The Un-Americans

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Petrified Laughter
Jews in Pictures, 1947

Nominations

In his book on the Jews of Hollywood, Neal Gabler recounts the following story of how the actor John Garfield got his name:

“What kind of a name is Garfield, anyway?” Jack Warner asked a young actor from New York’s Group Theater. “It doesn’t sound American.” Jules Garfield, formerly Julius Garfinkle, protested that it was the name of an American president, so Warner countered that it was the Jules that had to go. How about James—James Garfield? “But that’s the president’s name,” Garfield objected. “You wouldn’t name a goddamn actor Abraham Lincoln, would you?” “No, kid, we wouldn’t,” answered a Warner executive, “because Abe is a name that most people would say is Jewish and we wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea.” So Julius Garfinkle became John Garfield.¹

“We wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea” of course means “we wouldn’t want people to get the right idea”: an idea they could get—since you can never be too careful—even from a name like “Abraham Lincoln.” True to type, however, the moguls proved as shrewd as they were self-hating. After all, you wouldn’t name a movie actor “Abraham,” even today. And though Jack Warner may not have known much American history, his immigrant ear was acute enough to pick up some bad vibes around the name “Garfield.” For, like Lincoln, the American president who bore it was one of the three assassinated presidents at the time of
John Garfield’s christening. That this “goddamn actor” would share a Christian name with the fourth president to be assassinated is no doubt what they call an accident of history. Another accident of history—but an utterly predictable accident, an accident waiting to happen—was the assassination of John Garfield himself: by which I mean the targeting and tormenting of the actor by the House Un-American Activities Committee, which, intent on humiliating him into the violent redundancy of naming names, played a large role in causing the heart attack that would kill him in 1952 at the age of thirty-nine. For refusing to become a fink, the former Garfinkle paid with his life.

“What kind of a name is Garfield, anyway?": as though to naturalize his own name, Jack Warner doesn’t so much ask a question as issue a warning. No one more alert to what “doesn’t sound American” than a Jewish studio head in Hollywood’s golden age—especially as that golden age gave way to a more overt reign of terror conducted in the name of patriotism, and supported with abject enthusiasm by every Jewish mogul, including Jack Warner. If Warner, assisting in the naming of John Garfield, darkly intuited the fatality of that name, his endorsement of the blacklist would help turn his intuition into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and his caution into a death wish. “How about James—James Garfield?” With warnsers like these, who needs stalkers? With bodyguards like these, who needs assassins?

In 1947, the same year in which the Un-American Activities Committee began its inquisition in Hollywood, and in which, eager to please their Christian masters in Washington and on Wall Street, even at the cost of self-destruction, Warner and his fellow studio heads instituted the blacklist, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, living in Los Angeles, the very capital of what, through their indictment of it, would come to be known as the culture industry, published that indictment in the first printed edition of Dialectic of Enlightenment. We have already encountered this passage, but it is worth considering again what the authors had to say about “culture monopolies” like the Hollywood studios: “They have to keep in with the true wielders of power, to ensure that their sphere of mass society, the specific product of which still has too much of cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism about it, is not subjected to a series of purges.” At once the purge and the deflection of the purge, the blacklist, far from proving Horkheimer and Adorno wrong,
conveniently illustrates their whole oxymoronic ontology of the culture monopolies, or the culture industry, as domination by the dominated, as liberal totalitarianism, as the Nazism of the Jews—as the very grand-daddy of all those baby-faced tyrannies that cultural studies loves to hate. If the Warner brothers hadn’t existed, Horkheimer and Adorno would have had to invent them.

