economy prompted a parallel reorganization of American social difference into a newly multi-ethnic white majority and a black underclass associated with the inner city. Unlike African Americans, who remained largely excluded from the kinds of white-collar work that underwrote middle-class status, upwardly mobile Jews benefitted from the expansion of the white-collar workforce, whose personal needs helped to override historical anti-Semitism in the job market and in higher education.”<sup>18</sup>

In the post-war period Jews were able to dilute their ethnic difference as racial distinctions became realigned; the social mobility enjoyed by the Jewish community during this time was, unfortunately, accomplished at the expense of the social progress and economic development of other ethnicities:

The myth that Jews pulled themselves up by the bootstraps ignores the fact that it took federal programs to create the conditions whereby the abilities of Jews...could be recognized and rewarded rather than denigrated and denied. The GI Bill and the FHA and VA mortgages, even though they were advertised as open to all, functioned as a set of racial privileges. They were privileges because they were extended to white GIs but not black GIs...Jews and other white ethnics’ upward mobility was due to programs that allowed us to float on a rising economic tide.<sup>19</sup>

The complexion of Jewish identity within the public sphere was effectively whitened during the 1950s and Jewish identity became increasingly centralised, a movement that took place

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.71.

<sup>19</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*, p.50-1.

alongside the preferment of the Jewish faith within the character of American religion, the community's anabasis from largely East Coast urban areas to middle-American suburbia, their admittance into the white-collar workforce and educational institutions, and federal affirmative action programs. These cultural, political, and societal developments within the Jewish character and community resulted in the bestowing of middle-class respectability and a new racial identity upon Jewish Americans.

It is important to draw a distinction, however, between the weakening of ethnic difference and the attenuation of Jewish identity. Jewishness undoubtedly underwent significant changes during the late-forties and throughout the fifties, but as we have seen, the adaptation of Jewish identity to mainstream culture and the quest for acceptance was part of a historical interaction between Jews and America. *12 Angry Men* describes the accelerated integration of Jewishness into a mainstream American character, and also suggests the way in which this process was at the expense of other ethnic groups, but it also asserts how Jewish identity sought accommodation within this newly formed "Americanness." In this way Lumet's feature maintains the exploration of ambivalence within the Jewish imagination and culture, allowing the film to articulate the difficulties faced by a wider American character, as well as an American masculinity, as they encountered these same cultural evolutions.

### **A Textured Consensus: Debate and Difference in *12 Angry Men*.**

David Desser and Lester D. Friedman assert that, perhaps predictably, *12 Angry Men* can be read as a left-wing, anti-conformist treatise on the dangers of McCarthyism and racist practise:

"The jury room, although not quite the frontier of justice of *The Ox-Bow Incident*, represents only the veneer of decorum and fair play, for all of the jury, save one, wish to convict and sentence the accused to death...Fonda's character...shames the others into admitting that their basis for judgement rests on the fact that the defendant is Puerto Rican. Lumet not only makes it abundantly clear that the jurors have stereotyped images of blacks and Puerto

Ricans, but also, and more importantly, that such stereotypes can have tragic consequences.

Conformity, especially when it disguises racism and prejudice, can kill.”<sup>20</sup>

Desser and Friedman offer a justified argument that the film is a cipher for liberal reactions to the on-going Civil Rights struggle in the South; in essence an effective anti-mob, anti-lynching film. Whether they are correct, however, to suggest that the film succeeds in fully repudiating the “go-along” mentality of the fifties is more open to interpretation.<sup>21</sup> In fact, whilst the filmmakers may well have sought to represent cold war conformity through a critical lens, the film’s conclusion sees diverse members of society subsumed by – to borrow Biskind’s terminology – the “corporate-liberal” majority.

This is not to say that the liberal agenda of the movie is wholly undermined, after all, the only jury member truly excluded from this majority is the group’s shamed and outcast bigot, whilst the prejudicial proclivities of other jury members are resolutely quashed, and the innocent (one assumes) defendant avoids being condemned to death largely on the basis of his age and ethnicity. What’s more, the film succeeds in placing the burden of responsibility for crime and delinquency squarely at the feet of factors environmental, sociological, and economic rather than suggesting that it is the result of the innate deviance and maladjusted psychology of an ethnic and disadvantaged youth. The film may well reveal something of American culture’s discriminatory underbelly therefore, but it also betrays the fact that political allegiances and a new ideological emphasis upon the acceptance of those members of society willing to conform to a corporate-liberal, consumption-driven paradigm identity, had eroded the banks of cultural exclusion and flooded the mainstream. In this way *12 Angry Men* presents a dichotomous ideal of consensus identity that homogenises the American male character but which also allows for the inclusion of difference. The attraction of acceptance into the mainstream in the film is undeniable, but rather than seek to undermine the integrity

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<sup>20</sup> Desser, David & Friedman, Lester D., *American Jewish Filmmakers*, University of Illinois Press, 2004 (Second Edition), p.176.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.175.

of consensus or paradigm masculinity, Lumet reinvigorates these identities with fresh characteristics that make the American mainstream and American manhood more multifarious.

Of the eleven jurors who erred on the side of the defendant's condemnation, three remain most convinced of his guilt. Collectively these three jury members embody a conservative American manhood that harbours prejudicial principles and an investment in an outmoded masculine ideal. By creating a consensus composed of ethnic and non-ethnic American male citizens, Fonda is able to overcome a discriminatory and outdated 'hegemonic' masculine identity. He is only able to do this, however, by simultaneously appropriating aspects of corporate conservatism in order to offer a consensus that is widely acceptable. In this way the film functions in a similar way to *Superman*; state institutions and mainstream cultural identity are championed alongside the necessity for accommodation of individual and ethnic representation. By the end of the film there is little doubt as to the aspirational quality of a white, male, suburban identity; but Fonda has also helped fashion in a new masculine paradigm, reinstated individual agency and helped create a more inclusive consensus. Thus the masculine and cultural identities that had heretofore agitated or opposed each other, even in those instance where brotherhood seemed possible, such as Walter and Keyes in *Double Indemnity*, Fred and Newman in *Focus*, Bernard and Willy in *Death of a Salesman*, or even Steve Rogers, Bruce Wayne, and Clark Kent and their various super-alter-egos, are brought into a common cultural dialogue. *12 Angry Men* differs from these texts, therefore, because it seeks to remedy the ambivalence of transition and mediate masculine antagonisms.

The first main dissenter, juror number ten, the bigot, is easily despatched. Having hinted at his narrow-mindedness earlier in the film, and exacerbated by the changing tide of opinion in the room, the man attempts to voice what he appears to believe is an unspoken and shared truth:

“You know how these people lie, it’s born in them. I mean, what the heck, I don’t have to tell you. They don’t know what the truth is. And let me tell you, they don’t need any real big reason to kill someone either. No Sir. They get drunk. Ah, they’re real big drinkers, all of ‘em – you know that – and bang someone’s lying in the gutter. No one’s blaming them for it, that’s the way they are, by nature. You know what I mean, violent...human life don’t mean as much to them as it does to us...”

In what is a memorable if rather theatrical scene, more and more jurors desert the man as his rant continues, leaving the table and taking up position with their back towards the raving and desperate bigot. Finding himself stranded somewhere between bewilderment and realisation, his ideals rendered null and void, his world view collapsing, the juror trails off, defeated. At the next vote, the man resignedly votes “not guilty” in a tacit acceptance that the superiority he has borrowed from the assumed and quietly accepted deviance of ethnics is no longer an approved component of mainstream American male identity. Like Newman’s disavowal of Fred in Miller’s *Focus*, the excommunication of juror ten’s prejudicial and partisan voice indicates that whilst the new masculine ideal is unified and accepting of difference, it will not tolerate prejudice. If we accept the jury room as a microcosm of the nation (one that is perhaps guilty of wishful liberalism), the scene suggests that discriminatory cries now fall upon deaf and disapproving ears from all corners of American society.

The second most stubborn juror is the calm, unflappable, and rational stockbroker, played by E. G. Marshall. This juror’s judgement is not based on personal prejudice or any other criteria born of self-interest; having heard the facts of the case, measured them against his own politics and weighed them against his understanding of the law, this juror has concluded that the defendant is guilty. When these facts are brought into question, however, and the juror is forced to doubt the evidence, he too changes his plea and joins the growing majority. Biskind argues that the capitulation of this juror signals an important shift in attitudes regarding identity, politics, and ideology in 1950s American culture as compared to previous decades. Fonda’s “bleeding heart” liberal is at odds with Marshall’s more conservative outlook;

for Biskind, in the 1930s the two men and the ideals they embody would have fought across schisms carved by the Depression and New Deal politics.

By the 1950s, however, when the United States basked in material abundance, enjoyed economic stability, and marvelled at the era's technological innovation, the two found common ground in a political and social landscape that was becoming increasingly planar. As Biskind argues, in the politicised culture of fifties America, conservatives and liberals forged an allegiance built upon a shared distrust of ideological extremists:

"The components of this new alliance were the moderate wing of the Democratic Party, the so-called "cold-war liberals"...Their counterparts to the right were the "corporate capitalists," the left wing of the Republican Party...it was this "corporate-liberal" alliance of the center, this "bipartisan" coalition of moderates from both parties, who made up the rules of the game...*12 Angry Men* follows this script quite closely...we can determine...that [Fonda] is a "cold-war liberal" precisely because he is engaged in building a bridge to those to the right of himself and bring those to the left along with him. Stockbroker Marshall is, of course, the enlightened corporate capitalist...The understanding between Fonda and Marshall forms the backbone of the corporate-liberal alliance of the center."<sup>22</sup>

Marshall and Fonda's alliance is built upon pragmatism, reason, and justice; the corporate protection of capitalist interests and institutions is tempered by the liberal's compassion for the victim and guardianship of the individual. Their coming-together creates an attractive mainstream American male character that suffuses consensus with an acceptable ideological backbone. Yet concomitant to the forming of this alliance is the eradication of difference; the myriad of dissenting voices and multiple identities are overcome by the force of the majority. For many of the jurors, ipseity is surrendered in exchange for acceptance. This compromise between acceptance and the abandonment of individual identity reflects the ambivalence and trepidation that Jews felt towards assimilation into the mainstream; *12 Angry Men* not only describes the packaging of American identity and the American male within a uniformed,

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<sup>22</sup> Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: Or How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s*, p.14-16.

suburban ideal, but also the specific experience of Jewish Americans as they adapted to the mainstream.

In this way then, *Twelve Angry Men* can be seen as indicative of the way in which identity became central to cultural and political agendas in the fifties. The film describes the invalidation of individuality and overwhelming importance of subscription to a majority identity built upon a corporate-liberal consensus. The capitulation of these eleven men dissolves their differences and homogenises the American male character. It is a condition described in the era's popular social criticism; for in betraying their individuality in favour of pressure from their peers, the eleven jurymen conform to David Riesman's interpretation of fifties identity. They signal the shift from *inner-directed* social characters in charge of their own destiny, to *outer-directed* characters who surrender the administration of their future to an ascendant majority.<sup>23</sup> The group is also representative of the condition described in William H. Whyte's 1956 sociological study, *The Organization Man*, where the author argues that emphasis is placed upon cooperation and collaboration within social groups at the expense of individual agency. In Whyte's analysis, fifties culture witnessed a movement away from a traditional "Protestant Ethic" honed by individual enterprise and instead moved towards a "Social Ethic" characterised by the desire to belong to a group whose collective code of beliefs, aspirations and fears are lent greater importance than those of the individual members.<sup>24</sup> The group in *Twelve Angry Men*, with their faith in facts and the individual's tendency towards yielding agency to the majority, along with the method by which the group arrive at their final

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<sup>23</sup> "What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual – either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course "internalized" in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strive shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life. This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioural conformity, not through drill in behaviour itself...but rather through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others." Riesman, David (with Glazer, Nathan & Denney, Reuel), *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale University Press, 2001 (1<sup>st</sup> published, 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Whyte, William H., *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1956.



not-guilty decision, conform to Whyte's characterization of the identity politics of the decade.<sup>25</sup>

*12 Angry Men* was part of a wider cinematic trend in the 1950s for films in which the courtroom, trials or hearings were integral to the plot and themes: *The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dymtryk, 1954), *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* (Otto Preminger, 1955), *Trial* (Mark Robson, 1955) *The Wrong Man* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956), *Beyond A Reasonable Doubt* (Fritz Lang, 1956), *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmar Daves, 1957) *Witness for the Prosecution* (Billy Wilder, 1957), *I Want to Live* (Robert Wise, 1958), *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959), *Compulsion* (Richard Fleischer, 1959), and *Inherit the Wind* (Stanley Kramer, 1960). Not all of these films in fact featured juries or a trial; some didn't even take place in a courtroom. But the promise of courtroom justice forms the backbone of the narrative arc in each.

The last film in particular, *Inherit the Wind*, along with Arthur Miller's much lauded 1953 stage play, *The Crucible*, both of which incorporated trial scenarios intended as allegorical attacks on the culture of McCarthyism, or at least the social condition for which Joseph McCarthy's name has become a metonym, suggest that this trend within cinematic representation articulated a cultural curiosity that was created not only by the McCarthy hearings, but also the HUAC investigations into Hollywood. Indeed the memory and importance of the Nuremberg trials, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (included the 1954 'comic book hearings'), and the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg could be added to this collective allegory. The inauguration of President Eisenhower notwithstanding, the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings were "the first non-sports mass event in the United States

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<sup>25</sup> "...by Social Ethic I mean that contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual. Its major prepositions are three: a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in "belongingness" as the ultimate need of the individual: and a belief in the application of science to achieve belongingness...Man exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless: only as he collaborates with others does he become worth while, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts." Whyte, William H., *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1956, p.7.

to be broadcast on television,” and the public interest in the tribunal is indicated by the fact that “during the live broadcasts a drastic reduction in shopping was recorded and there was a rapid increase in the number of television sets purchased.”<sup>26</sup>

Of course, there had been trial films and courtroom dramas before in Hollywood that attempted to cross examine American political and social institutions, such as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (Frank Capra, 1939), *Young Mr Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939), or even *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (George Seaton, 1947), but their proliferation and popularity from the mid-fifties onwards and the widespread public interest in high-profile trials suggests that these films, and the judicial process in general, served an important cultural function. Towards the end of Preminger’s *Anatomy of a Murder*, Parnell Emmett McCarthy (Arthur O’Connell) the kindly, inebriate assistant to Paul Biegler (James Stewart), ponders the notion of a jury and suggests why courtroom dramas proved pertinent in fifties America:

Twelve people go off into a room; twelve different minds; twelve different hearts; from twelve different walks of life. Twelve sets of eyes, ears, shapes and sizes. And those twelve people are asked to judge another human being as different from them as they are from each other, and in their judgement they must become of one mind: unanimous. That’s one of the miracles of man’s disorganised soul that they can do it, and in most instances do it right well. God bless juries.

As is indicated in *12 Angry Men*, the jury process offers a scientific, methodical and logical alternative to the challenges of a perniciously disparate Cold War American populace. Of course, different films fulfilled different agendas, *The Wrong Man* or *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, for example, articulated anxieties regarding the possible fallibilities of this process, the consequences of which usually resulted in rendering American males as individuals who were singularly censurable for their actions and as such were ousted from consensus and refused group membership (until, that is, justice prevails and equilibrium is restored). Alternatively,

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<sup>26</sup> Vismann, Cornelia, “Tele-Tribunals: Anatomy of a Medium”, *Grey Room*, No.10 (Winter 2003), pp.5-21, p.7.

films like *3:10 to Yuma* and *I Want to Live* used the law to punish cultural deviants. Nevertheless, these films are united by the fact that judicial unanimity served the purposes of consensus culture; homogeneity solved the problems of political subversion, ideological perversion, and cultural or racial difference. To a general audience, these films offered a comforting vision of the judicial process as an institutional elixir; to a specifically Jewish audience and imagination, the jury process, especially as it is articulated in *12 Angry Men*, mirrored the fact that movement into the mainstream meant becoming a component of the majority. As such, whilst *12 Angry Men* shows how subscription to the ideal necessitated surrendering elements of Jewish cultural distinction, it also articulates the attraction of consensus and mainstream identification in that it indicated an acceptance of their ethnic identity whilst at the same time disavowing discrimination.

