

25 Years of the New York Jewish Film Festival

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25 Years of the New York Jewish Film Festival

Introduction

In January 2016, the New York Jewish Film Festival celebrates its 25th anniversary! The NYJFF is co-presented annually by the Jewish Museum and Film Society of Lincoln Center. Please see below for essays specially written for this occasion by Jens Hoffmann, Richard Peña, Jeffrey Shandler, and Aviva Weintraub.

Festivalization

Jens Hoffmann

Despite its contemporary synonymy with the star-studded red carpet and exclusive parties, the film festival is a form with modest roots. Its precursor was an intimate gathering for cinephiles in 1920s Paris. In the early days, cine-clubs gathered to view and discuss new films produced outside of the Hollywood mainstream. They offered a critical venue for independent productions, amateur films, and avant-garde experiments, and provided a needed forum for practitioners and thinkers in a quickly expanding field.

The clubs were also arbiters of taste and advocates for quality. They endorsed the visions of their organizers, and curated screenings that reflected idiosyncratic worldviews. Fervent cases were made for the virtues of films that varied wildly in style and subject, from nonnarrative formal explorations to surrealist dream sequences. These meetings were opportunities for exposure and dialogue. They were an opportunity for cinematographers and enthusiasts to share a room, discuss a shared passion, and tease apart the elements of storytelling

and craft. Film journals spread the conversation beyond the immediate audience and expanded it to embrace subjects outside the strictly cinematic, exploring underexposed work in kindred fields such as fine-art photography.

Floating high above this fecund ground, the first large, international film festival took place in Venice in 1932, just before World War II. In stark contrast to the intimate cine-club environment, the Venice Film Festival was a monumental spectacle. The event was nationalistic in nature, run by the state and supported by its dictator, Benito Mussolini. Its structure was shaped and its content selected to suit the Fascist regime. Like the Venice Biennale of which it was a part, it promoted the work of Italian artists while presenting Italy as a global cultural powerhouse. It raised the profile of film as an industry and an art form, but eschewed the cine-club's advocacy of the avant-garde in favor of fortifying the mainstream. In a telling example of its tightly controlled program, the popular vote that acknowledged audience favorites in 1932 was supplanted in 1934 by official selections.¹ Nazi Germany won the Mussolini Cup for Best Foreign Film several times in the first decade.



A photo shoot at the Cannes Film Festival, 1955.

Image courtesy Bob Hawkins / The Kobal Collection.

To grow, the festival format needed to escape what *TIME* magazine in 1939 called the “centrifugal force” of the “Rome-Berlin axis.”² It needed to reengage with its roots, to make space for alternative narratives and challenging political subjects. As a reaction against Venice’s nationalistic approach, France, England, and the United States collaborated to establish the Cannes International Film Festival in 1939, although its inaugural event would not take place until the war had ended, in 1946. When it did launch, the festival had magnanimous aims, indicating hope that art might begin to address the devastation of the intervening decade. Its stated mission was “to encourage the development of the art of filmmaking in all its forms, while fostering and maintaining a spirit of collaboration among all filmmaking countries.”³ While Cannes has since held steady as one of the industry’s “big three” festivals (along with its predecessor in Venice and the Toronto Film Festival, established in 1970), myriad others have stepped up to foster filmmaking at the fringes, and to present distinct, underrepresented voices. The model has proliferated and developed over the past half-century, filling every space, from the scholarly to the spectacular. The form affords plenty of room for the introspective experience and the glittering celluloid surface to exist side by side. Today, thousands of festivals take place across the continents, most created in the past twenty-five years. They play a vital role within the ecosystem of film production and consumption, supporting independent filmmaking outside of big-studio financing even as they offer opportunities to buy and sell. The flexible festival format serves various, divergent purposes. The events provide exposure for brand-new films and filmmakers while memorializing bygone luminaries. They have the capacity to act as platforms for propaganda and voice boxes for underrepresented communities. They are showcases for domestically produced films, and opportunities for filmmakers to make their way into the rapidly expanding global market. They present an alternative to the big-budget film industry but also attract it to little-known locales.

