

Jews in the Roots of the American Film Industry

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Jews, although a minority, play a large part in the American entertainment industry and today's popular culture. Just think of film directors like Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen, actors like Barbara Streisand and Natalie Portman, comedians like Jerry Seinfeld and Jon Stewart, and, for any American Idol fans out there, even Paula Abdul. But despite the great parts they play now, many people may not know the full extent of their influence on the culture of today and throughout the history of America.

Jews had a very important role in American culture during the early Twentieth Century, from the early 1900s to the Forties and Fifties.

Jewish immigrants were, in fact, the founders and heads of many of the major film companies of today; such companies as Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios, and Warner Brothers. Jewish immigrants started them all, some coming to America seeking new opportunities, others trying to escape from their poor roots ^[BRB1]and the racism that took place in the form of pogroms.

They were bravely (and somewhat desperately) attempting to find success in the land they had heard of as a place where anyone could be wealthy. They had high hopes for their new lives; hopes that some would see become a reality.

When Jews who would later become the moguls of the American film industry entered America, they found their opportunities for success limited. Anti-Semitism was strong, and many of the business owners didn't support immigrants, especially those who had experienced little formal education in their poor European hometowns. As a result, many Jewish immigrants had to find work in businesses like the clothing industry, and some had a difficult time making a living.

But around 1910, when vaudeville ^[BRB2]was popular, penny arcades saw an increase, too. Penny arcades were small buildings where one would pay money (usually a penny or so, hence the name) to play pinball machines or see peep shows. Peep shows were machines, where, after a coin was inserted, a crank was turned and 1500 cards with photographs were displayed sequentially which presented a flickering, live action motion picture.

These were the precursors to the movie industry, as were nickelodeons, small theaters that showed short films for 5 cents, hence the name (once again).

For example, Adolph Zukor, the future head of Paramount Pictures had good success with these, and anticipated the rise of the film industry, becoming the first mogul.

Movies started off in small theaters, raking in viewers and profits from working class people, in light of their affordability and entertainment value^[BRB3]. Although regarded as a mere novelty by many at the time, the future moguls saw the potential in the small industry, and became involved in it. All of them shared a goal; to cast off their poor heritage ^[BRB4]and use whatever they could to become successful in the new industry.

Although coming from devoutly religious backgrounds and families, almost all of the moguls did not care for religion and some such as Harry Cohn, the ruthless leader of Columbia Pictures, even tried to deny his Jewish ethnicity.

The moguls did not want to be seen as Jews; they wanted to be seen as Americans. They feared that their background would only impair their business and lives as it had before their rise to power.

Driven by their determination to succeed in America and their desire for acceptance, these men became great patriots. Louis B. Mayer, the head of MGM, even went so far as to say that his birthday was July 4th and that he could not remember his true birthday. These men were extremely successful, living wealthy lives with glamour, women and pleasure.

During their time in power, the moguls made a great deal of movies glorifying America, and it was films like these that manifested their dreams of a great America of equal opportunity and meritocracy [BRB5] where anyone could get to the top.

This was the American dream that became inscribed in Americans' vision of their country, the dream the moguls had tried to live. Their entire rise to power was reflected in this ideal; they had come from poor families, and had worked their way up from poor immigrant laborers to become some of the richest and most influential men in America.

But, in doing so, the moguls had lost their heritage, their religion and background that made them Jews. They, in their quest to become American, had redefined what it meant to be American and had truly become assimilated- but their power would not last forever.

It was not until after World War II that the Jewish moguls' power in the industry began to weaken, after being accused of communism and anti-American activities (even after they had made a great deal of films for the war effort during World War II).

Anti-Semites like John Rankin worked to kick the Jews out of Hollywood, and although they fortunately failed to destroy the Jews' empire^[BRB6], many talented men left the industry.

The leaders were shaken by the sudden attack too; for years they had been a great part of American culture, and now they had been attacked for, once again, being Jewish.

It was this and the eventual deaths of many important men in the industry that ended the age of Jewish power in the movie industry. Although Jews are still one of the most prominent

groups in Hollywood, larger conglomerates and companies own the mogul's original companies.

However, the moguls' influences on American culture are still visible today, as is their dream of America, which survives in classic films like *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, and *The Best Years Of Our Lives*.

Now I'd like to compare three of the men of Hollywood, who built the empire and ultimately lost it.

Adolph Zukor, like many poor Jewish immigrants of the late 1800s and early 1900s, began in the clothing business.

Mildly successful for a time, he quit and tried other professions in entertainment_[BRB8], such as running penny arcades. He soon became interested in the movies, and got an early start in the business with his Famous Players company, becoming successful with nickelodeons and small theaters, and helping to establish Paramount Pictures.

Later, he would control the company. It is still one of the largest and oldest film companies today.

Paramount was revolutionary in that it incorporated all aspects of filmmaking and distribution in a single company, and it was wildly successful.

But Zukor, affected by his poverty-filled past would settle for nothing less than the top. He would use whatever methods he could to take out opposing companies and become supreme in the industry, never selling his own company or letting anything (even family) get in the way of business. He would often use strategies such as rumors and intimidation to destroy his competition.

And although his father was a rabbi, Zukor did everything he could to escape his poor past and religion^[BRB9], which was part of the reason he was so obsessed with winning in the

film industry. Although he did return to his home in Hungary to contribute charity after World War I, he was more a vicious businessman than a charitable figure. He, although secular, [BRB10] held little regard for humanism and was totally focused on his business and success.