Yet *12 Angry Men* also champions individuality and heroic liberalism as the backbone of a successful American male character through the sheer force of Fonda's altruistic determination. Although Fonda is a successful, white, professional, upper middle-class American male and as such his individualism is endorsed by an already accepted consensus identity, and despite the fact that it is only once his "bleeding heart" is pumped with the cold-bloodedness of American corporate-capitalism embodied by Marshall that justice is done, Fonda uses his powerful individual identity and consensus alliance to imbue the centre with liberal ideals and to invite disparate members of American society into consensus culture. Thanks to Mark Jancovich's work on the function of conformity in post-war American culture, we can position Fonda within the context of fifties identity politics and the dynamics of group mentality, both in American culture at-large and within *12 Angry Men's* diegesis. Jancovich illustrates how the exigency to *not* conform, to disassociate oneself from the majority, was an integral part of how individuals sought to enact their identity as good Americans:

...almost every section of society sought to disassociate itself from conformity and to associate the term with those sections from which they wanted to distance themselves...The

conformist was always the degraded Other, a figure whose inferior status could be used to confirm the superiority of the autonomous, individual self. Unthinking conformity was how *other* people behave. In short, the debates over conformity were part of the fierce and complex battles for distinction and authority that distinguished the period.<sup>27</sup>

Analysing Whyte, Jancovich suggests that it was not the desire to conform that characterised fifties America – after all, conformity was symptomatic of a totalitarian and oppressive dogma rather than the democratic, freedom-loving American ideal – but rather the desire to *belong*. Fonda’s aspirational individual identity makes the other jurors want to belong to consensus; it is this trade-off between belonging to a consensus characterised by a desirous individuality and surrendering aspects of individual agency in order to belong that *12 Angry Men* articulates. This ambiguity of acceptance held a special pertinence for Jewish American at this time, but it also affected a more general American identity, as is evidenced by the manifold masculinities on display in the movie as well as the general scope of contemporary social criticism.

The uneasy relationship between individuality and belonging is perhaps most evident in the era’s consumer intemperance. Material abundance looms large in modern cultural recordings of the post-war years; our recollections are dominated by a consumer haven where food, drink, clothing, transport, and sex are assigned the registered trademarks of Coca Cola, Levi’s, Cadillacs, and Playboy. Cultural recollection views the post-war years through kitsch imaginings of brand name endorsed frivolity, and widely condemns consumer voracity as a premeditated attempt by post-war Americans to conform to the era’s repressive and anxious containment culture. In short, fifties culture is criticised for attempting to cover socio-political schisms with the Band-Aid of conformity and consumerism.

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<sup>27</sup> Jancovich, Mark, “Othering Conformity in Post-war America: Intellectuals, the New Middle Classes and the Problem of Cultural Distinctions,” In *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in 50s America*, The University of Birmingham Press, 2000, p.13.

This dovetailing of the era's twin themes of conformity and consumption suggests that Americans bought simply to belong. But within the framework of upward mobility Americans also sought to earn social promotion through material consumption. This practise was encouraged by what Lizabeth Cohen calls "planned obsolescence" whereby mass consumer items were continually and superficially restyled in order to create enduring demand.<sup>28</sup> The consumer's pursuit of status carried with it hope of a procuration of difference endowed with suburban superiority; a better house, model of car, tumble dryer, TV set, or telephone imbued consumer aberration with aspirational connotations.

Jancovich's interpretation of Vance Packard's 1959 study, *The Status Seekers*, suggests that consumers were well versed in the politics of social mobility and understood their position within the established hierarchy. For Packard, consumers surrounded themselves with material signifiers of their social status and whilst they were conscious of the position to which they aspired, they were more acutely aware of the exigency to distance themselves from those lower down suburbia's social structure. Packard thus condemns those advertisers and 'motivation researchers' that sought to massage the fears and buying habits of the masses by playing upon their subconscious anxieties. The maintenance of one's caste, whilst remaining conscious of the need to aspire towards a higher social grouping and avoid the trappings of the lower class, required a skilled understanding of how social hierarchy functioned. As part of a practise that Whyte calls "inconspicuous consumption", the pallid landscape of suburban homogeneity required consumers to develop sensitivity towards any trivial deviances from accepted lifestyle and consumption practices. Thus consumers only sought upward mobility through legitimate and endorsed means that reflected their social standing and reinforced consensus:

*"It is the group that determines when a luxury becomes a necessity. This takes place when there comes together a sort of critical mass. In the early stages, when only a few housewives*

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen, Lizabeth, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-war America*, Vintage Books, 2004 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 2003), p.293-294.

in the block have, say, an automatic dryer, the word-of-mouth praise of its indispensability is restricted. But then, as time goes on and the adjacent housewives follow suit, in a mounting ratio others are exposed to more and more talk about its benefits. Soon the nonpossession of the item becomes an almost unsocial act – an unspoken aspersion of the others' judgement or taste. At this point only the most resolute individualists can hold out, for just as the group punishes its members for buying prematurely, so it punishes them for not buying.”<sup>29</sup>

This social practice is reflected in the identity politics displayed in *12 Angry Men*. Initially Fonda is conspicuous because of his difference from the group; but this very difference becomes desirable because it articulates the aspirational ideals of liberal consensus and upper-middle class respectability that he embodies. Slowly, the other eleven jurors trade their individuality and surrender their personal agency for status and worth within the group as measured against Fonda's aspirational prototype. Eventually, as the pendulum of consensus swings in Fonda's favour, those most entrenched within a “guilty” plea come to be seen as not only denigrating the group's worth, but also of obstructing the judicial process, undermining democratic institutions, and being ruinous to American social practice. Fonda's role within this social relationship is indicative of Jancovich's assessment of Cold War American identity:

“[Cold War liberalism] should be seen as an extremely complex discourse in which consensus was not, as is often argued, synonymous with a repression of dissent and a celebration of conformity...America was not presented as a society that had overcome all its problems, but rather as a society whose superiority to totalitarianism lay precisely in its encouragement of dissent and in its consequent ability to acknowledge, and thus tackle, its problems. In this framework, then, conformity was associated directly with the foreign, totalitarian Other, and nothing was more quintessentially American than the heroic dissenter, of which Martin Luther King would come to be seen as the exemplar by the late 1950s and early 1960s.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Whyte, William H., *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1956, p.314.

<sup>30</sup> Jancovich, “Othering Conformity in Post-war America: Intellectuals, the New Middle Classes and the Problem of Cultural Distinctions,” p.13-14.

Indeed, although the jury in Hollywood cinema reflects the movement, or at least the desire for a movement, towards consensus in wider American culture, the prominence of a judge in most of these films – a superior individual who presides over the fate of individuals and as such the composition of consensus – suggests that aspirational and influential individuals worked to accentuate consensus by epitomising the ideals that informed collective identity. In films like *Anatomy of a Murder* the judge performs a purpose similar to that served by Fonda in *12 Angry Men*. By tempering the prosecution's case with that of the defence the judge acts as a guiding figure whose superiority is institutionally maintained. In this way, both the judge in *Anatomy of a Murder* and Fonda in *12 Angry Men* represent the aspirational or dissenting Other, a figure who served an important function that complemented consensus culture by simultaneously diluting its totalitarian and oppressive nature whilst perfectly embodying an ideal majority identity.

The era produced the truest and most enduring incarnation of the dissenting Other in the figure of the teenager. Unlike Fonda, however, the heroism of this discordant individual was a moot issue; to the younger generation the teenager represented an invigorating alternative to the corporate-liberal consensus. To those who subscribed to this consensus the teenager reflected the concerns and anxieties of America at-large, threatening to adulterate the morality and ideological integrity of the American cultural landscape. In *12 Angry Men*, the young Hispanic functions as a surrogate America in the film's debate over the nation's future; in this way the film also, perhaps unwittingly, reveals duplicity in its attempts to articulate the need for liberalism, and rather succeeds in reflecting the era's pluralism. Whilst Fonda is successful in creating a corporate-liberal consensus that rescues the young man from kneejerk patriots, racial bigots, and ideological extremists (as well as inert everymen), the process also dissolves the young man's individuality and affords agency only to those members of this white masculine consensus identity.

Despite the fact that the film revolves around the fate of this young man, the only time we see him is at the beginning in a shot clearly designed to engender sympathy for the victim. For the remainder of the film, the defendant is mute; his fate rests in the hands of those members of society deemed worthy. Fonda's righteous quest thus allows the audience an opportunity to extricate this young man, align one's self with a moralistic consensus identity, and distance one's self from extremism. Yet it also implicates the viewer in the promotion of consensus; with regards to the Hispanic defendant, the film is as much concerned with self-interest and subscription to group consensus as it is with the plight of the individual.

In light of the complexity that Jancovich identifies within Cold War liberalism, we must be wary of reiterating the simplicity of past interpretations of fifties culture. *12 Angry Men* is not, as Biskind would have us believe, a film that simply pits conservatism against liberalism and brings about a compromise that completely champions consensus. As we will explore in more depth in the next chapter, Biskind's study of fifties cinema is indicative of an estimation of that decade that is intrinsically reductive of the era's cultural complexity. As Pamela Robertson Wojcik recognises, although Biskind "promises to complicate the stereotypical view of the fifties as focused on themes of conformity...for Biskind, the contradictions of the period fall predictably along a liberal-conservative ideological divide."<sup>31</sup> For Biskind, there are only three points on the compass of fifties ideology and culture – conservative; liberal; centrist – and although the author recognises the pluralist vision of *12 Angry Men* there remains in Biskind's rhetoric an air of accusation that the film betrays its liberal proclivities and succumbs unwittingly to consensus reasoning.

By positioning the film somewhere around the centre of a fifties ideological spectrum, Biskind allows the politics of the film's conclusion to engulf the ways in which the composition of consensus is delicately explored throughout the majority of the film. Within the pluralism that Biskind alludes to lies the true nature of the film's agenda; whereas other films that look

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<sup>31</sup> Wojcik, Pamela Robertson, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975*, Duke University Press, 2010, p.18.



at consensus and conformity view this aspect of fifties culture negatively, such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* or *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *12 Angry Men* views consensus as a viable and useful alternative to cultural exclusion. In this way, perhaps the most interesting member of the consensus is juror number eleven, the immigrant watchmaker who is among the first to change his plea. This European émigré, presumably a refugee from the Holocaust, is a proud and upstanding naturalized American citizen; his acceptance into the fold of American masculinity and the institutional acknowledgement of his social standing as a jury member are testament to the way in which certain ethnic Others were granted admission to mainstream American identity.

Although as an archetype the watchmaker is a cipher for the general immigrant experience in America, he is also useful as a representative of Jewish Americans for whom the 1950s signalled a period whereby, after centuries of exclusion, the community found acceptance in its host culture. It is no coincidence that the watchmaker is among the first jurors to change his plea; consensus allows this juror the opportunity to exercise the inclusion that had previously been extended to him by American democracy. And although the character of consensus ultimately fails to succeed in its quest for complete cultural inclusion in the film, the immigrant, ethnic, and working-class members of the jury nevertheless largely seize the opportunity to have Fonda lend legitimacy to their ethnic identity and pluralist ideals.

The acceptance that eluded Ralph Berger, Clark Kent, Steve Rogers, Walter Neff, *Dangling Man's* Joseph, Lawrence Newman, and Willy Loman is granted to the ethnic members of *12 Angry Men's* jury. What's more, this acceptance does not entail a struggle, instead they are offered an invitation by a representative of white, Christian, middle-class America to join mainstream consensus. As we will see, the film is also representative of the fact that cultural acceptance only went so far in fifties America *and* consensus culture necessitated a neutralising of cultural and ethnic difference. That said, by reading the film along a reductive axis of opposing ideologies, Biskind ignores the fact that *12 Angry Men*

articulates a textured consensus that represents the ways in which Jewish identity had been largely accepted into mainstream culture in the 1950s. Indeed, the fact that compromises need to be made in order to be part of consensus makes *12 Angry Men's* vision of pluralism less liberal fantasy and more an accurate representation of Jewish American cultural movements in the mid-twentieth century.

### **Re-Aligned Masculine Ideal.**

The chief antagonist of Sidney Lumet's film and bulwark of the guilty plea among the twelve angry men is juror number three, played by Lee J. Cobb. Whilst juror ten was blinded by bigotry, and juror four was merely remaining loyal to his pragmatic approach to the integrity of facts, for juror number three the defendant becomes representative of his own son, of their failed relationship, of their estrangement, and of his paternal shame:

It's these kids, the way they are nowadays. When I was a kid I used to call my father "Sir."  
That's right, "Sir." Ya ever heard a kid call his father that anymore?...I got one, twenty-two years old. When he was nine years old he ran away from a fight. I saw it, I was so embarrassed I almost threw up. I said "I'm gonna make a man outta you if I have to break you in two trying." Well, I made a man outta him. When he was sixteen we had a fight. Hit me in the jaw – he was a big kid. Haven't seen him in two years. (Laughs) Kids. You work your heart out!

After a certain point, however, once the seemingly watertight case for the prosecution begins to crack under the pressure of reasonable doubt, the man's recalcitrance appears feigned. His bellowing aggression seems to simply be the filibustering of a man who can see the facts clearly but finds greater comfort in the fiction. Cobb is ideal for the role, his performance here, as elsewhere in his career, hints at a personal power that is weakened by exposure to the morality and mores of the public sphere. His self-belief and his identity are damaged by forces outside of his control; in contrast to Fonda, who emblematises aspirational qualities, Cobb embodies ideals that are in contrast to those held by the majority and as such he struggles to

fit comfortably into the cultural hierarchy. The actor is also perfect for the role because the way Cobb speaks gives the impression that, even at his most vicious, the man is merely trying his hardest not to swallow his pride.

As with the other ten jurors who initially entered a guilty plea, Cobb's character eventually realises that his assessment is based not upon the facts as they were presented but in how he interpreted this "factual information" through a lens twice-tinted with prejudice and personal agenda. In the final scene of the film, whilst the rain outside douses the summer's insufferable heatwave just as inside Fonda has extinguished the impetuosity of extremism, Cobb's impassioned and final harangue ends with the defeated man proclaiming, "Kids! You work your life out." The older man measures his masculinity against the success of his son, relying upon the younger man to add meaning to his identity and existence. His son's failure to live up to his expectations has distorted Cobb's outlook; embittered and incomplete he is determined to punish the young man in the dock in lieu of his own son.

*12 Angry Men* tests the composition of fifties identity and masculinity against the ability of consensus to determine the future of America's youth. The young Hispanic on trial is not merely a surrogate for Cobb's son, his plight performs as an allegory for the nation's future. By righteously rescuing the young man in the dock from a premature and unjust death the film presents a reassuring message that the nation's youth, as a symbol of America's destiny, can look forward to a bright future in which consensus can resolve sociological problems. Here, and elsewhere in American cinema of the time such as *High School Confidential* (Jack Arnold, 1958), *The Wild One* (Laszlo Benedek, 1953), *King Creole* (Michael Curtiz, 1958), *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), and *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), fears regarding the plight of America's youth also articulated anxieties regarding the composition of masculinity in a new domesticated suburban environment.

As Elaine Tyler May has shown fifties consumption practices and suburban living were not just indicative of upward mobility but were also intimately related to issues of national

security, the promotion of capitalism over Communism, and the solid establishment of gender roles. In the ideologically entangled utility of suburban life, the firm reconfiguration of distinct social roles for men and women saw husbands embody a dichotomous identity. On the one hand, with women's primary function within the ideological infrastructure of suburbia being that of housekeeper and consumer, men's role as provider became more deeply engrained as the nuclear family came to symbolise a successful and prosperous democratic America. At the same time, however, masculinity also became associated with domestication and men found themselves taking up position next to women within the private sphere.

As well as fulfilling the role of provider, consensus corralled masculinity into the prohibitive environment of the suburban home and this new identity divorced masculinity from its traditional definitions. Physicality and sexuality were replaced with positions within the organisation, contentment reaped from the procurement of home appliances, and the confinement of sedentary life. As Leerom Medovoi points out, by "shifting the terrain of definition for masculinity from production to consumption" this new manhood served to distance fifties masculine identity from the "male-worker identity upon which the spectrum of thirties leftwing culture...had been based." As such, domestic masculinity was part of a movement toward presenting a classless democratic culture that "repudiated "divisive" class politics in favour of a universal sharing of the fruits of American capitalism."<sup>32</sup> We can see this universalism at play in the corporate-liberal consensus forged between Fonda and Marshall in *12 Angry Men*; but given the fact that the ethnic defendant is forbidden from joining the consensus, we also see that, in spite of the celebration of inclusive pluralism performed by the harmonious jury process, an integral component of this process, indeed an integral part of the phenomenon of consensus and suburbia, was cultural exclusion.