As biennials do for visual art, film festivals offer a chance to

experience the vast diversity of contemporary production while attempting to hone in on a zeitgeist. This taking-stock can be a confounding task even for themed versions, which cover any one of a near-infinite range of subjects, from noir to tech. Even the films in such narrowly focused festivals might represent every genre. On a given day one could view comedies, dramas, documentaries, animated films, and shorts; attend lectures, talks, and readings; participate in roundtables and filmmaker Q&As; view exhibitions; and browse online forums. These diverse offerings test the limits of festival audiences: to make the most of them is to undertake a durational performance oneself. Evident in the more recent programs is a reinvigorated sense that varied fields inform one another—that an exhibition might elaborate productively on a screening and vice versa, and that the conversation need not be limited to those present in the theater. The rise of cross-disciplinary programming signals a shift, as well as a return to the beginning, when the boundaries between fine art and film were less defined.



Sophia Loren at the Cannes Film Festival, 1954.
Image courtesy Bob Hawkins / The Kobal Collection.

Like the earliest cine-clubs, many of today's festivals provide context and historical awareness for the most pressing national and global concerns. Some dig into the fertile ground beneath the dazzling spectacle, and focus in on unheard stories that need to be told. If one thing has remained constant since the beginning, it's the promise that films and film festivals have always offered: a chance to become more aware of one's own time and place by skipping into another perspective for two minutes or two hours—and then repeating the exercise several times in a single day, surrounded by others willing to share a room and a passion.

Jens Hoffmann is Deputy Director, Exhibitions and Public Programs at the Jewish Museum and Curator for Special Programs at the New York Jewish Film Festival.

Notes

1. "History of Film Festivals," Film Reference, accessed September 28, 2015, <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Festivals-HISTORY-OF-FILM-FESTIVALS.html>.
2. Liz Ronk and Lily Rothman, "How World War II Created the Cannes Film Festival," TIME, May 13, 2015, <http://time.com/3843724/first-cannes-history/>.
3. Extract from the Cannes Festival policy, 1948, "History of the Festival," Festival de Cannes, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/about/aboutFestivalHistory.html>.

Twenty-Five Years Old and Getting Younger

Richard Peña

What a joy it is to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the New York Jewish Film Festival—to appreciate what a vital institution it has become, and to see how, at twenty-five, it remains even bolder, more insightful, and at times more provocative than ever.



Image still from *The Gift to Stalin*, directed by Rustem Abdrashev, Kazakhstan/Russia/Israel/Poland, 2008, 97 min.

I joined the staff of the Film Society of Lincoln Center in May 1988, and my principal responsibility was the planning and execution of the program for the still-under-construction Walter Reade Theater. The theater was to be completed by late 1989, so I would need to get right to work. Of course, this being New York, construction on the Walter Reade wasn't completed until late 1991, so I did wind up having time to really think about what kinds of programs we wanted to offer. At the Film Center at the Art Institute of Chicago (now the Gene Siskel Film Center), where I had worked prior to coming back to New York, I learned that a truly essential part of the job was creating collaborations with a variety of organizations, and I very much hoped to do the same at Lincoln Center. And indeed, among the very first people to approach me about working together was my good friend Wanda Bershen, then in charge of film programs at the Jewish Museum. Wanda hoped to establish an annual collaboration between the museum and the Film Society. The advantages for both organizations were obvious: the museum could have access to a much wider range of works to screen, while the Film Society could introduce its beautiful new theater to audiences eager to see more specialized programming.

Moreover, hard as it might be to believe today, when every synagogue seems to be mounting its own film festival, there wasn't in 1992 anything even vaguely like the program Wanda was proposing going on in New York. There was a true need for a New York-based festival devoted to Jewish film that would be comparable to the excellent San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, which had been in operation for several years already.



Image still from *Dziga and His Brothers*, directed by Yevgeni Tsymbal, Russia, 2002, 52 min.

The original idea was to pick a theme and program films around it. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, there was suddenly an abundance of films with Jewish subjects emanating from that region, and it was decided that we would make that our initial theme. That first year was a great success, and the terrain was prepared for an ongoing annual

collaboration between the Jewish Museum and the Film Society.