Carl Laemmle, unlike Zukor, was not the stereotypical businessman willing to do anything for more money and power. Although very successful, his Universal Studios, founded in 1915, did not become a major competitor with other companies like Fox and Paramount until Laemmle's son took over. Carl Laemmle was more friendly and honest than the other moguls, which was also reflected in his appearance; short, elfish even, not imposing at all.

Although he wanted success as much as any other man in the movie business, he did not want the same kind that Zukor wanted. For almost the first forty years of his life, he had little success, moving from job to job, never becoming quite as wealthy as he would have wanted to be, but he finally settled down into managing a branch of a clothing store in the town of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Yet, nearing his fortieth birthday, he suddenly wanted something more than he had. He wanted success and recognition, and he would get it.

After losing his job in the clothing company, he became interested in the movies, and opened a nickelodeon in Chicago that was run mostly by him and his family. His theater became successful, and he opened another in Chicago. Soon he not only went into showing films but also distributing them, and his wealth grew even more [BRB11] in only a few months.

As the movies exploded into popularity, Laemmle raked in even more profit. He, along with other Jews in the movie business, went up against the monopolistic Edison Film Trust. This was a group founded by Thomas Edison, an anti-Semite, which held patents on film cameras_[BRB12] and raw film, attempting to limit the individual success of the Jewish filmmakers. The filmmakers fled to Hollywood partly because of the great California weather, but also to escape the dominance of the Edison Trust_[BRB13]. Laemmle was one of the key fighters.

During the time that Jews were gaining great power in the movie industry, Laemmle established Universal Pictures and was no doubt one of the most powerful men in the industry. Yet despite his overwhelming success, he never forgot about his German hometown of Laup-heim_[BRB14]. He would return there many times, celebrating and donating money to the

town. He even assisted Jews from the town to come to America, [BRB15]effectively saving them from the soon-to-be [BRB16]Holocaust. He was a humanitarian, a key aspect of Secular Humanistic Judaism, [BRB17]and he was not religiously observant. Leaving the industry would have little negative effect over his life, and in this way he was unlike the other moguls. He had achieved what he wanted all along, and no longer desired the wealth and power Universal had given him[BRB18].

These two men defined polar opposites in the industry; one a vicious businessman, the other a kind and charitable person who proved extremely rare in the industry with his independence after leaving his company.

Other men were a little closer to the middle ground in terms of viciousness and kindness^[BRB19], although still extremely deeply involved in their business. A fine example of this would be Louis B. Mayer, the president of MGM, who said he would never have been able to survive without his company. Like others in the business, he had been born in a poor European village, but actually grew up in Canada after his parents fled from Russian oppression in their Ukrainian hometown.

Mayer, after opening a few small theaters in Massachusetts from 1907 to 1916, found partnership with Richard A. Rowland and later formed MGM with Samuel Goldwyn and Marcus Loew.

During his time as the head of MGM, Mayer would be one of the most successful men in the country. The highest paid American during the thirties, Mayer made it his job to acquire

as many movie stars as possible and, as a result, MGM was the biggest film company of its time^[BRB20].

Mayer, although wanting power in the industry like any other mogul, did not want total control as Zukor did. One of Mayer's highest goals was for him to be accepted and loved, part of his motivation to acquire as many stars as possible for MGM.

Not only a wealthy businessman, Mayer was the Chairman of the Republican Party of California during the early thirties^[BRB21], a strong political post. Mayer, although powerful, would not have success forever.

Being mainly a crowd-pleaser, MGM began to fall in the 1940s when public taste started to change. Mayer, who was stubborn, was fired after a disagreement with the owner of the parent company, Loews Inc. Although he did little in the

way of promoting Secular Humanistic Jewish values, [BRB22]he made great contributions to the industry.

As I stated earlier, the Hollywood moguls held little regard for religion, focusing mainly on their business. Although some performed philanthropic activities, like Carl Laemmle's support of his hometown, business was the major factor in the moguls' lives. When Frank Capra, Harry Cohn's best director, was about to leave Columbia, Cohn gave an emotional speech, saying, "I would die without Columbia!" Whether or not this was just an attempt to make Capra stay (which it succeeded at doing) or was really the truth does not matter, for it showed how involved Cohn was with his studio; the other moguls (with the exception of Carl Laemmle) shared his devotion. Adolph Zukor's Paramount Pictures had been his life's work - literally; he worked there up until his death at over 100 years old in the 1970s.

Although a few moguls were philanthropic, it is debatable whether or not they were Secular Humanistic Jews. Yet, their work was a small example of Secular Humanism. They believed outright that no greater force would help them, as shown by their abandonment of organized religion. They built their success solely with their own fists and feet_[BRB23].

This is one aspect of Secular Humanistic Judaism as I see it: using one's own strengths and determination to live life, not depending on divine intervention to help your well being.

Although more of a secular value in general than a Secular Humanistic value, it shows that Jews, even in the early 1900s, were facing the same issues as we are today _[BRB24]and were using their own strengths to succeed.

Carl Laemmle, of course, was the closest to showing the true secular humanistic values that we believe in today.

I would like to learn from his example, that it is possible to be successful through hard work and self-reliance, but still retain the humanistic values of charity and philanthropy. The Jewish moguls of Hollywood overcame racism and became successes without dependence on divine assistance, a lesson we as Secular Humanistic Jews must share ^[BRB25] and teach.

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