Thus in juvenile delinquency films, those things that work to undermine the integrity of fifties domestic masculinity – ethnicity, sexuality, wild-behaviour, the urban working-class,

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<sup>32</sup> Medovoi, Leerom, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, Duke University Press, 2005, p.172.

and, above all, disaffected youth – are either excluded from majority identity or forced to capitulate to consensus ideology. These films articulate anxieties regarding suburban middle-class masculinity by positioning inter-generational conflicts within non-urban environments. The youthful miscreants who possess anti-consensus characteristics thus contrast sharply against the prevailing culture of consensus. *12 Angry Men* and *Blackboard Jungle* differ in this respect because the discourse between domestic masculinity and a wayward youth takes place in an urban environment. In *Blackboard Jungle* the urban slums become an arena in which to explore the inter-generational disunity and the pernicious threat of juvenile delinquency more readily addressed in suburban dramas. But in this film, and in *12 Angry Men*, the protagonists, Fonda and Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford), act as ambassadors for suburban righteousness; in the ideologically-charged inter-generational conflict, Fonda and Dadier acts as suburban missionary Cold War warriors.

Brook's film therefore works in much the same way as *12 Angry Men*; the liberal idealist, white suburban male that embodies an aspirational difference is tasked with rescuing an asocial and outcast youth from apathetic adults and urban decay within a venerable institution. By contradistinguishing between Dadier as the embodiment of consensus and the teenagers (and the other teachers) as representative of a corrosive inner-city upbringing, urban tensions between various ethnicities, and a failing educational institution, *Blackboard Jungle* effectively champions suburbia and conformity. That the film traces the cause of juvenile delinquency back to malfunctioning family units, the lynchpin of American cultural ideology, only reinforces this fact. Despite recognising an ambiguous conclusion in which Gregory Miller's (Sidney Poitier) capitulation retains an insidious and impendent portent, Aram Goudsouzian argues that the film performed an important cultural function, if only superficially so:

"If *Blackboard Jungle* were to please the masses, the danger posed by Miller had to dissolve. The picture thus recreates the pattern from Poitier's earlier films: Miller helps

the white hero, proves himself decent, avoids trampling on racial sensibilities, and illustrates the success of American democracy. The transformation of Miller from cultural threat to loyal citizen upheld Cold War democratic principles, [however] under closer examination the film offers a more ambiguous less comforting outlook than its Hollywood conclusion suggests, But Poitier had tapped into a physical, sexual energy that personified the nation's rifts."<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the intention here is that, much like Fonda in *12 Angry Men*, Dadier is brought from the suburbs to tame the unruly youthful members of fifties society and *teach* them how to function as *proper* Americans; as such, generational tensions are only brought about in the city because of the presence of consensus representation.

Yet Fonda and Dadier's role as suburban representatives goes beyond offering an instructive and reformatory model for America's inner-city youth; they also serve as exemplar American male citizens to urban adults who haven't been swept along by mainstream consensus. *12 Angry Men*, in particular, is concerned with an American masculinity that appears to resist joining the ranks of a new suburban masculine ideal. The relationship between Fonda and Cobb echoes the relationship between opposing masculinities that we have seen evolve throughout the Jewish imagination in the thirties and forties. It is surely no coincidence that Cobb had played Willy Loman in the first production of Miller's play in 1949; Loman and Cobb's character in *12 Angry Men* share the same investment in an outmoded masculine order and the same sense of damaged pride and disappointment in their sons who have failed to inherit the mantle of their specifically coded masculine identity. Fonda also bears comparison to Miller's Bernard, both having eschewed Loman and Cobb's masculine ideal and instead adapted to a cultural climate in which the professional, suburban, home-centred male is bestowed with material security and social stature.

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<sup>33</sup> Goudsouzian, Aram, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon*, The University of California Press, 2004, p.104.

Going back to Medovoi's ideas about how the movement of masculinity to the suburbs offered the opportunity to dissolve class difference and refigure the composition of masculine identity from one of producer to consumer, the reluctance of Cobb to join suburbanite consensus positions the character as representative of a resistant blue-collar masculinity. For this masculinity to yield agency to a suburban majority necessitates admitting a shift in masculine ideality, but the sheer force of consensus overwhelms Cobb's stand and he ultimately joins the spectrum of masculinity that is amalgamated by suburban existence. This makes Cobb an unusual character in the mid-century Jewish imagination; whereas in the previous texts that we have looked at in this thesis, both ours' and the authors' sympathies lay with these excluded members of a cultural under-class or dissent-cum-different masculine identity, here Cobb comes to represent an obstacle to the universalism of affluence and abundance. The man's recalcitrance indicates anxieties regarding a power-shift within masculine ideality; whereas before Cobb's mode of masculinity functioned as an almost insurmountable impediment that hindered the progress or led to the downfall of the sympathetic protagonist, Fred in *Focus*, the gangsters in *Body and Soul*, or the free-floating masculine ideality that Joseph struggles against in *Dangling Man*, *12 Angry Men* shows how the force of consensus reasoning can overcome a masculinity that is opposed to inclusion and progress.

*12 Angry Men*, therefore is just as interested in re-aligning American male ideality as it is with promoting an accommodating and textured consensus culture. Fonda and Cobb function as opposite ends of the spectrum of American masculine identity – remaining true to Packard's theory that fifties American citizens were conscious of both the identities to which they aspired and those from which they sought to distance themselves. As Fonda's identity and perspective gains momentum, the other jury members become more and more aware of the exigency to disassociate themselves from the masculine ideal embodied by Cobb. Whereas *Dangling Man*, *Double Indemnity*, *Batman*, *Focus*, and *Awake & Sing!* critique a central paradigm masculinity and construct an alternative male identity that is inevitably positioned in

opposition, *12 Angry Men* seeks to reinforce a more inclusive consensus culture that offers the opportunity for inclusion of differing identities, if not necessarily dissenting voices.

## **The Goldbergs**

Nowhere is the transitional process between an ethnic inner-city identity to a suburban, 'whiteness' more apparent than in the widely popular radio and television melodrama-cum-sitcom, *The Goldbergs*. Gertrude Berg's show had been charting the movement of Jewish identity within American culture since the late-twenties and had throughout that period maintained a universal appeal built around the themes of upward mobility and familial experience. Like *12 Angry Men*, the show's premise championed an abundant suburban middle-class identity as the most successful and viable manner in which Jewishness could gain acceptance whilst retaining an element of cultural distinctiveness. In a similar way to Lumet's film, *The Goldbergs* also sought to complicate the complexion of consensus by making visible the Jewish presence in suburban enclaves. Yet given the matriarchal focus of the show, *The Goldbergs* moves beyond *12 Angry Men*'s debate about masculinity and instead addresses the issue of how women fit into suburban patriarchy. Moreover, the show, whilst promoting the benefits of suburban identity, nevertheless contains a mood of regret and reminiscence about a Jewish identity left behind in urban tenements. In this way, *The Goldbergs* further articulates the ambivalence of transition that accompanied the cultural movements towards suburban identity, for both a specifically Jewish and a more general American audience.

Created, written, and produced by Gertrude Berg, who also starred as Molly, an amiable and nurturing *baleboste*, *The Goldbergs* began in 1929 as a weekly radio broadcast called *The Rise of the Goldbergs* that charted the day-to-day existence of the Goldberg family. It struck a chord similar to that of *Awake & Sing!*, representing those Jewish-Americans abiding in New York tenements until their aspirations of American middle-class status are actualised. 'Popular' barely begins to cover the repute of Berg's creation; as Weber notes, at a time when radio acted as a cohesive comforter for a vast number of disparate and disaffected sections of



American society, *The Rise of the Goldbergs* (later just *The Goldbergs*) was perhaps second only to *Amos 'n' Andy* in terms of popularity and matched the way in which that show articulated the prevailing mood of American culture.<sup>34</sup>

By 1931 the show was being broadcast daily and its massive success was down to the fact that Molly and her Jewish-American family's quest for self-betterment and higher social status, as well as their day-to-day experiences, resonated with large swathes of the American populace. Having mothered the nation through the Depression and the 1930's, Molly, along with husband Jake, daughter Rosie, and son Sammy, approached the war decidedly better off than they had been ten years previously. Throughout the thirties and into the forties, through hard work, familial unity, community spirit, and an investment in the importance of upward mobility, the Goldbergs moved from their urban abode to more affluent suburban surroundings. For Depression-era, wartime, and post-war audiences *The Goldbergs* offered light comic relief as well as an instructive prototypical example of how their desires for social advancement could be realised. The continued quest for social promotion, along with the long-running and universal theme of motherhood and the exploration of familial trials, tribulations, triumphs and tragedy meant that the Yinglish voice and ethnic peculiarities of *The Goldbergs* succeeded in representing the lives of many Americans.

In 1949 the show made the transition to television and the narrative premise of upward mobility was replayed on the small-screen. For five years the family remained in the Bronx until, on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1955, they moved to the fictional suburb of Haverville. The transition from an inner-city ethnic environment to a uniform bedroom community reflected both the geographical changes experienced by Jews in America at this time and, as Vincent Brook argues, a movement away from urban-based and characteristically ethnic programming within the American television industry (the two were not, of course, mutually exclusive) . As with the

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<sup>34</sup> Weber, Donald, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs*, Indiana University Press, 2005, p.127

Jewish community's large-scale migration to the suburbs, the Goldberg's journey to Haverville necessitated a dramatic shift in the family's identity and lifestyle:

The show's ethnic flavor and working-class milieu were also instantly homogenized by bland, prosperous Haverville. Molly's Yiddishisms, neighborly chats, and gefilte fish seemed out of place in the Waspish enclave and banished completely were her window monologues delivered in direct address to the television audience. Without the monologues and surrounded by a family that suddenly flocked Father Knows Best-style around Papa Jake on his return from work (work that, after all, had blessed them with their bountiful new surroundings), thoroughly domesticated Molly was no longer even the center of the Goldberg universe. When DuMont cancelled the program the following year, the termination seemed somewhat of a mercy killing.<sup>35</sup>

Brook's analysis further describes the ways in which the Goldberg's move meant the abandonment of ethnic peculiarities and Jewish heritage; the selling of family heirlooms and old furniture indicated a severing of links to an outsider, inner-city past; Jewish neighbours and tenement intimacy are replaced by ones distant and non-denominational; kosher butchers are eschewed, whilst Passover and Yom Kippur are conspicuous by their absence, all of which correspond with the Jewish community's acceptance into the homogeneous religiosity of mid-fifties suburbia. For a show that had never previously shied away from tackling pertinent Jewish social problems, however, for Brook the most glaring impact that the transition had was that opportunities to address issues affecting the Jewish community's arrival in, and adjustment to, suburban middle-class America were left unexplored.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Brook, Vincent, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got "Berg-larized in the Process), *Cinema Journal*, Vol.38, No.4 (Summer 1999), pp.45-67, p.45-6.

<sup>36</sup> "The show does not deal with Jewish issues or consciously avoids them. Thus, when Molly is initially rejected by her neighbors because of a misunderstanding, one would think that someone in her family might have suggested the possibility of anti-Semitism ("Social Butterfly," September 29, 1955) [or] when daughter Rosie suddenly becomes obsessed with her "ugly" nose and insists on having plastic surgery, the show refuses this obvious invitation to confront ethnic stereotyping in the non-Jewish neighborhood ("Rosie's Nose," October 27, 1955)." Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got "Berg-larized in the Process), pp.45-67.

Although Brook argues that the Goldberg's suburban environment was influenced by the family's ethnic identity – a reciprocal relationship for which the author coins the phrase “Berg-larized” – the author ultimately concedes that this process is overwhelmed by the homogenising force of suburban existence. Despite the Yiddish-isms, malapropisms, and Vaudeville-inspired sexual innuendo having remained largely intact in Haverville, the suburban milieu had largely neutralised the Goldberg's ethnicity. Weber's analysis supports the conclusions that can be taken from Brook's article; the author points out that the family's switch from urban to suburban, implicating the diminishment of religious and political themes, meant that the family embodied “...what, in 1956, the sociologist Herbert Gans labelled “symbolic Judaism,” a term he later enlarged into “symbolic ethnicity” – a religious-cultural outlook linked in the fifties to the phenomenon of middle-class arrival.”<sup>37</sup>

In its quarter-century history, *The Goldbergs* had adroitly straddled both the dividing line between Jewish and American identity and the economic and social discord between working- and middle-class experience, thus appealing to both ethnic and non-ethnic American audiences. More than this, however, thanks to Gertrude Berg's exact perspicacity, the show described the experience of navigating the space between these various identities, articulating nostalgic yearnings for past traditions, an aching desire for economic stability, an anxious appetite for social advancement, and an aspirational coveting of material rewards enjoyed by America's middle-class. Come the mid-fifties, however, the realisation of the much strived for social status put an end to the vitality of the show's premise by resolving the overarching narrative impetus and indicated that the family's symbolic ethnic difference was out of tune with the cultural movement towards consensus.

As suggested by Brook, the capitulation to middle-class provinciality seemed to be completed when the suburban series saw a realignment of the family's focus so that the kindred unit concentrated upon the patriarch Jake rather than the buxom guardianship offered

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<sup>37</sup> Weber, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs*, p.145

by Molly. Yet much of the literature relating to *The Goldbergs* deals with the importance of the family's matriarch. Joyce Antler, for example, argues that "...Berg's conception of Molly as Jewish mother, gave [the show] a distinctive perch with which to view – yet also challenge – traditional expectations of Jewish assimilation and the Jewish family's relation to the outside world." And while the author concedes that "...as the Goldberg family negotiated a new middle-class status...Molly's inflexible, un-self-reflexive husband, Jake, increasingly claims center television stage at Molly's expense," Antler maintains that Molly stands firm as the influential heart of the family.<sup>38</sup> Brook comes to a similar conclusion; although the author recognises how the familial orientation of the programme shifted towards Papa in the show's ultimate series, the author's argument that the Goldberg's "Berg-larized" the changing focus of the suburban sitcom in the mid-fifties relies upon Molly's attempts to undermine patriarchy in the diegetic, industrial, and wider cultural contexts.

Citing two episodes, *Molly's Pocketbook* (Dec, 1955) and *Dreams* (Nov, 1955), Brook illustrates how Berg contrived to challenge the patriarchal hegemony of suburbia:

*The Goldbergs*, while certainly capitulating to the homogenizing forces of mid-fifties television and society, also fought back. Molly and family may have been Americanized, but their neighbors were, to a certain extent, Semiticized. Molly lost her window monologue, but she was also encouraged to get out into the world. The women of Haverville were punished for seeking greater parity with men, but their dissatisfaction was at least acknowledged and to some extent redeemed. Assimilated into the suburban middle class and absorbed by the Father Knows Best-style sitcom, *The Goldbergs* relinquished its working-class roots and denied much of its Jewishness. But the program also tapped oppositional strands in the domestic melodrama to occasionally plead, however ambivalently, a progressive case.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Antler, Joyce, ""Yesterday's Woman," *Today's Moral Guide: Molly Goldberg as Jewish Mother.*" Key Texts in American Jewish Culture, pp.129-146, p.130.

<sup>39</sup>Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got "Berg-larized in the Process), p.62.

While Brook's examples articulate this progressive transgression of women in the masculine suburban environment, as the author realises, their narrative structures ultimately succeed in reinforcing patriarchal order. Less temporary is the violation of patriarchal norms and the championing of matriarchy that can be seen in *Member of the Jury*, an episode that, coincidentally, bears a strong resemblance to *12 Angry Men* (it seems clear that Berg must have drawn inspiration from Schaffner's 1954 television version).

The episode sees Molly, proud to have been selected for jury duty, sitting on the case of an accused pickpocket. Once sequestered in the jury room, the housewife delights in arguing that all the evidence against the accused is circumstantial and, as in *Twelve Angry Men*, ultimately succeeds in convincing the other eleven jury members to deliver a "not-guilty" verdict. Sometime later that evening, when Molly is recounting the day's events to the rest of the Goldberg family, the accused, Frank Clark, arrives unannounced to express his gratitude. After inviting him in and offering the man the benefit of the family's usual hospitality, Molly's watch goes missing. Suspecting the visitor of the misdemeanour, Jake insists upon calling the police, and whilst waiting for them to arrive Molly attempts to coax the accused into admitting the crime. With a knock at the door, Frank gives Molly an envelope that presumably contains the stolen watch and she hastily (and generously, given her suspicions) ushers Frank out of the backdoor. At the front door, meanwhile, the garbage man hands Jake the lost watch that he had found in the garbage. Opening the envelope Molly finds a different watch with a note that reads "If it wasn't for you, I'd be doing time. So here's a token to remind you of me. Keep ticking. Frank Clark."