After a few years, Wanda went on to other activities, but the museum continued its firm commitment to the program; many wonderful programmers, too numerous to name here, have worked on the festival over the years, culminating with the naming of my dear friend Aviva Weintraub as its director in 1998. She had been involved with the festival since the beginning, assisting Wanda in the early years, and is responsible for the NYJFF's continued growth and increasing excellence.

As for me, I got to play the *shabbes goy*, an outsider who could weigh in on our programming decisions. Through my work for the Film Society, I had to be aware of a broad range of international film production and was in a position to steer some excellent works into the NYJFF. There were of course a few “spirited” discussions over the years, but most of my memories are of the incredible fun we had assembling each year's program, despite all the hard work and hours of viewing films, often with subtitles of questionable quality.



Image still from *Daniel Takes a Train*, directed by Pál Sándor, Hungary, 1985, 87 min. Courtesy Hungarofilm / The Kobal Collection.

When I look back at the twenty-five years of the NYJFF, three factors pop out that have made it such a success and a vital part of New York's cultural life. The first has been its internationalism. From the

beginning, the festival sought out works from the farthest and often least-suspected corners of the globe. I can remember a remarkable Finnish film called *David: Stories of Honor and Shame* (Taru Mäkelä, 1997) about Finland's Jewish community during World War II. As dedicated Finnish citizens, Jews entered its army and even reached positions of authority, yet Finland was an ally of Germany, and thus Finnish Jews had to work with soldiers whose colleagues were slaughtering Jews in other parts of Europe. Another standout was a documentary called *The Fire Within* (Lorry Salcedo Mitrani, 2008) about a Jewish community in the Peruvian Amazon who were descended from Jews who went there during the nineteenth-century rubber boom. The broad international selection at each year's NYJFF encapsulates, perhaps more than any other Walter Reade program, the vision of cinema as a truly global art form. A second aspect that defines the NYJFF has been its willingness to consistently expand the definition of what might be a "Jewish film." Most of the films over the years have had a clear connection to Jewish history or culture, but the festival has also included many works about individuals who, while Jews themselves, do not address in the film, or even in their lives, specifically Jewish concerns. For me, these works are a testament to the extraordinary impact that the Jewish community has had on secular societies since its integration into those societies over the past few centuries.



Image still from *The Golem*, directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, Germany, 1920, 91 min. Courtesy UFA / The Kobal Collection.

Finally, I must express my ongoing admiration for the NYJFF's continuing willingness to present works that offer decidedly controversial views. Having grown up in New York, and knowing since a tender age the adage "two Jews, three *shuls*," I understand that disputations and arguments are very much part of Jewish culture—at least the part to which I was exposed. In the twenty-one years I worked on the selection, and since, the festival never shied away from films that would surely produce streams of angry letters or emails. In 1997, for example, each screening of *Never, Again, Forever* (Danae Elon and Pierre Chainet, 1996) was interrupted by audience members leaping on stage trying to block the images being projected. Names were called, memberships—for both organizations—were cancelled, yet the NYJFF continues to stand behind works it considers essential to screen, no matter the consequences. To my mind, this more than anything attests to the festival's importance in New York's cultural and Jewish life.



Image still from *Left Luggage*, with Isabella Rossellini (pictured), directed by Jeroen Krabbé, USA/Netherlands/Belgium, 1998, 100 min. Courtesy Shooting Star / Flying Dutchman / The Kobal Collection.

At twenty-five, the New York Jewish Film Festival shows no sign whatsoever of slipping into a comfortable middle age; it's as much the rambunctious youngster it's always been, and that I know it will

continue to be. Congratulations on another spectacular program this year; I'm looking forward to many more.

Richard Peña is Director Emeritus of the New York Film Festival and Professor of Film Studies at Columbia University.

What Makes a Film Jewish?