And while we’re at it, here’s one more Accident That Isn’t One: also in 1947, Hollywood released two high-profile films about anti-Semitism, as well as a third picture, which, though less explicit in its representation of Jewishness, may be the most “Jewish” of them all. This last film, in which John Garfield played the starring role, was Robert Rossen and Abraham Polonsky’s *Body and Soul*. One of the two films about anti-Semitism—whose producer in fact invited Horkheimer to comment on it—was *Crossfire*, which I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, and to which I will return in a moment. The other was the Academy Award–winning *Gentleman’s Agreement*, in which Garfield had a supporting role, and which Elia Kazan directed. Garfield was *HUAC*’s most stellar target, and Kazan, to whom we will turn in the next chapter, its most eminent collaborator, but a remarkably large number of those involved in all three films would in fact end up, whether “uncooperatively” or not, in the committee’s cross hairs, lending plausibility to the view that Cold-War anti-Communism was inseparable from Cold-War anti-Semitism. No doubt the inquisitors in Washington owed much of their zeal to the assumption that all Hollywood movies were Jewish pictures—even when, like Darryl Zanuck, the studio chief responsible for *Gentleman’s Agreement*, their makers were Gentiles. Adding insult to injury, the three films of 1947 that I discuss in this chapter had the effrontery to be not just Jewish pictures but pictures of Jews. This alone may seem to account for their evident nonappeasement of “the true wielders of power.” But what exactly is the trouble with Jews in pictures? Is it as plain as the noses on their faces? Is the answer as simple as Jewishness and left-wing politics in the first year of the Cold War? Are these things really so simple, especially when they come together in pictures? What is it about these films, and about *Body and Soul* and *Crossfire* in particular, that so inflamed *HUAC*, and that threw the Jews behind pictures—the mostly Jewish heads of studios—into a veritable frenzy of appeasement, whose effects, some have argued, are still in the air, even though the Cold War
To answer this question will be to suggest the extent to which recent cultural-studies accounts of the distinctively (though not exclusively) Jewish culture industry, whether or not they are explicitly derived from Horkheimer and Adorno, continue the work of the blacklist by suppressing not just the “cozy liberalism” but indeed the radicalism of these Jewish pictures, and not just the radicalism of the Jewish minority but the radicalism of the Jew as minor performer: a radicalism of the character actor, a radicalism of the comedian, and therefore, to be sure, a radicalism not recognizable by the most approved political signs.

Comic Materialism

Less celebrated than *Gentleman’s Agreement*, *Crossfire* in fact opened a few months before it, and has the added distinction not only of showing how a Hollywood of Jewish liberals is always already a Hollywood of assassins, but also of revealing exactly what gets caught in the crossfire of “always already,” crossed out in the chiastic intersection of “culture” and “industry.” Directed by Edward Dmytryk and produced by Adrian Scott, both of whom, in part because of the film, would soon end up in prison as members of the Hollywood Ten—the first casualties of huaC and the studios—and based on Richard Brooks’s novel *The Brick Foxhole*, *Crossfire* takes place in a claustrophobically noirish milieu of soldiers and civilians in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. But where Brooks’s novel is about the murder of a homosexual and the pursuit of his killer, the film, playing by the rules of a Production Code that, as film scholars such as James Naremore and Peter Lev have noted, insisted on keeping homosexuality unnameable—substitutes an anti-Jewish hate crime for a homophobic one. While this substitution dutifully works to appease the true wielders of power, the censors seem not to have caught the pederastic implications of the narrative’s liberal pedagogy, implications that survive the degaying of the murder victim. First entrusting that pedagogy, in a flashback, to the middle-aged Jewish man with whose killing the film begins, *Crossfire* wears its bleeding heart on the sleeve of a figure, part rabbi, part therapist, who all too vulnerably embodies the very “sensitivity” that, in 1947—that is to say, in that brief interval after the Holocaust and before the establishment
of the state of Israel—a lot of Jewish men were trying to shed, or at least, in the semi-tough manner of, say, John Garfield, trying to hide. In the first of the film’s two scenes of instruction, both featuring, as students, young, handsome, confused, male soldiers, the part of teacher is played by a character named Joseph Samuels, played by Sam Levene. As a certain name game itself thus gets played, the teacher, at last giving a diegetic face to Hollywood’s cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism, makes that liberalism and intellectualism look so cozy that the scene of instruction, enacted with remarkable intimacy between two men in a bar, closely resembles a scene of seduction:

**Samuels:** My girl is worried about you. We were talking about you when that kid spilled that drink on her. She says you’re not drinking but you’re getting drunk anyway. Anybody that can do that has got a problem. It’s a funny thing, isn’t it?

**Mitchell:** Very funny.

**Samuels:** It’s worse at night, isn’t it? I think maybe it’s suddenly not having a lot of enemies to hate anymore. (Picks up peanut from bowl.) Maybe it’s because for four years now we’ve been focusing our mind on one little peanut. The win-the-war peanut. That was all. Get it over with. Eat that peanut. (Pops it in his mouth.) All at once, no peanut. Now we start looking at each other again. We don’t know what we’re supposed to do, we don’t know what’s supposed to happen. We’re too used to fightin’. But we just don’t know what to fight. You can feel the tension in the air. A whole lotta fight and hate that doesn’t know where to go. A guy like you maybe starts hatin’ himself. Well, one of these days, maybe we’ll all learn to shift gears. Maybe we’ll stop hatin’ and start likin’ things again, huh?