The narrative here offers forceful evidence that Berg was attempting to undermine the integrity of the accepted patriarchal order. Unlike in the episodes discussed by Brook, Molly does not transgress from her assigned societal position under her own free will, rather, she is invited to leave the home by the state judicial institution in order to take a privileged position in the venerable and respected jury process, acting as the jury foreman no less. Berg thus

begins the process by presenting an idealised vision in which women are treated as equal within American institutions and fifties culture. The most interesting aspect of this episode, however, is what happens from here on in; by convincing the eleven all-male members of the jury to acquit the accused, Molly not only resists the necessity to accede to the dominant patriarchal order, but also refuses to be consumed by consensus identity.

After having counted out the votes, an eleven to one split, Molly points out that the verdict is still not unanimous, to which another jury member exasperatedly retorts, "We're all unanimous but you!" Molly refuses to submit to the depreciative nature of unanimity and masculine consensus; her quest, however, is not merely a frivolous act undertaken in an attempt to instate feminine dominance. Rather, the housewife's defiance is born of the same faith in the American institution of righteous judicial process that spurs Fonda's recalcitrance in *12 Angry Men*, a faith that is informed in both characters by the liberal's emotional investment in the importance of fairness and freedom. Yet, whilst in *12 Angry Men* the jury are encouraged to capitulate because of Fonda's aspirational function within the composition of consensus, Molly carries none of this societal weight. Thus her desire for acquittal is both symptomatic of the character's loving maternal nature and indicative of a defiant dismissal of the patriarchal norms that form the backbone of a reductive consensus culture.

The importance of the accused's character and the notion of time represented by the watch also play a vital role in Gertrude Berg's attack on the exclusivity of suburban homogenised identity. Whilst there are plenty of older males represented on the jury, the accused, Frank, seems to belong to an older era, reminiscent of a Depression-era hobo, and is incongruous to the paradigm character of consensus culture. Molly feels empathy for Frank too because she is, by her own admission, a "woman of yesterday", despite her adaptability to this new middle-class identity. In the same way that the majority seek to exclude the ethnic deviant in *12 Angry Men* because he embodies a difference that threatens the integrity of consensus, the majority of the jury in this episode of *The Goldberg's* attempt to exclude Frank

because he embodies an outmoded brand of masculinity and represents an impoverished, retrospective American culture that is out of sync with the modern American way. Molly has been able to successfully assimilate her ethnicity and update her values and practices to better fit consensus identity; her reward for this is suburban residency and to be allowed to take her place on a jury in the bosom of an American institution.

With her steadfast investment in the letter of the law, Molly uses this opportunity to form an alliance with Frank, whom she sees as a kindred spirit from yesteryear, allowing him access to consensus culture and, by inviting the man into her home, suburban identity. Even when she suspects him of stealing her watch she refuses to hand him over; indeed, in her attempt to persuade Frank to confess his sin, Molly implies a shared understanding of forgotten values, (“What does a child learn when he is knee-high like a grasshopper? Thou shalt not, what, Mr. Clark...?”) This empathy suggests that Molly believes Frank’s actions are the result of him being excluded, or forgotten, by consensus identity rather than an innate deviance of cultural Others. When, at the end of the episode, Molly and Jake find that Frank didn’t steal the watch (and thus we are led to believe, didn’t commit the crime for which he was being tried) Molly’s instincts are proven correct and her judgement of Frank is granted authenticity by the judicial institution.

Thus, despite collectively embodying an ethnic, impoverished, anachronous character, the alliance that Molly and Frank have forged penetrates into the heart of suburban consensus, successfully undermining the limited exclusivity of middle-class identity. By making Frank reminiscent of the early-1930s, the time of *The Goldbergs*’ (ethnic) heyday, Berg also uses the character and their collective triumph over consensus culture to critique the erasing of ethnic peculiarity and diversity in mid-fifties American culture and television programming. The two watches that drive the narrative are symbolic of a forgotten era; the watch that Molly loses symbolises the old traditions and working-class values that she has left behind, thrown out with the garbage and lost amongst the pre-occupations of suburban life; the watch that

Frank gifts to Molly is symbolic of how their common embodiment of a time-passed has surreptitiously infiltrated the white, middle-class, masculine terrain of Haverville.

In *12 Angry Men*, of course, the immigrant experience is also connected to the notion of time through the figure of the watchmaker, and although the purpose of this may merely be to imbue his archetype with an artisanal, European aesthetic, this is in itself reminiscent of a time and an identity that belongs primarily in the past. As Biskind illustrates, *12 Angry Men* articulates an evolution in political and ideological divisions and identities as compared to the 1930s, and, although *The Goldbergs* more obviously harks back to the thirties in a nostalgic lament that mourns the passing of personal and ethnic traditions, *12 Angry Men* also regrets the loss of individuality and visible ethnic diversity within fifties consensus.

In this respect Frank in *The Goldbergs* is similar in character to the first juror to change their plea in *12 Angry Men*, juror number nine, a thoughtful old man whose opinion is disregarded by most of the other jurors but respected and defended by Fonda. These two characters can be read as the aged version of those disaffected and disadvantaged young men who occupied the Jewish imagination in the thirties and forties. Ralph Berger in *Awake & Sing!*, Clark Kent in *Superman*, and Joseph in *Dangling Man* were locked out of the mainstream, their individual and ethnic identity denied; the alliances forged between the protagonists of the *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs* and the elderly and ignored men indicates their authors' belief that consensus and affluent suburban identity can offer a useful method through which those previously excluded and ostracised from the fruits of the American mainstream can find accommodation in American culture. In the final scene of *12 Angry Men*, Fonda and his older ally meet on the steps outside the courtroom and exchange handshakes and, significantly, their names. Although within the jury room both men willingly became an integral component of consensus culture, they each offer the other an individual identity on the threshold of a state institution. Like the relationship between Molly and Frank, the younger of the two respects the elder for their struggles in the past and contrives to include their embodiment of



individual identity within the complexion of consensus. The older man recognises the necessity to yield his individuality to a consensus identity that offers the opportunity to imbue once excluded identities with shared agency.

The two texts recognise that the American paradigm identity is constructed upon the narrow characteristics of the white suburban middle-classes, but they also realise that acceptance into this mainstream character is a privileged step forward for Jewish Americans. They nevertheless harbour a desire for an American *beau ideal* that can accommodate greater diversity and that doesn't necessitate the abandonment of ethnic specificity, the dilution of individuality, or the exclusion of those members of American society who fail to fulfil the paradigmatic ideal.

This brings us back, after a fashion, to Wouk's immensely popular novel *Marjorie Morningstar*, which, as discussed at the very beginning of this chapter, functions as an instructional treatise on the adoption of fifties conservative conformist imperatives and the eschewing of thirties bohemia, or, when interpreted more widely, thirties leftist politics. Whilst it could be argued that *Marjorie Morningstar* petitions for Jewish representation within contemporary American identity, Wouk's mode of Jewish identity concedes to WASPish superiority; it is the acceptable form of Jewishness that is representative of the patriotic religiosity discussed earlier and of Herbert Gans's notion of "symbolic Judaism." Thus, where *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs* seek to complicate consensus culture and colour its pallor by promoting visible ethnic representation among the ranks of middle-class America, *Marjorie Morningstar* encourages the abandonment of ethnic specificity and a wholesale subscription to the imperatives and characteristics of the American conservative paradigm.

### **On the Banks of the Mainstream: Suburban Discontent and Urban Alternatives in the 1950s Jewish Imagination**

In the previous chapter both *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs* were shown to articulate the ambivalence and trepidation with which the Jewish community approached entry into the American mainstream whilst also petitioning for the accommodation of Jewish distinctiveness and individual identity within suburban consensus culture. That said, the attraction and superior status of suburbia remained intact in these texts and consensus was promoted as the only viable way in which Jewish identity could successfully retain elements of cultural distinctiveness. Alongside this, general American identity was suggested to be improved by consensus culture and suburban unity shown to re-align and accommodate a healthy masculine ideality. Whilst the leitmotifs of transitional ambivalence and sympathy for the outsider were maintained in these Jewish authored texts therefore, to use their perspective as singularly representative of fifties Jewish experience and wider American culture proves reductive.

Elsewhere in Jewish American cultural expression, suburbia and consensus were shown to actually have an atrophying effect on masculine and individual identity; in cinema especially (perhaps exacerbated by the persecutory atmosphere brought about in Hollywood by the HUAC investigations and subsequent blacklist) films like *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1951), *Terror in a Texas Town* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1958), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Robert Wise, 1956) and the film analysed in this chapter, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, portrayed a mainstream where American males were abandoned and forced to fend for themselves amid a

culture of domestic homogeneity and anxious, obedient uniformity. More than this, the Jewish imagination also helped envisage alternatives to suburban existence, where urban culture could offer benefits to masculine and individual identity that were denied to those who invested in the suburban myth. Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, for example, although not completely supportive of the notion that an urban lifestyle better provided for American masculinity, nevertheless shows an urban abode that critiques suburban culture. The married "organization men" who use C.C. Baxter's (Jack Lemmon) bachelor pad for their illicit liaisons are seen to undermine suburban ideals of the home, built as they are upon supposedly solid foundations of family, fidelity and morality.

In Philip Roth's debut novella, *Goodbye Columbus*, suburban culture and the assimilationist drama of Jews into this affluent milieu is similarly critiqued; yet the text brilliantly captures the ambivalence of transition to this world by casting its protagonists as caught between what Andrew Hoberek calls, "a residual urban, working-class version of Jewishness" and a suburban melodrama of middle-class Jewish identification.<sup>1</sup> Although Hoberek figures Neil Klugman as a representative of the post-war Jewish intellectual, we can apply the author's analysis more generally to our investigations into the Jewish imagination. Klugman is "at once both inside and outside the new suburban middle-class Jewish world: inside enough to understand it, outside enough to critique it," and as such can be understood as representative of how Jewish artists approached the space between suburban, middle-class consensus and not only Jewishness, but also individuality, ethnic and community distinctiveness, and masculine difference.<sup>2</sup>

Trepidation regarding American Jews' emergence into the middle-class and their adaptation into American mainstream identity had filtered into Jewish American cultural production around this time, resulting in cultural artefacts that accommodate ambiguous

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<sup>1</sup> Hoberek, Andrew, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.91.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.94.

meanings regarding this change of identity and conflicting treatises on American culture and Jewish identity. In this chapter, I will analyse how Jewish artists sought to undermine the hermetic ideality of suburban existence and how it impacted upon and restricted the diversity of individual and masculine identity. More than this, however, the chapter will address how the Jewish imagination explored alternative experiences, particularly representations of urban living that were not measured against suburban ideality or singular notions of the suburban home. The centuries long association between Jewishness and the city, along with the residual working-class Jewish (and more widely, ethnic) communities that Hoberek refers to and which exist outside of the suburban myth of the fifties, allow us to complicate our understanding of that decade and also show how the Jewish imagination not only articulated the ambivalence of transition from within an inculcated middle-class perspective, but also across the breadth of American cultural experience.

### ***The Incredible Shrinking Man: Suburban Existence and the Masculine Condition***

Given the fact that since the industry's very beginnings Hollywood's Jewish moguls had sought to use the medium to represent an idyllic interpretation of middle-American identity, it should perhaps come as little surprise that many of the films produced by Jewish filmmakers in the fifties articulated more middle-class concerns. The movement of the Jewish community into the mainstream is reflected in this cinema. The ability to articulate both the concerns of a specifically Jewish audience and middle-class American identity can be seen as somewhat incidental in previous decades, or the Jewish imagination articulated the experience of a 'satellite' identity and the experience of existing on the periphery of the mainstream. In the 1950s, however, Jews largely found themselves to be an implicit part of this mainstream identity and were thus inculcated with its ideals, beliefs, and practices, as well as its anxieties and concerns. Therefore, even texts like *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs*, that sought to explore a liberal agenda, still contained themes, settings, and intrinsic meanings that succumbed to bourgeois anxieties.

In this way, a hint of what was to come later on in the decade can be seen in Robert Wise's 1951 sci-fi invasion feature, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The film sees an alien, Klaatu (Michael Rennie), along with an extra-terrestrial policing humanoid, Gort (Lock Martin), descend from the heavens to land in Washington D.C. and deliver a cautionary plea that the nations of Earth must cease fighting one another or risk complete annihilation. Upon arrival Klaatu is shot and injured by a nervous soldier whereupon he is taken to hospital and the doctors get to observe his extraordinary healing powers. Determined to speak to either all of the representatives of Earth at once or not at all, Klaatu is hindered by petty bureaucracy and international disagreements; escaping from his protective custody at the hospital, the intergalactic visitor takes residency at a local boarding house and mingles among Earth's denizens under an assumed identity. Seeing that a meeting with the political parties of Earth is impossible, Klaatu contrives to meet with the planet's scientists in order to deliver his admonishment. Before this meeting occurs, however, Klaatu's identity is uncovered, and, whilst attempting to reach the sanctity of his spacecraft he is shot and killed. After a Christ-like resurrection (his assumed name is Mr Carpenter!), made possible by his planet's superior technology and healthcare, Klaatu issues a parting censure to the world's warring factions before finally departing.

The film appears to critique Cold War paranoia and the concomitant exclusivity of American consensus identity, offering an interpretation of this culture that hopes to inspire an ideological epiphany in those unable to recognise the irrationality of unthinking conformity and the unacceptability of a cold war "witch-hunt" mentality. This is certainly how many critics interpret the film; as Mark Jancovich has discussed in his authoritative study, *Rational Fears*, reviewers like Bruce Kawin argue that the film champions intellect, reasoning and rational thinking, whilst Peter Biskind sees the picture as a left-wing critical appraisal of fifties containment culture that, like Kawin's analysis, suggests that the film works against a prevailing conservative authority at that time. In Jancovich's assessment, however, *The Day*

*the Earth Stood Still* advocates acquiescence to a wholly universal consensus culture and supports hegemonic ideals:

[The film] calls for the repression of individual feelings, interests and desires, all of which are simply defined as both irrational and destructive. This repression is necessary in order to ensure the efficient running of a state which is not mere national or even international, but a fully 'universal' order...Unfortunately for Biskind, and for others who defend this film as a critic of Cold War ideology, it was this rhetoric of universalism over particularism which American used to justify its Cold War politics...In this film, individualism is merely irrational selfishness...It hardly offers the image of a society in which humans can live more fulfilling lives, and simply calls for the repression of individual desires before an authoritative state...Instead of representing difference, the film demands rigid conformity to the universal order, an order from which there can be no valid dissent.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between the opposing pieces of scholarship is intriguing; although it is Jancovich who argues that the film is representative of a conservative containment culture, as we have already seen in the analysis of *12 Angry Men* and Jancovich's discussions regarding 'othering conformity', the author of *Rational Fears* is interested in complicating the traditional scholarly interpretation of 1950s as a period of unconscious conformity. Kawin's and Biskind's analysis, on the other hand, is symptomatic of this traditional approach, relying upon a dominant image of 1950s America that characterises the decade as mindlessly middle-class, nervously conformist, consumption-driven, and suburb-orientated.

This creates a metanarrative of the mid-century in American culture that is by now well known to us. In our mind's eye and collective cultural consciousness the story of the forties and fifties fits into simple binaries that are neatly divided along ideological and political axes. McCarthyism, suburbia, and the Cold War combine to create an image of conformity,

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<sup>3</sup> Jancovich, Mark, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*, Manchester University Press, 1996, p.41-46.

conservatism, repression and fear against which Rock 'n' Roll, the teenager, and multiculturalism rebelled. It is a history that tends to be viewed through the most stylised of visual representations. From the very beginning suburbia existed in its own aesthetic legend by having its ethics and codes largely formed through advertising. In pop culture naïve renderings of futuristic flying objects hum across celluloid skies, while down on earth Presley's hips gyrate to the sound of a new Beat and shake off the shackles of paranoia and parental control, all the while children duck for cover as yet another mushroom cloud looms overhead. Intrinsic to this understanding is an eagerness to create an opposition between an overarching conservative culture and a heroic dissenting counter-culture. Indeed, both Kawin and Jancovich compare *The Day the Earth Stood Still* against *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) in precisely these terms; mapping out each articulates their own opposing aspects of fifties culture. And although Jancovich only does this in order to remedy what he sees as the erroneous or simplistic conclusions of the earlier scholarship the effect is that the dualistic character of fifties Cold War culture becomes more deeply engrained in the literature.