Jeffrey Shandler

“What makes a film Jewish?” It’s a question people often ask, just as they wonder what defines Jewish art or literature or music. As someone who teaches and writes about this subject, I used to dread being asked this question, because it can’t be answered successfully. Any criterion one might come up with—Jewish content, themes, sources, or artists—fails to satisfy and only engenders new conundrums. Indeed, merely asking what makes a film Jewish is to make a whole set of problematic assumptions.

Yet despite being inherently thorny, this question does keep getting asked—and therefore is a phenomenon worth examining. So when someone asks me what makes a film Jewish, I respond with a question of my own: what prompts this persistent desire to determine what is (and, by implication, what is not) a Jewish film or other cultural work?

This desire is rooted in a central challenge of Jews’ engagements with modernity. As a consequence of these encounters, the possibilities of Jewishness have expanded beyond (and sometimes left behind) the traditional tenets and observances of rabbinic Judaism, even as some Jews staunchly resist these changes. The proliferation of new Jewish definitional practices—such as political activism, journalism, sports, hero worship, theater, and, of course, museums—has prompted both

Jews and others to seek connections between Jewish identity and Jewish culture. As they contemplate the cascade of new ideas and activities that Jews have embraced, as well as the transformative events that they have experienced, people want to know: What is still distinctively Jewish? What do Jews still have in common with one another?



Image still from *One of the Hollywood Ten*, with Jeff Goldblum (pictured), directed by Karl Francis, UK/Spain, 2000, 109 min.

The attention paid to Jews' engagements with film epitomizes this pursuit. Since the medium's beginnings, Jews have been portrayed on screen, at times provocatively (as early as a series of short films made by Georges Méliès in 1899 that restaged the Dreyfus affair, even as it was still in progress). The conspicuous participation of Jews in the rise of the movie industry prompted considerable fear and loathing among anti-Semites and provoked much anxiety among Jews—at least at first, eventually transmuting into a source of pride. As J. Hoberman and I observed in our examination of "Hollywood's Jewish Question" for the catalogue to the Jewish Museum's 2003 exhibition *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, this inquiry

continues to offer “a telling index of how Americans draw connections between identity and culture.”¹

Discussing the Jewishness of Hollywood—whether “claimed as a source of Jewish pride or repudiated as a sign of Jewish shame”²—is part of a larger set of Jewish practices for engaging with film that have emerged over the past century. Some people scrutinize the end credits of films for Jewish participation and keep track of which actors are Jews, especially those who changed their names to obscure their origins (a practice that, Hoberman and I noted, is common to both philo-Semites and anti-Semites, albeit toward quite different ends). While some Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, have monitored the images of Jews portrayed on screen, others enlist movie stars as spokespersons to champion their causes. Jewish philanthropists underwrite the production of documentaries and features on Jewish subjects. Jewish periodicals publish reviews of films, often reading them with an ethnocentric eye. Jewish audience members may boycott a movie deemed anti-Semitic or may go see it out of curiosity. Videotapes and DVDs of films on Jewish topics can be found on the shelves of many a synagogue library. Websites and bloggers post lists of “100 Best Jewish Films,” and those who beg to differ with the choices respond in kind. Vidders post Judaized spoofs or mashups of Hollywood classics (for example, scenes from *Casablanca* dubbed in Yiddish) on YouTube. And a growing number of scholars publish books and articles on Jewish cinema and offer college courses on the topic.

Especially noteworthy are examples of film watching integrated into Jewish ritual life. By the early 1960s, some American Jewish summer camps had begun screening Alain Resnais’s 1955 documentary *Night and Fog* on Tisha B’Av, thereby linking Holocaust remembrance with the fast day mourning the destruction of the First and Second Temples in ancient Jerusalem. In her 2002 novel *In the Image*, Dara Horn describes a suburban Jewish family’s self-styled ritual for

welcoming in the Sabbath on Friday nights: they would light candles, bless wine and bread “exactly like in those old Jewish folktales,” and then, “after they had finished reciting the Grace after Meals, [the] family would get up from the table, clear away the dishes, go into the living room, and watch a rented movie,” always choosing “Important Films” meant to “teach them something about the Human Condition.”³