Samuels will be killed shortly after inviting the soldier, Mitchell, up to his apartment. But though Mitchell is suspected of committing the murder, he is being framed by the real killer, a fellow soldier named Montgomery, or Monty, and played with frighteningly believable thuggishness by Robert Ryan, who, looking like the sleek, movie-star version of Patrick Buchanan, needs no fiery cross to evoke the special horror of anti-Semitism, American-style. Monty kills Samuels not because he fears that Samuels is coming on to him or to Mitchell (“eat that peanut”), but because he is enraged by what he regards as Samuels’s typically Jew-
ish parasitism—by the way the Jews “live off the fat of the land.” “You
know the kind,” Monty, we have seen, observes to the detective inves-
tigating the murder; “guys that played it safe during the war. . . . Got
swell apartments, swell dames. . . . Some of them are named Samuels,
some of them got funnier names.” The swell dames, of course, keep the
censors themselves out of the swell apartments, which, alone, might
have signaled too close an affinity between Jewish luxuriousness and
homosexual decadence. Yet if the film takes as much trouble to clear
Samuels of the invidious charge of Jewish parasitism as to provide him
with a “girl” and an interest in baseball—it turns out that he has no
money, and that he served in Okinawa during the war—his softness,
as though resisting total abstraction into liberal humanitarianism, pre-
serves traces not only of gay hedonism but also of the Jewish “materi-
alism” from which, in any case, a guy like Monty might not bother to
distinguish it. For although Samuels, judge and prophet like his biblical
namesake, concludes his fable of the peanut with what we might be
tempted to banalize as a plea for tolerance—“One of these days, maybe
we can stop hating and start liking one another”—what he actually says
is “One of these days, maybe we’ll all learn to shift gears. Maybe we’ll
stop hatin’ and start likin’ things again.” “Liken’ things”: consistent with
the terse, manly “poetry” of the screenplay as a whole, the phrase is suf-
ficiently general that “things” can no doubt be taken to include “people.”
But if “things” includes “people,” people are nonetheless things: like the
“funny thing” that Samuels mentions at the beginning of the scene—
when he refers to Mitchell’s getting drunk without drinking—or like the
funny thing at the center of his lesson, the “win-the-war peanut” that he
ends up popping into his mouth.
Insofar as the point is to stop hating and start liking things again—to
stop hating things and to start liking them again—then the funny thing
would seem to be a good place to start. For the funny thing would seem
to be an eminently likeable thing—unless, of course, you’re Monty, in
which case the funniness of the funny thing, like the funniness of the
funny name (“Some of them got funnier names”), causes not fun or
liking, but envy, resentment, and an urge to wipe out the happily funny
difference that can only signify pathologically funny deviation. Monty’s
anti-Semitism, in fact, consists not in his treating Jews as things, but
in his failing to treat them as likeable things. To be sure, his hatred and
violence dehumanize his victim; but that victim proposes, against the postwar paranoia of which Monty is the most egregious symptom, and which threatens to continue the war by bringing it home, a more than easygoing, indeed a fundamentally comic, relation to the world, whereby people, named things—transformed into things through the medium of the name—become available once more as objects of affection.

Murderously anticomic, Monty cannot tolerate Samuels’s comic materialism. And as the hard-hitting story of a murder investigation, this well-intentioned film, necessarily following the murderer, itself repeats his deadly seriousness, casting its murder victim out into the world where the actor who plays him seems to belong: the alternative universe of Broadway comedy and musical comedy, where no self-respecting film-noir citizen would be caught dead. Horkheimer worried that, for all its overt anti-anti-Semitism, Crossfire unconsciously invited the audience’s identification with the hunky anti-Semitic killer: an identification, we might add, that, by virtue of its genre, the film cannot but share. Yet, while the narrative pursues the taut, lean svelteness of Monty’s killer body, the swellness that Monty not-so-mistakenly attributes to Samuels produces a certain quiet counternarrative of its own. Within the rippling, tense angularity of the suspenseful narrative, that is, something swells:
and what swells is precisely the word “thing.” Almost by virtue of its very imprecision, its colloquial elasticity, that word—manly in its plainness but somehow, to quote Michael Rogin’s description of Samuels himself, “vaguely effeminate,”10 or perhaps effeminately vague—proliferates in the second of the film’s scenes of instruction, where the role of student is now played by a soldier named Leroy, and where the teacher, Samuels in the previous scene, is now a police detective named Finlay:

**Finlay:** Leroy, has Monty ever made fun of your accent?

**Leroy:** Sure, lots o’ times. He . . .

**Finlay:** Why? He calls you a hillbilly, doesn’t he? Says you’re dumb. He laughs at you because you’re from Tennessee. He’s never been to Tennessee. Ignorant men always laugh at things that are different, things they don’t understand. They’re afraid of things they don’t understand. They end up hating them.