Our view of 1950s culture is further complicated by the fact that the era's Hollywood features and, even more so, its television programmes were conceived within their own aesthetic myth. As Fredric Jameson points out, it is predominantly the decade's TV serials "...that give us the content of our positive image of the fifties...If there is "realism" in the 1950s...it is presumably to be found there, in mass cultural representation, the only kind of art willing (and able) to deal with the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family in the small town, of normalcy and non-deviant everyday life." Continuing that much of our understanding of the fifties "...seem very precisely to derive from its own television programs; in other words, its own representation of itself."<sup>4</sup> The author also claims that whilst the high-art of Hopper and Marcuse was the only form of representation deemed worthy enough in the fifties to address the problems of everyday existence, it was critics and scholars in the 1980s, the likes of Biskind and Kawin, who recognised the importance of mass culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1993, p.280-1

As we have seen, however, the scholarship betrays a tendency to frame this experience within an established political and ideological template of 1950s historicism, creating a propensity to read texts reductively and label them as either conformist or dissident; to categorise them as either supporters or critics of suburban, middle-class, consensus culture. Indeed, Biskind's study of fifties cinema is consciously situated against a previously "conventional view" of the fifties "as an era of political and cultural uniformity, regarded as either a nightmare of repression or a paradise lost, depending on the point of view." Yet by arguing that "the most striking thing about the films of the fifties is that they reflected...several warring ideologies...[and that] Films of the fifties, in short, pitted different ways of being and acting against each other," Biskind reinforces the interpretation of American culture in the 1950s as an era of binary oppositions and places an overwrought importance on ideological fissures.<sup>5</sup>

In this assessment the dualistic meanings and ambivalent mood present in *12 Angry Men*, *The Goldbergs* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* prove contradictory and the ideological conflicts in these texts seem to suggest visionary confusion on the part of the producers. There is little room within the traditional scholarship for texts that attempt complex interpretations of fifties culture; texts that embody simultaneously both the zeitgeist corporate-liberalism and more ambiguous or critical representation of American life in the mid-century. Whilst it may be fair to say that, to some extent, the race to conform to the imperatives of mainstream identity unwittingly informs the messages embedded in these texts, the inability to locate an acceptance regarding their cultural intent actually reflects recent trends within scholarship that seek to reassess containment and consensus in fifties culture, and also suggests that these texts are indicative of just how successful Jewish artists were at capturing and articulating the prevailing mood of that era.

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<sup>5</sup> Biskind, Peter, *Seeing is Believing: Or How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s*, Bloomsbury, 2001 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 1983), p.4.



As we have seen in *12 Angry Men* and *Blackboard Jungle*, middle-class anxieties found an outlet in Hollywood films from the middle of the decade. In particular, science-fiction films that characterised the cinematic landscape of the 1950s, as well as the new teen cinema that had begun to dominate the industry's cinematic output, due to the arrival of television coupled with shifting social demographics, forced Hollywood into an attempted realignment of its target audience by fixing its commercial crosshairs on the youth market. Nowhere are these anxieties more pronounced than in the stunningly bleak and hopelessly metaphysical perspective on suburban existence offered by *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Jack Arnold's sci-fi feature offers little alternative to suburban existence; and in this way the film articulates the anxieties of an American masculinity trapped within a restrictive environment. Arnold also, however, continues the investigation into the plight of the individual that occupied the Jewish imagination at this time and articulates the ambivalent experience of individual masculinity encountering consensus in suburban enclaves.

The film begins with Scott and Louise Carey, a young and attractive married couple, enjoying a vacation basking in the sun on board a boat. When Louise goes below deck to fetch refreshments, however, a mysterious radioactive cloud momentarily engulfs Scott. Feeling no ill-effects, the young man soon forgets about his encounter with the mysterious mist and goes about the rest of his vacation. The next time we meet the couple in their suburban home, Scott realises that his shirt seems too big for him. He visits the doctor who puts the height and weight loss down to stress and a poor diet; but when Louise no longer has to stand on tip-toes to kiss her husband, the young man's fears that he is shrinking seem to be justified. A second visit to the doctor confirms Scott's suspicions; after numerous scientific and medical investigations, doctors explain that an unlikely mix between Scott's encounter with the radioactive cloud and an earlier brush with some pesticide has resulted in a biological process whereby the young man's cells are shrinking.

As he continues to shrink, his case courts media and public attention; he is forced to give up his job and has to sell his story to make ends meet. Feeling the emasculating effects of his impotence and decreasing stature, Scott lashes out at his wife and wallows in self-pity until hope arrives in the form of an antidote that arrests the progress of his physical (and emotional) diminution. Still, one night, feeling "puny and absurd," Scott sets about on an evening walk when he happens upon a visiting circus; the sight of the freak show, however, reminds him of his affliction and he retreats to the relative sanctity of a nearby coffee shop. Here he is approached by Clarice Bruce, a pretty, young, and equally petite woman who is in town as part of the circus.

In Richard Matheson's book, upon which the film is based, the pair become romantically involved, and, although platonic in the film, this appears to be for the sake of the censors; either way, their involvement illustrates Scott's emotional estrangement from his wife and his need for a validation of his masculinity from the sexual and emotional interest of the opposite sex. When he notices, however, that he is suddenly smaller than Clarice, he realises that the antidote has ceased to work and he is once again decreasing in size. Eventually, Scott becomes so small that he has to live in a doll's house; the relationship between the bantam young man and his wife Louise becoming more and more strained. Here, the film takes a macabre twist; left alone in the house one day, Scott falls prey to their cat. Narrowly managing to escape, Scott nevertheless ends up stranded in the basement where he undertakes an epic journey to gather food, and must fend for himself as house spiders and a flood brought about by a leaking water heater threaten the young man's life. In the meantime, Louise, convinced that Scott was killed by the cat, has sold the couple's home and left distraught. Despite surviving his hunger and the flood, and defeating the spider, by the climax of the film Scott has become so small that he can fit through a window screen and emerge into the outside world. Here, no longer trapped but so small as to be insignificant, Scott accepts his fate:

I was continuing to shrink, to become... what? The infinitesimal? What was I? Still a human being? Or was I the man of the future? If there were other bursts of radiation, other clouds drifting across seas and continents, would other beings follow me into this vast new world? So close - the infinitesimal and the infinite. But suddenly, I knew they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet - like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up, as if somehow I would grasp the heavens. The universe, worlds beyond number, God's silver tapestry spread across the night...And in that moment, I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. I had thought in terms of man's own limited dimension. I had presumed upon nature. That existence begins and ends is man's conception, not nature's. And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away. And in their place came acceptance. All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something. And then I meant something, too. Yes, smaller than the smallest, I meant something, too...To God, there is no zero. I still exist!

*The Incredible Shrinking Man* is an exceptionally rich cultural text that offers critical insight into Cold War American culture. Jerome F. Shapiro offers a summary view of the scholarship when he analyses how the film captures the “social and the spiritual conditions of life under the shadow of the Bomb.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* stands alongside *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951), *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), *The Day the World Ended* (Roger Corman, 1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Robert Wise, 1956), *The Monster That Challenged the World* (Arnold Laven, 1957), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugene Lourie, 1953), and many more sci-fi creature features that sublimated fears regarding the Bomb, atomic energy, the Russian threat, and free-floating anxieties about the Atomic Age into radiation-induced mutations or alien invasions that threatened either communities,

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<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, Jerome F., “Atomic Bomb Cinema: Illness, Suffering, and the Apocalyptic Narrative,” *Literature and Medicine*, 7.1 (1998), pp.126-148, p.134.

individuals, or both. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, however, is also an anomaly; not just because, as Michael J. Strada points out, radiation most often led to gigantism rather than minuteness, but also because Jack Arnold's film does not offer any solutions to the problems it poses.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in other fifties sci-fi films the invaders are defeated or the mutations are reversed – thanks, more often than not, to atomic power – in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* no such panacea exists; science and medicine cannot fix the problem that they have identified and Scott is forced to face the futility of their endeavours.

Although the film doubtlessly has something to say about the atomic threat and the ability of the era's technological advancement to remedy a variety of problems, as Shapiro recognises, the spectre of the Bomb in the film, the radioactive cloud, functions primarily as a McGuffin. The film's real purpose is to explore the culture of suburbia and the relationship between this environment and fifties masculinity. As Cyndy Henderson has illustrated, the film:

...focuses on the stresses placed upon men in the atomic age. Radiation and insecticide cause Scott to devolve physically, eventually becoming smaller than an insect, but his anxieties about living up to the 1950s masculine ideal pre-exist his physical devolution. If the 1950s American man is supposed to epitomize evolved human civilization in order to set a good example in Cold War society, Scott's character reveals the stresses involved in embodying masculine ideality.<sup>8</sup>

The conclusions that the film comes to in this regard are no less bleak than its outlook on the atomic threat. Certainly from the moment that Scott becomes truly Lilliputian and the film undertakes an apocalyptic journey towards an inevitable vanishing point, the simple message seems to be that masculinity has been dwarfed and engulfed by suburban existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Strada, Michael J., "Kaleidoscopic Nuclear Images of the Fifties", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol.20, No.3, pp.179-198, Winter 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Hendershot, Cyndy, "Darwin and the Atom: Evolution/Devolution Fantasies in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, *Them!*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol.25, No.2, (July 1998), pp.319-335, p.328.

The scale and perspective, as well as the detail, texture, and sound of his environment are all so excellently technically executed as to involve us intimately with Scott's predicament and invite tremendous pathos; thus our sympathies lie with Scott and the plight of modern manhood. We feel his insignificance, the weight of the suburban home above his head, the pressure to provide financially, and the burden of cultural anxieties. In some ways, Scott's predicament in the cellar, his quest for food, his battle with the spider, his survival of the flood, his ingenuity, his endeavour, and his resourcefulness, suggest that the protagonist succeeds in civilising a new frontier and reinstating the importance and dominance of masculinity within the suburban home. By defeating the spider Scott symbolises a masculine victory over the bogeymen (Russians, Communists, et cetera) who tormented fifties culture; by surviving the flood, he symbolises a firm reinstatement of masculine individual endeavour that refuses to be swept away into insignificance by the neutralising effect of the mainstream. This reading is certainly invited by Scott's attitude towards his environment, a characterisation that could apply more widely to our vision of a featureless fifties suburbia: "My prison, almost as far as I could see, a grey, friendless area of space and time. And I resolved, as man had dominated the world of the sun, so I would dominate my world."

As Jancovich points out, however, once Scott defeats the spider and completes his epic journey to gather food, his quarry becomes meaningless; the superiority that he has gained in victory is spurned in favour of an acceptance of the universal. Jancovich places this within biblical terms, but it is just as insightful to read the film's conclusion within a cultural context; by rejecting hierarchal dominance and accepting his fate Scott surrenders his supremacy, masculinity, and individuality to universal consensus. Indeed, when Scott finds himself marooned in the cellar he recognises that he must shed his usual clothes for something more appropriate, and whilst Jancovich sees this as a movement from civilisation to primitivism, given Scott's inability to fulfil his husbandly role as provider and protector, it could also be seen as a wry indication that the man of the house can no longer be seen to "wear the trousers". Although Scott's final realisation is that "...I meant something, too. Yes, smaller than

the smallest, I meant something, too...To God, there is no zero. I still exist!" his significance is reliant upon belonging to a greater whole. Without the structure of universal existence, Scott becomes insignificant.

Although the film places much focus upon Scott's fate once he falls into the basement, the action before this also has a lot to say about the film's attitudes toward suburbia and, in particular, gender relations within these bedroom communities. Following on from Shapiro's suggestion to view the spectre of the Bomb as a McGuffin, the film's position within the sci-fi genre further invites us to separate the naturalistic elements of the film's diegesis from the fantastical and the absurd. If we compare Scott's predicament to more commonplace suburban problems, such as illness, infidelity, loss of employment, or a simple lack of satisfaction with his lot in life, the 'rising act' develops in a manner that is more reminiscent of film melodrama than a sci-fi feature. From the very beginning of the film, the relationship between Scott and Louise and how they represent gender roles is central to the interest of Arnold's film. For Jancovich, the ostensibly light-hearted and jocular opening, where Scott convinces Louise to fetch him a beer and refers to his wife as a 'wench', nevertheless serves to illustrate Scott's "complacency about his own position as a man" and ingrain specific fifties gender roles from the very outset.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after, with Scott occupied by concerns about his clothes not fitting he suggests the reason behind his weight loss could be "...the cooking around here," before instructing his wife to perform her feminine duties as a suburban consumer and buy some bathroom scales; later Louise's culpability and ineffectiveness as a good housewife are ratified by the doctor's suggestion that Scott suffers from a "poor diet." Once the couple discover the extent of Scott's situation, the young man tells his wife to "start thinking about us, our marriage. Some awful things might happen; there's a limit to your obligation," to which Louise responds, "when I married you I meant what I said, and as long as you've got this wedding ring on, you've got

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<sup>9</sup> Jancovich, Mark, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*, Manchester University Press, 1996, p.192.

me,” only for the ring to promptly slip off Scott’s ever-shrinking finger. Sure enough, as Scott becomes smaller, less able to provide financially, incapable of satisfying Louise sexually, and generally less effective as a suburban husband, the couple’s relationship deteriorates and Scott begins his affair with Clarice.

Scott’s masculinity is measured throughout against that of Charlie, his brother: the boat on which Scott and Louise sunbathe at the beginning is “provided’ by Charlie; the couple are supported by him during their financial troubles; and when Louise leaves the couple’s home she is driven away by the brother. Although the suggestion of an affair or a future romance between Charlie and Louise is by no means explicit (although, it could easily be inferred), the comparison between the two brothers is clear and it is Scott who once again comes up somewhat short in the measure of fifties masculinity. Here again, the health of suburban and, more generally, American masculinity is gaged by the ability to fulfil the role of husband and provider. Lacking physical and financial virility, Scott is usurped by his more capable and traditionally masculine brother. In this way Arnold’s film continues the motif of masculinities being measured against one another, with the one that is out of tune with the prevailing paradigm rendered diseased, inadequate, and threatening to the integrity of wider American identity.

Despite the tension between Scott and Louise, and feelings of inadequacy, not to mention the suggestions of infidelity, there still exists an element of love, tolerance, acceptance and duty; Louise’s role is that of housekeeper, Scott’s that of a provider. When these roles are disrupted and the suburban order is disturbed by their mutual inability to fulfil their ascribed duties the couple initially look to support each other and struggle to maintain their fractured relationship. But without satisfactorily realising their capacity as husband or wife, the supporting structure of suburban gender-informed identity fails to sustain their marriage and ceases to legitimize their suburban tenure. When Louise is all-but-certain that Scott has been killed, she tacitly admits her guilt at being a poor wife, “I just keep thinking that

he needed me and I wasn't there." An abridgement of Scott's feelings throughout the film, told in voiceover, also proves telling, and indicates a parallel decaying of their relationship and his masculinity as well as an increasing solipsism:

Lou, let's get out of this place before we both go crazy, somewhere where nobody can find us...we haven't been able to find a new house, and there still is no privacy, no relief...I fear for what life remains for me...my relationships with the world had ceased with everyone, except my wife; and I knew I was driving Lou from me. But burning inside, adding its own hideous pressure to everything else, was my desperate need for her...I felt puny and absurd...I loathed myself, our home, the caricature my life with Lou had become. I had to get out; I had to get away.

The relationship between Louise and Scott, their fulfilment of gender roles, their feelings about their relationship, and the ways in which they express these feelings are all reminiscent of Elaine Tyler May's investigation into gender relations in the suburban home. As we have touched upon in the previous chapter, May examines the importance of the home in 1950s American culture, and how gender distinctions maintained the ideological integrity of the suburban home and nuclear family within the political interests of the democratic, freedom-loving, capitalist-orientated United States. With the home and family becoming the bedrock of American ideology in the Cold War environment, "domestic containment" invested gender roles with political consequences:

For...middle-class couples, viable alternatives to domestic containment were out of reach. The cold war consensus and the pervasive atmosphere of anticommunism made personal experimentation, as well as political resistance, risky endeavours with dim prospects for a significant positive result... [W]ith political and economic institutions fostering the upward mobility of men, the domesticity of women, and suburban



homeownership, they were homeward bound. But as the years went by, they also found themselves bound to the home.<sup>10</sup>

Louise and Scott experience and articulate this discontent with “domestic containment” within the bricks-and-mortar of the suburban ideal; indeed the way in which they express their feelings, Scott especially, is similar to the language used by the respondents to the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) upon which May bases much of her analysis.<sup>11</sup> May’s interpretation of the KLS study reasons that fifties suburban American citizens felt the burden of maintaining normative relations and fulfilling their patriotic duty of identifying with assigned gender and cultural roles.

*The incredible Shrinking Man* represents these tensions bubbling below the surface and the desperation to fulfil and maintain the designated positions of husband and wife within suburban social structures. Overall, despite Scott’s obviously decreasing physical size it is from his deteriorating social stature that the film gains it dramatic impetus. For all the sci-fi effects and scientific reasoning that place it alongside other Atomic Age zeitgeist sci-fi cinema, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is an effecting, sympathetic and humanistic feature that does little to hide its analogous meaning. In this way the film articulates the condition of masculinity in a suburban environment and critiques the circumscriptive and reductive nature of fifties suburban identity.