The most elaborate form of Jewish engagement with films is surely the Jewish film festival. The first one was launched in San Francisco in 1980, and now this is an international phenomenon, with well over a hundred different festivals large and small. Some are independent entities, while others are organized by museums, art cinemas, Jewish community centers, or universities. These events bring many of the aforementioned practices together into one enterprise. Films are not merely watched but discussed, both formally in post-screening dialogues with filmmakers, critics, or scholars, and informally while standing in line for tickets, refreshments, and restrooms. Some festivals ask attendees to vote on awards for favorite films. And as the cost of operating film festivals is seldom, if ever, covered by ticket sales, these events have become funding opportunities for philanthropists who support Jewish culture. Because Jewish film festivals are usually annual occasions, held at the same time each year, they have become fixtures of local Jewish calendars. A sizable number of people who regularly attend these festivals analogize the experience to attending synagogue; some Jews explain that for them, the film festival has replaced congregational worship, becoming, in effect, their High Holy Days. At any given screening, one can find such Jews sitting beside those for whom the festival is but one of an array of Jewish activities in which they partake, as well as people who aren't Jews but are attracted by the film's subject, or filmmaker, or performers.

It may seem paradoxical that Jewish film festivals have proliferated at the same time that opportunities to watch movies on one's own, at a

time and place of one's choosing, have burgeoned thanks to video rentals, programmable DVRs, on-demand cable services, DVDs, Netflix, and online streaming. Now that it is possible to access an inventory of films of unprecedented scope and variety and screen them on an array of electronic devices without leaving the comfort of home, why would anyone go out to watch a movie—especially on a bone-chilling night in January?



Image still from *Rothschild's Violin*, directed by Edgardo Cozarinsky, France/Finland/Switzerland, 1996, 101 min. Courtesy CAB Productions / France Telecom / The Kobal Collection.

The reason may be that Jewish film festivals, like others that are centered on a particular social group—Asian Americans, LGBT, people with disabilities—are sites of communion, which is enacted as much in the auditoriums and lobbies as it is on the screen, if not more so. As folklorist and media scholar Mikel Koven observed of Toronto's Jewish film festival, "Cinema is but the medium through which internal cultural dialogues occur."⁴ To attend a screening at a Jewish film festival is to partake of a contemporary Jewish practice—whether you're Jewish or not, and whether or not Jewishness brought you to the event. Showing a film at Jewish film festivals doesn't necessarily make it "Jewish" (whatever that might mean). But doing so can make

the film a catalyst for conversations about Jewishness. So perhaps instead of asking what makes a Jewish film, it would be more fruitful to ask, “What conversations about Jewishness does a film engender? And what sort of communion is created, however briefly, by this discussion?” These conversations are not necessarily consensual acts of group affirmation; indeed, sometimes they prove quite contentious. The discussions at Jewish film festivals take place among the shifting assortment of people, many of them unknown to one another, who comprise the audience for each screening. The common experience of sitting side by side in the dark to watch and listen as the film unfolds refracts as soon as the film ends, the lights come up, and the talking begins. The shared act of watching a movie is complemented—and enriched—by the diversity of responses to it. That the responses are at times heated is a testimony to the power of works of culture to provoke strong thoughts and arouse deeply held feelings. If you are lucky, your visit to the New York Jewish Film Festival will provide you with both an engaging film and a stimulating argument—the former to lure you out into the cold, the latter to fuel your journey home. As an elderly Jewish woman once told anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, citing Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, “We fight to keep warm.”⁵

Jeffrey Shandler is Professor and Chair, Department of Jewish Studies, Rutgers University.

Notes

1. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, “Hollywood’s Jewish Question,” in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 75.
2. Ibid.
3. Dara Horn, *In the Image: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 56–57.
4. Mikel J. Koven, “‘You Don’t Have to Be Filmish’: The Toronto Jewish Film Festival,” *Ethnologies* 21, no. 1 (2003): 125.
5. Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 191.