Alongside its critical perspective on the suffocating effect that suburbia has upon American masculinity, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* also addresses more free-floating anxieties regarding the Jewish presence in the mainstream that can be applied more widely to an American identity worried about conformity and consensus. The complete transformative effect that the radiation has upon Scott and the disruption that these changes have upon his personal and public relations and identity hint at the residual anxiety within the Jewish psyche

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<sup>10</sup> May, Elaine Tyler, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1988), p.197

<sup>11</sup> Especially those discussed in Chapter Eight “Hanging Together: For Better or Worse,” May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, p.175-197.

that anti-Semitism was never too far away and that Jews living in the suburbs would be “found out.” Despite Jews feeling at home in suburbia and anti-Semitism being on a steady course of decline throughout the fifties, there remained disquietude about this acceptance and lingering concern about the security of Jews within suburban and mainstream identity. As Karen Brodtkin realises: “Despite this seeming acceptance, many Jews remained uneasy. Was America’s love affair with Jews temporary? Would the anti-Semitism of the 1920s and 1930s flare up again?”<sup>12</sup> This reflects the fact that despite the overwhelming mood of integration and acceptance that occurred throughout Jews’ adaptation into the mainstream, there exists in Jewish American scholarship the caveat that anti-Semitic attacks and sentiments persisted, as did Jewish insecurity.<sup>13</sup>

As the preeminent Jewish historian Edward S. Shapiro puts it, “despite the euphoria engendered by Bess Myerson and Hank Greenberg, American Jews exhibited a psychological insecurity that was never far from the surface.”<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, the mysterious mist that engulfs Scott symbolises the ‘ever-there’ threat of anti-Semitism, the anxiety that despite their seeming acceptance and widely successful adaptation to suburban life, unfortunate cultural conditions outside of American Jews’ control could come together to once again make Jews conspicuous. There is an analogy to be read in the film: like the unlucky and absurd happenstance between a prior exposure to insecticide and the more recent incident with radioactive material that led to Scott’s condition, there is the concern that previous exposure to historical anti-Semitism and ethnic difference could be exacerbated by fifties ideological concerns regarding subversives and cultural Others, to bring about a reawakening of past antipathies. This unwelcomed conspicuousness can also be seen in Robert Wise’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon*, and Joseph H. Lewis’s *Terror in a Texas Town*

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<sup>12</sup> Brodtkin, Karen, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*, Rutgers University Press, 1998, p.144.

<sup>13</sup> See, Hertzberg, Arthur, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*, Touchstone, 1990 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed. 1989), p.316; Dinnerstein, Leonard, *Antisemitism in America*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.163.164.

<sup>14</sup> Shapiro, Edward S., *World War II and American Jewish Identity*, *Modern Judaism* (Vol.10, No.1, Feb.1990), p.29.

and signals that Jewish artists still harboured real concerns about American Jews' security within characteristically 'white' suburban abodes, the notion that they once again could be seen as exotic outsiders.

Conversely, the notion of conspicuousness in these films could also be read as articulating anxieties about the disappearance of Jewish distinctiveness. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* especially, Dr. Miles J Bennell's (Kevin McCarthy) difference from the rest of the town's inhabitants – in that he has not been transformed into an emotionless, robotic being by alien invaders – may create an unfortunate and life-threatening scenario for the protagonist, but he nevertheless embraces this conspicuity and endeavours to remain distinct. The idea that the neutralised inhabitants of the town from which he flees represent featureless suburbia, and that he must escape its confines and find refuge outside of suburban insularity surely offers a critique of existence within these bedroom communities. The fact that his sweetheart ultimately succumbs to the alien invaders further suggests that the nuclear community and family environment of suburbia threatens to abrogate individual and masculine identity. That said, anxieties about being part of this culture only arise because of Bennell's desire to remain individual and distinct, the film articulates the worry that mainstream identification was weakening Jewish specificity.

In *The Incredible Shrinking Man* too, Scott ultimately overcomes his difference (although by embracing it he surrenders to the universal), and Will Kane (Gary Cooper) triumphs at the finale of *High Noon* through sheer individual endeavour, as does George Hansen (Sterling Hayden) at the end of *Terror in a Texas Town*. The blend of contradictory anxieties regarding individual identity in these films, at once concerned with forced conspicuousness but at the same time articulating a desire to be distinct, exemplifies the mood of ambivalence within the Jewish imagination in the mid-century. This ambivalent attitude towards Jewishness within the mainstream reflects wider anxieties; as discussed in the previous chapter, in American culture there existed not necessarily a desire to conform but to

belong, or if we term the practice conformity, then we must understand that conformity was the quest to better oneself through a set of criteria most obviously governed by consumption. In this way, the relationship between inconspicuousness and distinctiveness in these films articulates the dynamic between consensus and individual identity discussed in the previous chapter. But the threatening nature of consensus in these films and the perilous position of being distinctive suggest more deep-rooted anxieties regarding Cold War cultural paranoia surrounding subversives, an environment that Margot A. Henrikson describes, “struggling under the surface serenity and outward security of the mainstream cold war American mind was an unstable and paranoid underground American psyche state of panic.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, the mysterious radioactive cloud in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* embodies a miasma of specific anxieties transformed into a free-floating malaise that included concerns about the re-emergence of an ebbing anti-Semitism, worries about the plight of the individual, and the weakening of masculine identity.

### ***Marty*: Eschewing the Suburban Ideal and Achieving Urban Contentment**

*The Incredible Shrinking Man* may well cast its critical eye over the atrophying and emasculating effect of suburban existence, but contemporary scholarship suggests that even utilising this critical perspective to create a more complex view of fifties American culture proves blinkered. As with many examples of American cultural artefacts that attempt to offer critical interpretations of the 1950s, seeking to reveal an underbelly of disquietude, the discontent that Arnold’s film articulates is measured against a backdrop of suburbia and the ‘home’ that remains reductive of wider American culture. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, along with *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), and many other films, as well as novels like Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place* and Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, and television programmes like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* offer a limited perspective because although they each seek to

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<sup>15</sup> Henrikson, Margot A., *Dr Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*, University of California Press, 1997, p.85.

scrape away the intemperate veneer of suburban existence and complicate the perception of gender and generational distinctions, they do so not within the context of the full breadth of American culture but within the singular context of the suburban home. Thus, to use these texts as an indication of cultural diversity and dissent would be to perpetuate the myths of the mid-twentieth century, myths that are divided along the binary oppositions offered by previous scholarship and with their boundaries marked only by the white picket fences of suburban distinctions.

This is not to detract from the importance of these texts in elucidating those aspects of bedroom communities that were forced into the shadows by the suburban ideal. The fact remains that *12 Angry Men*, *The Goldbergs*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* offer critical insights into American culture, and this is in no small measure due to the fact that these texts were produced by Jewish artists who represented the trepidation with which the community approached emergence into the middle-class, a feeling that articulated widespread concerns as many Americans became swept along in the mainstream. The aesthetic and thematic structure of suburbia and the suburban home, however, continues to cloud our vision of fifties American culture; the exclusive use of suburban critiques to complicate our understanding of the decade proves reductive of wider fifties cultural representation. And so, to enrich our image of fifties culture we must look to other texts that situate their narrative and position their ideals elsewhere; once again, given the Jewish community's centuries long association with the inner-city milieu and their tenure in urban environments, the Jewish imagination was ideally positioned to articulate the experience of those members of American society who were excluded, or elected to eschew, the suburban ideal.

Generally considered one of the finest live productions from the golden age of television, *Marty* originally appeared as a teleplay in 1953 on NBC-TV's The Goodyear Television Playhouse starring Rod Steiger and Nancy Marchand. It was then adapted by Chayefsky into a hugely successful feature film in 1955 (one of only two films to scoop both the

Palme d'Or and Best Picture Oscar, the other being *The Lost Weekend*) and went on to return over three million dollars in profit on its modest studio investment. With a longer running time the later production has a few protracted subplots, but the essential narrative and important relationships remain the same. Despite being badgered daily by friends, family and neighbourhood busybodies, Marty Piletti, a stout and homely Italian-American butcher, remains a bachelor at thirty-four years of age. On yet another Saturday night of rejection, boredom and resignation, Marty once again reluctantly finds himself at a dance looking for a girl. Having assumed his familiar position leaning alone against a pillar, the stocky singleton is approached by a man who, having come on a date with a "dog", offers to pay Marty five dollars to take the girl home. Ever the gentleman, Marty refuses and can only watch as another man takes up the opportunity, fortunately without success. Having endured the humiliation of being palmed off on somebody else, the man's date, Clara, a lonely, awkward and shy schoolteacher, retreats outside. Feeling sorry for her, Marty follows and invites her to dinner. As the night continues their candid chatter and clumsy courtship reveals a mutual attraction and for once their advancing years, bashful demeanour and ordinary appearance prove appealing.

Come the next day, when his mother, fretful at being abandoned, discourages him from pursuing the romance and the butcher's circle of friends cruelly disparage Clara's homespun looks, Marty decides not to call his new love. Later that evening, however, finding himself alongside his equally desperate friends replaying the tired scenario of a lonely, hapless, and hopeless bachelor looking for a good time, Marty realises that he has surrendered his chance of happiness because of peer pressure and his mother's mithering. In a final triumph, seizing control of his destiny Marty calls Clara to arrange a date, but not before offering this admonishment to his disapproving friend:

You don't like her. My mother don't like her. She's a dog and I'm a fat, ugly man. Well, all I know is I had a good time last night. I'm gonna have a good time tonight. If we have

enough good times together, I'm gonna get down on my knees and I'm gonna beg that girl to marry me. If we make a party on New Year's, I got a date for that party. You don't like her? That's too bad!

Here, both the television show and the film come to an abrupt end with the implication that the two lovebirds get married and settle-down. For Elaine Tyler May, Marty and Clara are symbolic of both the new suburbanites and the shift toward middle-class orientated representation in mass culture. May argues that Marty's journey from a "young man [with a] deep commitment to the ethnic family in which he was reared," to a prospective suburban husband mirrors the path taken by millions of Americans:

Far from his family and their obligations, the young couple can embark on a new life freed from the constraints of the older generation. By the film's end, the audience has made the transition, along with the main character, from loyalty to the community of ethnic kinship to the suburban ideal of the emancipated nuclear family.<sup>16</sup>

Stephen J. Whitfield offers up a similar assessment, opining that the film illustrates that if even "...Italian-American butchers like Chayefsky's *Marty* could find redemptive, romantic love, and thus could be welcomed under the big tent of middle-class consumption. Upwardly-mobile Jewish families could be embraced as well."<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Whitfield and May, *Marty* suggests the notion that even a "dog" and a "fat, ugly" Italian-American butcher can gain access to mainstream middle-class identity so long as they elevate the importance of subscription to that identity above all else and abandon identification with the outmoded and retrogressive ethnic inner-city existence.

Yet, whilst on the one hand, by choosing to "settle-down" Marty conforms to convention and takes a step towards the ideal of an ethnically-neutral suburban nuclear family, on the other hand, by choosing Clara, a girl that his family and friends discourage him from pursuing, Marty repudiates the effect of being *other-directed* and defies consensus. By

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<sup>16</sup> May, Elaine Tyler, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1988), p.28.

<sup>17</sup> Whitfield is reviewing "Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Post-war Democracy, 1940–1960," *American Jewish History* 92.4 (2007) pp.520-522.

embodying an aesthetic and lifestyle that doesn't conform to the fifties paradigm the two individuals have been excluded from the fulfilment offered by the American ideal; as a working class, inner-city Italian American Marty's identity already works against the prevailing tide of mainstream identity, whilst his masculinity is more stupefied ruggedness than virile organization man and Clara's femininity is more spinsterish than it is fertile suburban housewife. Thus by choosing each other rather than submit to the lonely process of pursuing the ideal, Marty and Clara's union is an act of defiance that sees the not-so-young couple find love, companionship, and contentment on their own terms.

What is more interesting, however, is that given the equivocal conclusion to the film and television programme, the assumption that Marty and Clara aspire towards a suburban ideal and head off into a bucolic utopia while the credits roll requires a fair amount of conjecture. There is very little, if any, indication that suburbia is the desired destination of the mature lovebirds, whilst there is ample reason to suggest that Marty and Clara are content to eschew the suburban ideal by remaining in New York and moving into a "nice little apartment". To interpret the ambiguous conclusion of the film in the suburban context is to succumb to the dominant image of 1950s American culture and ignore Chayefsky's attempt to articulate a different aspect of American culture.

In her bibliographical review of three recent publications that seek to complicate the myths of fifties culture and its televisual self-representation, what strikes Kathy M. Newman about *Marty* is just how modest the aspirations of Chayefsky's eponymous hero seem to be:

He wants to get married, own his own butcher shop (in the 1955 film version) and buy a nice little apartment. And, while he was identified by *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther as belonging to the "great urban middle class," looking back we would be more likely to see Marty as a working-class guy, who, for the most part, was comfortable with



his station in life. He did not dream of white picket fences, station wagons, barbeques, or even a backyard.<sup>18</sup>

If Marty's dreams were in-line with middle-class status in the mid-1950s – as Crowther suggests – our interpretation of just what constitutes prototypical middle-American identity at this time requires revision. As Newman states, "If *Marty* touched a chord, it was probably because not all Americans were anxious to move to the suburbs, start families, and stock their fall-out shelters."<sup>19</sup> The synonymous connection between an aspirational middle-class identity and a heavily-aestheticized suburban culture proves reductive; as Newman's review and the books that the author discusses suggests, part of the problem is that there exists an over-eagerness to read cultural artefacts from this era through a critical lens already tinted with halcyon hues of suburban ideal or the discolouration of consensus uniformity.

Pamela Robertson Wojcik's excellent book, *The Apartment Plot*, is one of the publications that Newman reviews. In it, Wojcik identifies a body of films from 1945 to 1975 in which the apartment setting is integral to the plot and functions as a central narrative device, thus complicating our vision of 'the home' in the 1950s, a vision heretofore dominated by notions of the suburban ideal. Although the author doesn't explicitly address *Marty* within her analysis, Wojcik does forward a revisionist assessment of fifties attitudes towards the notion of 'home' that is crucial to our understanding of Chayefsky's production and of fifties culture in general. By looking at the studies of two aforementioned scholars, Elaine Tyler May and Peter Biskind, along with Lynn Spigel's analysis of television in the 1950s, Wojcik argues that by making the single-family suburban dwelling central to our understanding of fifties domesticity and home, these studies perpetuate the myths regarding gender relations, sexuality, urban and suburban environments, and the family that surround fifties American culture. Wojcik's analysis of Spigel's discourses on fifties TV, for example, argues that "like most authors on the fifties, Spigel aligns home so strongly with the ideal of family and suburbia that she takes little

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<sup>18</sup> Newman, Kathy M., *Movin' On Up: Revising Post-war Film and Television History*, *American Quarterly*, Volume 63, Number 2, June 2011, pp.431-439, p.431.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.432.

notice of other models of the home.”<sup>20</sup> Wojcik’s study remedies this situation by analysing how the ‘apartment plot’ within mid-twentieth century American culture relied upon the articulation of different modes of American life.

Although the author recognises that the suburban home was represented as *the* aspirational epitome of familial and ideological wholesomeness, and that suburban housing and community development was a booming industry, the tendency within scholarship to promote this ideal as the only option for Americans in the 1950s proves reductive of both wider American cultural patterns at that time and the period’s cultural representation:

...apartment living was a “viable alternative” to prevailing norms and the only real choice for many people left out of the suburban imaginary, including single and divorced people, African Americans, ethnic minorities, and gay people. Apartments were, as well, the preferred option for many married, middle-class families with urban or bohemian tastes...representations of apartments exist alongside suburban discourse in the fifties, and interact with it. Rather than be subsumed into suburban discourse...the apartment needs to be placed in conversation with that discourse...Thus, rather than a stable precursor to suburban development, or a residual and outmoded form, apartment living needs to be understood as dynamic and changing, and urban domestic life needs to be seen as a viable alternative, in both the real and the imaginary American culture.<sup>21</sup>

In *Marty* there is one indication that a non-urban environment connotes an aspirational lifestyle, in that Marty’s boss, Mr Terry, is moving to California, a location where the apartment wasn’t the place for living, rather it was the ever-growing sprawl of tract housing that drew appeal.

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<sup>20</sup> Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975*, p.20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.19, 21-22.