Twenty-Five Years of Looking at the Silver Screen: A History of the New York Jewish Film Festival

Aviva Weintraub

Since its founding in 1992 as a unique partnership between the Jewish Museum and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, the New York Jewish Film Festival (NYJFF) has grown into one of the most significant Jewish film festivals in the world. In our first quarter-century, we have presented almost seven hundred films from forty-three countries to more than two hundred thousand people. The festival presents features, documentaries, and shorts by renowned and emerging filmmakers, many of whom attend in person to introduce their work and participate in post-screening Q&As. To expand the festival experience, special “sidebar” selections by influential filmmakers, lectures, screenings of archival prints and rarely seen films from the vaults of Jewish cinematic history, and other programs create space for a rich conversation about the art of film.



Image still from *Stavisky*, directed by Alain Resnais, France/Italy, 1974, 120 min. Courtesy Ariane / Cerito / The Kobal Collection.

These salient facts reveal a broader truth about the intent and effect of the festival: in its inclusive reach, diversity of content, and depth of exploration, the festival provides a platform for the Jewish contribution to world cinema and helps to define it. We at the NYJFF are proud to host this ongoing, evolving conversation about what it means to be Jewish at a particular moment in time, about our past, and about what our collective future holds. The festival is a framework for addressing these questions through the art of cinema.

The NYJFF is one of the longest-running Jewish film festivals in the United States, and the partnership of the two organizations—the Jewish Museum and the Film Society of Lincoln Center—is one of the longest-running collaborations of two major arts institutions in New York. Each occupies a significant and specific place in the cultural landscape of the city; together they give the festival a DNA that is unique locally, nationally, and internationally. And what a pleasure it was working with Richard Peña, the Film Society’s longtime Director of Programming, and now with Dennis Lim, Director of Programming since 2013.



Image still from *Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem*, with Ronit Elkabetz (pictured), directed by Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz, Israel/Germany/France, 2014, 115 min.

Jewish cinema—the films being made, the filmmakers who are making

them, and what that phrase even means—has undergone major transformations over the last quarter-century. Its scope, in every way, has expanded dramatically, and the festival has nimbly kept pace. The first edition in 1992 presented eleven films over eight days; the 2016 edition will present thirty-seven over two weeks. But more significant than the sheer number of films is the way the event has grown programmatically.

The first few years of the NYJFF focused largely on the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. With the fall of Communism, feature films on Jewish themes were suddenly pouring out of these countries. This period represents a remarkably rich vein in the history of Jewish cinema. Founding NYJFF director Wanda Bershen wrote at the time: “As we watch this almost unbelievable movie of late-twentieth-century history play itself out in those places from which so many of us trace our ancestry, it is our hope that the presentation and discussion of these films can contribute to the task of remembrance and reconstruction.” For several years, the focus of the NYJFF remained on Eastern Europe, then gradually expanded to include Western Europe, Israel, and North and South America. Now the geography is truly global. The veritable explosion of Jewish film production that began in the mid-1990s increases every year and shows no signs of stopping.

Through its many changes and expansions, a few programmatic constants at the NYJFF have remained. Films that will have a world, United States, or New York premiere are most sought after. Films produced within the past year are given priority, and films that have had theatrical releases are not eligible for inclusion. In addition to new productions, the NYJFF presents screenings of restored prints of archival films, including Yiddish-language talkies from the 1930s, in cooperation with the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University. Thematic sidebars of rare films have also been presented. A unique feature of the NYJFF has been to link these sidebars to exhibitions on view at the Jewish Museum. These presentations have

included a series of silent films from the 1910s, among them several by the great Ernst Lubitsch, in conjunction with the Jewish Museum's exhibition *Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture, 1890-1918* (2000); silent films featuring Sarah Bernhardt in conjunction with the exhibition *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama* (2006); and this year, a screening of *Benya Krik* (1926), which is based on Isaac Babel's *Odessa Tales*, in conjunction with the exhibition *The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film*.



Image still from *The Matchmaker*, directed by Avi Nesher, Israel, 2010, 112 min.

In January 2014, the NYJFF expanded its offerings with a number of programs called “Beyond the Screen,” initiated by Jewish Museum Deputy Director Jens Hoffmann. These included a symposium cosponsored by *Film Comment* magazine exploring the role of culturally specific film festivals, and a poster exhibition featuring the work of the designer and filmmaker Saul Bass. A special program called “Guest Selects” was inaugurated with a thirtieth-anniversary screening of *Paris, Texas*, along with two films selected by Wim Wenders. “Guest Selects” continued in 2015 with Jennie Livingston and the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Paris Is Burning!*

In recent years, each edition of the NYJFF has screened thirty to forty films, including shorts, culled from an annual universe of

approximately three to four hundred films. As the quantity of product continues to rise, the selection process becomes more challenging. That process, though, is the lifeblood of the festival; the choices and the manner in which they're made are the embodiment of our mission to illuminate and reflect the diversity of the global Jewish community as expressed in film.

The beauty of any festival, from an audience perspective, comes from attending many films in a concentrated period of time so that the experience becomes, in a sense, one long movie with many casts, locations, and points of view. Our audiences travel from New York to Russia, France, Israel, Germany, and Iran over the course of a few days. Equally important, the audience submits to the point of view of the filmmaker for the length of each film, and, hopefully, comes away with an appreciation of the many different manifestations of Jewish life and culture.

Another crucial element in a film festival is the presence of the filmmakers to introduce their films and participate in Q&A sessions with the audiences following the screenings. These post-screening talks, as well as the NYJFF's panel discussions with guest directors, film scholars, and critics, serve to contextualize and amplify the conversations around the films.

Some of the films in the NYJFF go on to theatrical release or television broadcast. Our audience members get to enjoy having been the "first on the block" to see them. Unfortunately, most films shown in the festival do not achieve distribution in the United States—a fact that makes the NYJFF an increasingly vital outlet for filmmakers, and an invaluable resource for audiences who appreciate the opportunity to see films they otherwise couldn't.

Many Jewish film festivals see themselves as an opportunity for audiences to identify as Jews in a communal setting. At the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, some audience members refer to

the festival as their version of High Holiday services: an annual event at which one sits in a Jewish environment, “reads” communal texts, and reunites with friends one sees on a yearly basis. In his 2003 article, “You Don’t Have to Be Filmish: The Toronto Jewish Film Festival,” (*Ethnologies* 21, no. 1), Mikel J. Koven wrote, “The texts themselves—the films—function as cultural icons to be displayed for the invocation of *communitas*. Cinema . . . is a medium through which the community is reborn and revalidated.”



Image still from *Strange Fruit*, directed by Joel Katz, USA, 2002, 57 min.

These concepts are crucial to our outlook at the NYJFF, where our audiences are so emblematic of New York itself: passionate, articulate, good naturedly combative, and heavily invested in what they see. The post-screening discussions are charged, full of energy, and never dull. Attendees ask intelligent questions, sometimes challenging the filmmaker directly. Often there are more questions than time, and discussions continue into the lobby and out onto the street. It is a feeling of assertion and participation, not just identification, that brings audience members out on frigid January days and nights.

Both the Jewish Museum and the Film Society of Lincoln Center emphasize the importance of looking at film as an art form as well

as a medium of cultural expression. In his 1925 essay “The Conversion of a Sinner in Berlin’s UFA Palace” in *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, Joseph Roth wrote of his moviegoing experience:

“Nothing betrayed the deep seriousness that awaited me inside the theater, and I had no idea what shocks my poor impious soul would encounter there. . . . I was sitting in the third row in front of the green velvet curtain. Suddenly the hall darkened, the curtain slowly parted, and a mysterious light that could not have been created by God, and that nature couldn’t manage in a thousand years, ran in soft rivulets over the silvery walls of the hall.” Nearly a century later, the art of cinema continues to impress. New York Jewish Film Festival audiences are drawn by curiosity and, we hope, leave with not only an enriched understanding but also a sense of wonder at the rich complexity of Jewish life around the globe in the twenty-first century. It is a privilege to participate in and contribute to the expansion of this understanding, and this wonder.

Aviva Weintraub is Associate Curator at the Jewish Museum and Director of the New York Jewish Film Festival.