There is, however, no suggestion that this is what the young butcher aspires towards. Indeed, Marty's dream is to get the money together to buy the butcher shop for himself, and the pragmatic manner in which he goes about planning the financial implications, as well as his intimate understanding of the ins-and-outs of the business and the butcher trade, suggest that this is no mere flight of fancy and that Marty's intention is to stay in the city. Moreover, given that Marty's boss is moving to California because all his children are married and he and his wife are lonely, the implication is that Mr Terry is putting himself out to pasture to enjoy his autumn years, which, in turn, suggests that to own the butcher's shop is a young man's way of successfully providing for and raising a family in an urban environment.

It is fair to say that both Marty and Clara conform to the fifties preoccupation of self-betterment; they both aspire towards advancement within their respective professions and both clearly harbour a painful desire to get married and presumably start a family. We can also see that each of them has allowed themselves to be held back by an overbearing relationship with their parents. The structure of a fulfilling middle-class, family-orientated life supported by gainful employment are thus fully respected. However, the suburban ideal doesn't figure in their mutual and collective hopes for the future, absent too are the dreams of extrication seen in *Superman* and *Awake & Sing!*, or the displeasure with a pernicious and suffocating city seen in the era's noir cinema. Marty's profession, as the protagonist realises, isn't in accordance with the vision of the 1950s Taylorized, organisation man and the couple lack the aesthetic value and youthful fertility of the suburban ideal. Chayefsky, however, doesn't present the duo as circumscribed by their environment or disadvantaged by their position within culture. The city becomes an arena of opportunity in other words, and the necessity to flee to the suburbs in order to find love, contentment, and a bright future is undermined if not totally ignored. Ultimately, by resisting consensus and repelling the draw of suburbia, Marty and Clara sow the seeds of their own destiny and prove that the concrete jungle is a place where even wallflowers can blossom and find true happiness and contentment.

Despite the fact that it centres on the Italian-American rather than a Jewish community, Chayefsky's screenplay continues the trends that we have seen within Jewish American cultural expression. The film doesn't shy away from promoting the benefits of the affluent middle-class, but it does seek to offer alternatives to suburban existence and mainstream identity. Marty's imperfections cast him as an unlikely but accessible hero that refigures masculine ideality; the vocational satisfaction and marital bliss that is promised at the end of the film relocates the concepts of work and home life to an inner-city environment. The urban milieu undoubtedly makes the movie identifiably 'ethnic', but the pursuit of advancement within the workplace and the desire for a wholesome home creates a universal story arc. What secures the film as truly a product of the Jewish mid-century imagination, however, is the accommodation found in the space between the middle-class, suburban ideal and the needs and desires of a distinctly ethnic, individual, and community identity.

### ***The Assistant and the Space Between***

Although *Marty* is a thoroughly hopeful piece of American cinema that comforts the loveless and champions the possibility of a fulfilling life lived within the city walls, it also fits within the genealogy of mid-twentieth century Jewish American representation that sought to critique American mass culture. Chayefsky's script articulates anxieties about the possible impact of American capitalist consumerism on the prospects of Marty's butcher shop and worries whether the inner-city could offer refuge from the encroachment of American consumerism and an environment in which ethnic communities could retain the essential aspects of their identity. When Marty talks of buying the butcher business, he voices concerns about the arrival of two supermarkets in the neighbourhood, and, although it is perhaps a throwaway line, Marty's anxiety about the ability of his Italian butcher shop to survive alongside these supermarkets articulates apprehensions about how well ethnic identity will endure the changes taking place in fifties American culture. The shooting script gives a good impression of how Marty's anxieties regarding the supermarket represent wider fears regarding ethnic identity:

The point is, of course, you gotta worry about the supermarkets. There's two inna neighborhood now, and there's an A&P coming in, at least that's the rumor. Of course, mosta his trade is strictly Italian, but the younger Italian girls, they get married, and they don't stick to the old Italian dishes so much. I mean, you gotta take that into account too.

The presence of the supermarkets and the loss of ethnic culinary traditions are linked here in such a way that mass culture is made culpable for, or at least seen as an accessory to, the decline of ethnic specificity. Marty's solution to the problem, after being offered encouragement from Clara, is to look towards the community: "Well, there's a lotta things I could do with this shop. I could organize my own supermarket. Get a buncha neighborhood merchants together. That's what a lotta them are doing."

This idea of using communality of purpose to oppose the overarching threat of American consumer-capitalism and within an urban environment is reminiscent of Clifford Odets's attitude towards social organization in the early-1930s. Of course, the political and economic landscape of 1950s America was drastically different from the Depression-era climate that Odets's socialist-inspired agit-prop so fittingly articulated; but the relationship between Odets's outlook in *Waiting for Lefty* or *Awake & Sing!* and Chayefsky's perspective in *Marty* highlights the fact that despite the evolutions that had taken place in American culture a discernible leitmotif prevailed in the Jewish American cultural imagination. Although for Odets and Chayefsky the solution of how best to negotiate the wider cultural concerns and social patterns that threatened the integrity of individual, masculine and ethnic identity was through community organisation, at the heart of these texts, and of the Jewish imagination in general, are the recurrent motifs of transition and ambivalence, and a give-and-take dynamic between fluid notions of Jewishness and Americanness.

This theme of ambivalence is typified by Marty's attitude towards the presence of the supermarkets in his neighbourhood; despite the threat they pose to the ethnic quiddity of the protagonist's immediate urban environment, Marty's reaction is not to oppose them outright

but to imagine an ideal scenario that blends American consumer capitalism with ethnic artisanal traditions and community identity. It is this compromise between the adoption of a mainstream cultural identity and the retaining of ethnic specificity that is also seen in the dual identities of Superman, Captain America, and Batman, as well as in the idealised consensus constructed in *12 Angry Men* and *The Goldbergs*. The imagined compromise articulates a desire for accommodation within a national paradigmatic identity and can be witnessed in many other examples of Jewish American art produced during this period, including *Waiting for Lefty*, *Double Indemnity*, *Dangling Man*, *Focus*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Catcher in the Rye*.

Marty's compromising attitude towards the supermarkets not only represents a desire for just representation of ethnic specificity within the overall framework of American identity but is also emblematic of the changes taking place in Jewish American identity at this time. The ambivalence in these texts, and in mid-twentieth Jewish American expression more generally, is generated by a desire to hold on to certain aspects of community and individual identity whilst also recognising the importance of adapting this identity to fit the changing cultural climate and also realising the positive and beneficial aspects of identifying with a more mainstream and general American identity. It is no accident that the threat to Marty's ethnic and community identity, as well as the symbolic representative of American mainstream identity and consumer capitalism, is a supermarket. As we have seen in *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder employed the setting of the supermarket as an emblem of a systematised mass culture that commodifies human life and adds an absurd legitimacy to the film's murder plot. In *Body and Soul*, Charley's Jewish parents own a small grocery store; indeed, the young man expresses a desire to distance himself from this environment, and the shop itself signals the death of ethnic identity when Charley's father dies within its walls. As with Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical approach, where mass culture nullifies all other modes of expression and constructs culture along purely capitalist economic lines, the supermarkets in *Marty* threaten to abrogate the presence of mom-and-pop grocery stores in urban environments and

concomitantly adulterate the ethnic flavour and cultural traditions of the inner-city neighbourhoods. Whilst this theme enjoys only a cameo in *Marty*, Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* places the setting of a struggling grocery store centre stage and uses the urban environment as an arena in which to explore the disintegration of Jewish identity as well as the threat and appeal of mainstream American culture.

In Malamud's second novel the author's sympathy undeniable lay with the poor and inner-city Jewish characters; indeed, throughout the novel Jewish identity and the Jewish way of life is figuratively attacked, stolen, raped, and misappropriated. Equally, however, Jewishness and the urban milieu entrap the inhabitants of Bober's grocery store in a web of poverty, suffering, ill-health, and despair. Morris and Helen simultaneously endure a duty towards tradition and the inescapable burden of Jewish suffering, as well as an obligation towards an indefinable Jewish identity, whilst also harbouring a desire for escape. Frank Alpine, meanwhile, is a truly tortured soul continually torn between the simple dilemma of what is right and wrong; like the Bober's inescapable duty to a burdensome ethnic identity, Alpine is afflicted by a troubled past and a tragic, masochistic compulsion towards wrongdoing. Every act in the novel, every decision made by each principal character, be they Morris, Ida, Helen, or Frank, is an arduous choice between desire and duty, suffering and relief, abstinence and lust, honesty and deceit, tradition and progress, faith and apostasy, loyalty and unfaithfulness, and morality and sinfulness.

If a move to the suburbs resulted in the weakening of ethnic specificity within the Jewish community and caused masculine anxieties that manifested themselves in tensions between generations and genders, a continued identification with ethnicity brought by remaining in an urban environment led to a distancing from youth and vitality whilst the hazards of being a suburban husband were replaced with sexual frustration, loneliness, and cultural exclusion. For the characters in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and Chayefsky's *Marty*, reaching maturity in the ethnic inner-city has caused a sense of stagnation;

spinsterhood and celibacy beckon, as do poverty and ill-health. Youth, as a beacon of a prosperous and healthy future, is absent. The principal characters in both texts are fully inculcated with urban existence; by remaining in a deteriorating inner-city environment, both Frank and Helen in *The Assistant* and Marty Piletti in *Marty* have seen the springtide of their youth pass without baring the fruit that would otherwise have blossomed into wholesome, if problematic, domesticated suburbanites. Yet whereas *Marty* emphasised the ability of the individual human spirit to overcome its physical surroundings and transform an existence outside of the ideal into a positive experience, *The Assistant* shows how the retrogressive ethnic urban environment asphyxiates vitality, beauty, and hope.

Building on Alfred Kazin's notion that Malamud's Jews are not so much insular as they are unaware of an existence outside of their immediate environment and experience, Andrew Hoberek argues that Malamud "...constructs Jewishness as *simply* nostalgic, a residual culture located in urban enclaves far from the white-collar suburbs."<sup>22</sup> The use of '*simply*' here, whilst presumably not intended pejoratively, is reductive of Malamud's characterisation of the Jewish community and the immediacy of his fiction in fifties America. There is little doubt that Malamud's representation of Jewishness owes a large debt to the author's artistic licence; the Jewish milieu that Malamud composes in *The Assistant* is a fictional Jewish American shtetl where aspects of the Old World survive as mournful memories alongside a painful everyday existence. Moreover, in much the same manner as the domestic scenes in both *Marty* and *The Goldbergs*, the ethnic tone of the novel as well as the familial closeness (if not necessarily domestic amity), are more reminiscent of the intimate ethnic inner-city and the murky and impoverished tenements seen in examples of Jewish American fiction from the 1930s such as Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934) or William Wyler's *Dead End* (1937).

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<sup>22</sup> Hoberek, Andrew, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.90. Hoberek refers to Kazin's discussion in *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1974.



Hoberek points out that because Malamud's work is nostalgic, the author has not enjoyed the lasting appeal that has been extended to his contemporaries, specifically Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. The implication here is not that the author of *The Assistant* is "ranked" lower than other Jewish American authors, but rather that Malamud's less privileged position within cultural memory as well as the author's less prestigious and conspicuous cultural legacy is legitimised by the aesthetic qualities of his work. In this estimation the nostalgic flavour of Malamud's Jewish characterisation is viewed as regressive, romantic, and out-of-touch with both contemporary fifties culture and the cultural myth of fifties America. Yet whilst there is no denying that *The Assistant*, indeed that Malamud's oeuvre in general, harbours a nostalgic mood and a sorrowful atmosphere of yesteryear, this only accentuates the heart-breaking existence of his tragic characters, mutilated by their attachment to the past and to familial obligations, as well as by the intangibility of happiness in the future. These characteristics of Malamud's fiction position the author's work as representative of the ambivalence of transition that marked the Jewish imagination throughout the mid-century, a motif that secured the Jewish imagination as universal.

Malamud's biographer, Philip Davis, in fact shows how the retrospective aesthetic indicates how Malamud, more than most, was concerned with the universal essence of the Jewish experience and imagination. In response to Leslie Fielder's assertion that *The Assistant* was a "belated novel of the thirties," Davis, whose argument is formed from extensive research into the Malamud archive, reasons that the invoking of the Depression results in the novel tapping into fundamental questions about the human condition, that "seeing life reduced to that humdrum 'bedrock' yielded a better insight into its intrinsic nature."<sup>23</sup> The novel is populated by ugly, unsuccessful, morally dubious, criminal or unlucky characters; their life is one of toil and the environment in which they eke out a living is suffocating, cold, and generally inhospitable; this is not a story of fifties upward-mobility but rather one in which the characters share with the inhabitants of *Awake and Sing!* the "struggle to survive amidst petty

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<sup>23</sup> Davis, Philip, *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.116.

conditions.” The vistas of suburbia and the material affluence of fifties culture are absent; even the more financially successful characters, like Julius Karp, lack compassion and morality, and hint at a grassroots, Depression-era critique of American consumer capitalism. There also lingers an anxiety about work throughout the novel, a fearful hangover from thirties privation and unemployment; Morris and Ida’s identity is intimately connected to their grocery store, so much so that it ceases to be a home or a workplace, and instead can be seen as a habitat, at once providing comfort and shelter, whilst at the same time imprisoning the married couple and their daughter. Moreover, Frank attempts to achieve his much sought after redemption through hard work, and even for minor characters like Al Marcus, the terminally-ill paper bag salesman who continues to work despite his condition, the notion of work is integral to their identity.

The Depression-era inferences and thirties aesthetic are not merely nostalgic, they result in a heightened sense of ambiguity as the pronounced past, filled with loss, regret, and half-forgotten identities, meets with a troubled immediate existence. This uneasy encounter between the past and the present acts as a disquieting aesthetic base that feeds the myriad of tensions that consume Morris, Ida, Frank, and Helen. *The Assistant* is littered with characters for whom the urban environment has laid derelict their youthful spirit and contentment, and who are punished because they continue to identify with a retrospective ethnicity or because they cannot escape past identities. Morris, for example, is marooned between overlapping and manifold identities, not only those of the Old and New World but those of the Jewish American and the fully assimilated American Jew. Frank vacillates between criminality, immorality and lust and kindness, altruism, and love. Whilst Helen’s dilemma appears to be one of the heart, the inability to choose a suitable beau, the predicament in her love-life is the manifestation of more general concerns regarding her responsibility towards an inherited ethnic identity, an unfulfilled desire for education, and a yearning for extrication and a quest to locate a pathway to a better existence.

It is the dynamic between Helen and Frank through which Malamud articulates the weight of external forces upon internal contentment and serenity. When Frank surreptitiously ascends the airshaft to spy on Helen in the bathroom, he discovers that, "Her body was young, soft, lovely, the breasts like small birds in flight, her ass like a flower. Yet it was a lonely body in spite of its lovely form, lonelier."<sup>24</sup> Soon thereafter, Helen suspects of Frank that, "There was more to him than his appearance. Still, he hid what he had and he hid what he hadn't. With one hand the magician showed his cards, with the other he turned them into smoke."<sup>25</sup> The two lovers see behind each other's external burdens; Helen's exoteric persona disguises an inner beauty and youth that is communicated through her pert, lively flesh. She in turn can see goodness behind Frank's cold, unattractive, and (given he is not a Jew) forbidden exterior. Nevertheless, their worldly afflictions impact upon their private visions; Frank's moral dubiousness (and the fact that he is a *goyim*) clouds Helen's quest for Frank's true self with noxious fumes of suspicion and doubt; Helen's bird-like breasts, with their suggestion of flight, betray a desire for escape, a corporeal yearning to flee. The motif of her "flower-like" *derriere* suggests an enclosed beauty and an imprisoned spirit aching for sunlight.

Arnold L. Goldsmith identifies the exploration of "what it means to be human in an inhuman world" as the central theme of Malamud's fiction.<sup>26</sup> We can see this theme at play in the relationship between beauty, goodness, and potential within Helen and Frank, and the way in which these things are hidden by environmental forces and concealed by ghostlike ethnic and past identities that haunt and agitate present contentment. The presence of this tension between the human experience and an inhuman world in *The Assistant* and Malamud's other works typifies the interests of this thesis; the ambivalence created by the tension between individual, ethnic and community identities and the changing dynamics of a centralised mainstream or paradigmatic 'American' character and an evolving cultural climate that we

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<sup>24</sup> Malamud, Bernard, *The Assistant*, Penguin Books, 1988, p.70.

<sup>25</sup> Malamud, *The Assistant*, p.109.

<sup>26</sup> Goldsmith, Arnold L., *The Modern American Urban Novel: Nature as "Interior Structure"*, Wayne State University Press, 1991, p.104.

have discussed in texts thus far is essentially an exploration of the discord between the human experience and the inhuman world. Along with its pronounced retrospective aesthetic that reaches into a past Jewish culture and artistic tradition, the novel contains the two thematic concerns that had preoccupied the Jewish imagination in the mid-century. Much like *12 Angry Men* and *Death of a Salesman*, the notion of masculine identity is debated within *The Assistant* through various father-son relationships, where masculinity is measured along generational lines, and through the relationship between American males, family and the workplace. Mass and consumer culture is similarly discussed, and although Malamud's interests are in no way political, or even ideological, *The Assistant* succeeds in figuring 'American' culture as a threatening force. In *The Assistant* these two themes are dramatized chiefly through the ersatz father-son relationship that develops between Morris and Frank and within this dynamic we can see, if not an end-point, a culmination of the mid-century Jewish imagination and aesthetic.

One of the recurring motifs of the novel is the milk cases and bread rolls that Morris receives every morning and sells throughout the day. The continuance of this routine through the plot suggests that Morris is concerned with nourishing the community and sustaining urban and multi-ethnic identity, and it secures the grocer as representative of ethnicity and the inner-city. From the very first page the bread rolls and milk, as well as Morris's general morning routine, indicates his honesty, kindness, and position as preserver of the community. The grocer "dragged the heavy boxes to the door, panting" and "lugged in the milk;" he serves the "sour-faced, grey-haired Poilisheh," before "he boiled coffee in a blackened enamel pot and sipped it, chewing on a roll, not tasting what he was eating." Shortly, a young girl comes into the store on behalf of her mother asking for bread, butter, and cider vinegar on credit:

He knew the mother. 'No more trust.'

The girl burst into tears.

Morris gave her a quart-pound of butter, the bread and vinegar. He found a pencilled spot of the worn counter, near the cash register, and wrote a sum

under 'Drunk Woman.' The total now came to \$2.03, which he never hoped to see. But Ida would nag if she noticed a new figure, so he reduced the amount to \$1.61. His peace – the little he lived with – was worth forty-two cents.<sup>27</sup>

As well as showing us that Morris is a sympathetic character, who puts other's needs before his own and who serves his conscience before his cash register, Malamud also shows us, from the very beginning, that Morris, as a representative of ethnicity, suffers and is taken advantage of. He *drags* and *lugs* the heavy foodstuffs, serves the *sour-faced* and impatient first customer, and offers credit to a woman who is all-but stealing from him. The fact that he can't taste what he is eating shows that he finds no pleasure and gains no subsistence from his almost charitable position as provider for the community.

Frank functions in much the same way as the mysterious mist does in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*; he embodies a myriad of anxieties and the transformative effect of American mass culture on Jewish and individual identity. After having robbed Morris's shop and attacked the grocer, and having subsequently begun working in the store, Frank, with nowhere to live and no funds to live off, sleeps in the Bober's basement and steals some of the bread and milk that Morris tussles with each and every morning. Nevertheless, having discovered Frank's predicament and misdemeanour, Morris takes pity and invites the Italian further into his home and business. True to Helen's estimation of 'the assistant,' with one hand Frank enriches the Bober's existence, improves their store immeasurably, and offers Helen a forbidden love that ignites an emotional liveliness within her that she thought extinct. With the other hand, however, although he improves takings and the financial security of the Bober's grocery, he concomitantly reduces the ethnic, artisanal, and delicatessen aspects, making the business less characteristically *Jewish*. Similarly, although he allows for Helen to love and be loved, by being non-Jewish, he adulterates her Jewish hereditary identity, indeed he forcefully and violently strips her of her ethnic identity when he rapes her.

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<sup>27</sup> Malamud, *The Assistant*, p.7-8.

Frank gives as he takes, and takes as he gives; he even steals some of the Bober's meagre profit that he has helped them to gain, despite it causing him a moral dilemma. He is neither truly bad nor truly good, he occupies an ambiguous area between two moral extremes. Even so, he continually attenuates the Bober's ethnic identity and in this way he is an embodiment of the attitude towards the adaptation to a mainstream identity that was the leitmotif of the mid-century Jewish imagination, neither welcomed nor denied, both beneficial and damaging. But this is only one of the many binary oppositions that intersect the tragic lives of those trapped in the Bober's grocery store. The culmination of the thirties aesthetic not only invokes painful divisions within Ida, Morris, Helen, and Frank's personal identity, it also indicates how the novel is a concoction of past concerns within the Jewish imagination. It shares with *Awake and Sing!* the discussion of familial tensions, with *Superman* the desire for escape, with *Double Indemnity* the critique of mass culture, within *Batman* and *Body and Soul* the exploration of masculine struggle within urban environments, with *Death of a Salesman* the pain of father-son relationships, and with *Marty* it offers a sympathetic, if necessarily different view of those existing outside of the suburban ideal.

As Davis shows, Malamud has been quite open with the fact that Morris and Ida Bober are based on his own parents, who owned a grocery store, a store that had, writes Davis, "been the prison from which Malamud had wanted to escape via his education; but now, in his very writing, he went back to it...When Malamud returned to the store for fiction's rescue-work, he also made Helen Bober the mark of his own desire to leave it. That is the richness of his ambivalence."<sup>28</sup> Ambivalence not only exists within the novel therefore, but within its extra-textual conception. Davis also discusses how Malamud, like Miller before him, had to endure accusations of betraying his Jewishness with his "Christian book" and that the book reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as victims (by Philip Roth, no less).<sup>29</sup> Davis shows, however, that "to Malamud, being too Jewish for some Americans or too Christian for some Jews was not

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<sup>28</sup> Davis, *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life*, p.115.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.138.

a problem. It marked out the holding-ground in which he worked.”<sup>30</sup> *The Assistant*, therefore, exists both inside and outside of the mainstream, is both Christian and Jewish, and is both a revisiting of past experiences and a memory of the desire to escape. These tensions can be felt within the novel’s poetics; Frank’s arrival places the text firmly within a fifties context and addresses pertinent questions about the threat posed by an American consumer identity. Frank and what he stands for allows for an exotic, struggling, ethnic existence to be improved, but he also undermines the Bober’s very ethnicity in the process. The pronounced retrospective aesthetic intensifies the weight of what has been lost and makes the urban atmosphere heavy with a nostalgic sorrow that suffocates the main characters. No decision in *The Assistant* is final, no identity truly fulfilled; it is neither a wholly nostalgic text nor an entirely contemporary investigation. Malamud interrogates the space between the past and the present, Jewishness and faithlessness, morality and necessity, lust and love, ethnicity and Americanness, youth and atrophy, and the city and the self. All that the author finds is an ambiguous hollow that characterises the Jewish experience and the Jewish imagination in the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.139

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

The texts analysed in this thesis, around fourteen in-depth case studies with a good number of other films, comics, stage plays, television programmes, and works of literature given honourable mention, barely begin to cover the breadth of the Jewish cultural output in the mid-twentieth century. Especially conspicuous by its absence in the analysis is the Broadway musical; this is not because these texts do not fit the interests of the thesis, more that scholars such as Andrea Most has already argued persuasively that the likes of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* articulate the drama of assimilation and the movements between Jewishness and Americanness.<sup>1</sup> Absent too is the popular music of numerous Jewish artists that range from Al Jolson to Benny Goodman. Here again, Jon Stratton has already explored the most patent example by showing how the music created by the Brill Building, and in particular the tales of teenage heartbreak vocalised by the all-Jewish girl group, The Shangri-Las, resonated with the disillusionment and trepidation with which the Jewish community approached suburban mainstream identity during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Broadway musicals and popular music, we could add the photography of Arthur Fellig, the films of Otto Preminger, the screenplays of Lillian Hellman, the comics of Will Eisner, the stage plays of Sidney Kingsley, and the literature of J.D. Salinger (to name very few) to the list of names and works missing from the pages of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Most, Andrea, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Harvard University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Stratton. Jon, "Jews Dreaming of Acceptance: From the Brill Building to Suburbia With Love", *Shofar*, Vol.27, No.2, Winter 2009, pp.102-127.



This thesis, however, is not concerned with the intimidating task of capturing the tremendous scope of the Jewish American popular cultural output throughout the mid-century, a burden already undertaken admirably by Paul Buhle and Stephen J. Whitfield. Rather, it is interested in analysing how the Jewish *imagination* was best positioned in the thirties, forties, and fifties to articulate the ambivalence of transition that simultaneously affected a specifically Jewish identity and a wider American character and how this is manifested in various examples of Jewish American culture. The texts privileged in the analysis, therefore, have primarily been chosen because they best embody this leitmotif, and are thus best representative of the character of the Jewish imagination, at least insofar as it is estimated in this thesis. Conversely, however, they have also been selected because of their difference from one another and for the textured interpretation of the Jewish imagination that this diversity enables.

A fundamental aspect of this thesis is the uniting of texts via thematic concurrencies that have heretofore been overlooked in the literature; a significant consequence of this approach is that multifarious Jewish cultural artefacts have been brought into a common dialogue that had previously been denied by the sheer aesthetic heterogeneity of Jewish American culture. There is little doubt that the artistic mood of *Superman* is drastically dissimilar to *Dangling Man*, or that the aesthetic qualities of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is different to *12 Angry Men*. But even this mere act of comparison highlights how the thematic and cultural agenda of these texts invite complementary readings; the presence of “men” in their title indicating a preoccupation with the plight of American masculinity more generally one might posit.

Therein lay the tension at the heart of this thesis; the kaleidoscopic nature of the Jewish imagination’s aesthetic threatens to tear apart our attempts at understanding Jewish American culture in any kind of concerted fashion. Yet the theme of ambivalence and trepidation, the experience of existing outside of the paradigm, of being a ‘satellite’ identity,

yet still being part of mainstream and suburban culture, sutures together these dissimilar texts. The differing negotiations between ethnicity and Americanness and the discrete approaches to masculinity identified in the first chapter between Captain America and Superman nevertheless articulate a similar experience of transition. Whereas Superman displays greater trepidation and regret, the ideological difference between the two artistic visions in these Jewish cultural artefacts shows how ambivalence existed extra-textually within the Jewish imagination as well as within the individual texts themselves. As exemplified in the second chapter, the Jewish voice most readily revealed a tendency towards articulating an experience outside of the mainstream and most often portrayed sympathy for the individual American male or the outsider identity. The give-and-take, however, between Jewishness and Americanness, individuality and consensus, and separateness and belonging was ever present in the Jewish cultural output and often led to the masculine confusion witnessed in *Death of a Salesman* or the cultural complexity seen in *12 Angry Men*.

The dynamic between the eclecticism of Jewish culture and the recurrent engagement of the Jewish imagination with the leitmotif of ambivalence, allows us to use these texts to truly capture the contours of wider American experience as the nation encountered the cultural evolutions of the mid-century. In this way, we can use the far-reaching arm of Jewish cultural enquiry to better understand the broader climate of mid-century America. Simultaneously, the tendency towards ambivalence also indicates a continuing and fluid negotiation between Jewishness and Americanness during this same period, allowing us to challenge earlier notions of a wilful movement away from Jewish distinctiveness and an acquiescent yielding of Jewish identity to an incumbent mainstream majority. In short, the experience of both a distinctly Jewish and a more general American character can be better illuminated by embracing the eclectic nature of Jewish American culture and understanding it within a unifying leitmotif of ambivalence.

It is tempting to characterise this leitmotif as a tendency towards representing the underdog, and in some of the work by the more politically or ideologically-minded artists this feeling certainly underscores their artistic vision. Odets's theatre plays and Polonski's films, for example, articulate the disadvantageous predicament of the disenfranchised poor and ethnic inner-city inhabitants in such a way that, whilst not intended to invite sympathy, does privilege the perspective of those ostracised from mainstream America. The motif of the underdog, however, implies a clear delineation between an oppressive "master" identity and a battling and dissenting counter-culture that proves too simplistic, even in the context of work by the likes of Odets and Polonski. The impression of an impoverished ethnic identity trying desperately to survive amid an onslaught by an "American" mass consumer culture, a culture that also sought to neutralise or exclude those identities that didn't conform to a white, middle-class American paradigm, ignores the ambivalence present in Jewish American cultural representation. The notion of the underdog also suggests an element of unconformity that is spuriously combatant and frivolously rebellious, or suggests a desire for revolution. But in the texts analysed here, Jewish American cultural expression during this period articulates not just a legitimate backlash against an American paradigmatic character, but also a desire to find accommodation within the overarching structure of American identity. Intrinsic to this attitude is a mood of ambivalence that simultaneously articulates the concerns and anxieties of ethnic, individual, and community identities whilst also recognising the attraction and benefits of finding acceptance in the mainstream.

The combination of pride, defiance, uncertainty, loss and hope that reverberated throughout the Jewish American community in the mid-twentieth century understandably created a complex identity and meant that Jewish Americans teetered on the cusp of acceptance and orthodoxy in both the Jewish and American mainstream community. Jewish American identity was continually torn between secularism and religion; nationality and ethnicity; observance and heresy; tradition and progress; conformity and ethnic conspicuousness; and, perhaps above all, assimilation or separatism. This complex identity,

augmented by an inherited cultural tradition blessed with an idiosyncratic *Yiddishkayt* yet blighted by alienation, persecution and discrimination, afforded Jews in America an acute sensitivity to the main streets and back roads of the route to the mythical American Dream, and a unique insight into the complexities of a life lived in the United States. It was this quality which meant that Jewish artists working in a variety of mediums in America during the mid-twentieth century produced a body of work that simultaneously articulated the anxieties affecting both a specifically Jewish identity and a more general “American” character.

The historical moment explored throughout this thesis, from the early-1930s to the late-1950s, is a time at which Jewish American identity underwent those profound changes that altered the community’s character and realigned its position within American society. Shaped by anti-Semitism, economic progress, the evolving ideological climate, material abundance, internal migration, the Second World War and the Holocaust, as well as many other political and cultural factors, the Jewish community that had entered the era as a section of American society most readily identified as ethnic, urban, poor, working-class, and politically radical emerged as members of a newly-minted privileged suburban middle-class. This is, of course, a generalised summary of Jewish American history at this time; to be sure Jews still ranked among the nation’s working class and, indeed, enjoyed the spoils of America’s elite caste. But the fact remains that the ethno-cultural demographic shift, the acculturation and assimilation of Jews into American mainstream identity, accelerated during the mid-twentieth century. Thus the Jewish American perspective was not just that of the outsider; as the thirties, forties and fifties progressed, Jewish Americans increasingly became a part of the American middle-class and the Jewish identity was slowly and more deeply absorbed into the mainstream.

At the same time, those same factors that stimulated the evolution of Jewish American identity and advanced Jewish social status also altered the wider landscape of American culture and impacted upon the ways in which American citizens interacted with their cultural

environment. Americans had to adapt to social, economic, political and ideological changes that had revised the shape of how the boundaries of mainstream and group identity were set by evolving and converging definitions of class, race, and ethnicity. All Americans also had to square their individual and community identity with a national ideological and paradigmatic character. Jewish American artists were best positioned to articulate the effects of these cultural evolutions simply because Jewish American identity underwent the most profound changes during this period, their socio-economic advancement and middle-class status having been achieved, says Edward R. Shapiro, a full generation before other ethnic groups in America.<sup>3</sup> The community's journey into the mainstream mirrored the path taken by many Americans; having been isolated in the choppy waters of the 1930s, however, by a particularly virulent bout of anti-Semitic activity and socio-economic disparity, their ride on the tide of abundance and prosperity towards acceptance in the mainstream meant that the Jewish experience epitomised a wider social narrative.

Jewish American artists were ideally positioned, therefore, to articulate this peculiarly Jewish but also general American experience; the cultural artefacts that have been analysed in this thesis explore the anxieties, fears, hopes, and aspirations of Jewish and American citizens as they attempted to locate their identity within the framework of a paradigm American character that, whilst ever evolving, nevertheless consistently promoted conservative, consumerist, and capitalist imperatives. The unifying theme of Jewish American art from this period is the ability to represent the middle ground between individuality and conformity, selfhood and consensus, liberalism and conservatism, tradition and change, and heritage and progress. Jewish American art was, of course, concerned with offering a critique of American culture that was imbued with the privileged perspective of Jews as both insiders and outsiders, with the numbing, neutralising and insidious nature of mass consumerism and cultural consensus being a particular preoccupation within the corpus of Jewish American cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Feingold, Henry L., *The Jewish People in America: A Time for Searching: Entering The Mainstream 1920-1945*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1992, p.125.

expression. Even in works by Odets, Miller, Wilder, Polonsky, and Lumet, however, there remains the attraction of American culture and an aching for the realisation of acceptance. The leitmotif of Jewish American mid-twentieth century art, therefore, is not the snarling rebellion of the underdog, but the hesitant, confused, and reluctant ambivalence that accompanies transition.

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