**Leroy:** You get me all mixed up. You know about all these things I don’t know anything about. How do I know what you’re trying to do? How do I know you aren’t a Jewish person yourself, or something?

**Finlay:** You don’t. But would it make any difference? Well, alright, Leroy. But I’d like to tell you one more thing.

“Ignorant men always laugh at things that are different, things they don’t understand.” “You know about all these things I don’t know anything about. . . . How do I know you aren’t a Jewish person yourself, or something?” “But I’d like to tell you one more thing.” “Things are beginning to get out of hand here, especially as “thing”s swell into “something” and “anything.” What prevents anything funny from happening (“How do I know what you’re trying to do?”) is that this teacher keeps both the proper distance from the student and the proper straight face to go with it. The star system having dispensed with the comic functions of minority character (Samuels) and minor actor (Levene) alike, the Law finds its appropriately major embodiment in Robert Young’s pedagogically earnest detective: a figure as humorless, albeit in the name of “understanding,” as is the churlish heavy, Monty, who at any rate never even laughs at things, but merely marks them as funny the better to hate them. As if it weren’t enough for the two actors (Robert Ryan and Robert Young) to share a first name, their characters must also attempt to match each other in their general grimness. Not that
there is anything unusual in the kinship between criminals and police, especially in a genre like film noir, where almost everyone, even the egghead, comes hard-boiled. That Monty was a cop before the war merely reinforces the specular relation between the anti-Semitic villain and the anti-anti-Semitic hero. At the end of the film, after Finlay talks Leroy into helping him catch Monty, the detective guns down the killer from a high window, eerily anticipating the fourth presidential assassination. Thus liberal Hollywood indeed seems to stand unmasked as the double, and as the accomplice, of its ostensible opposite: the right-wing terror that, in 1947, was taking over the country but that, even in the happiest days of the New Deal, demanded to be served. Teaching Monty a lesson, benign pedagogical narrativity seems to reveal itself as the brutally arresting force of interpellation that it always was.

In this gloomy light, it is difficult not to take a dim view of Finlay’s answer to Leroy’s question: “How do I know what you’re trying to do? How do I know you aren’t a Jewish person yourself, or something?” When Finlay replies, “You don’t. But would it make any difference?,” a cynical voice might be heard to whisper the dirty secret of the culture industry: that the rabbi-therapist doesn’t turn into a cop who turns into an assassin, because rabbinical-therapeutic Hollywood is already by definition policial-terroristic Hollywood. “No,” the rhetorical question bitterly answers itself, “it wouldn’t make any difference.” Needless to say, Finlay will go on to establish for Leroy that he isn’t a Jewish person, or something—or rather, that the something he is isn’t a Jewish something: the “one more thing” Finlay tells Leroy is a story about how his Irish-Catholic grandfather was murdered by a racist mob in Philadelphia in 1848. And while the overt moral of the story is that hatred can strike anywhere and anyone, even a white Gentile soldier from Tennessee, its barely hidden assurance, for all the Leroys out there in the dark, is that the film itself isn’t just “Jewish propaganda.”

But Leroy may not be as dumb as Monty says he is, or as the film itself seems to think he is: if only because of all the “thing”s he and Finlay have to say—that is, if only because of the swelling thingness of the dialogue—he knows very well not only that there’s a Jewish person behind the non-Jewish cop, and behind the film’s non-Jewish director, producer, and writer, but also that it makes a difference. One name for that Jew—indeed, one of those funnier names “some of them got”—is
Dore Schary, the liberal head of production at rko, the studio that made *Crossfire*, and the co-author, in 1947, both of the film, in whose shaping he was involved, and of the founding text of the blacklist, the classically sycophantic “Waldorf Statement,” which, via *HUAC*, would send Dmytryk and Scott, the film’s director and producer, to jail.\(^{12}\) As we know, however, another name for the Jew behind Finlay is Joseph Samuels, and still another, behind Samuels, is Sam Levene. Names like these—“Samuel,” for instance, means “name of God”—aren’t quite as funny as Dore Schary. But in this film “starring three Roberts,” as Robert Osborne calls it\(^{13}\)—for along with Robert Ryan and Robert Young, the film also features Robert Mitchum—names of non-stars, *minor* names, names like Joseph Samuels and Sam Levene, are funny enough.\(^{14}\) “Perhaps names are nothing but petrified laughter,” Horkheimer and Adorno write elsewhere in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, accidentally suggesting what gets left out of their ontology of the culture industry, lost between Hollywood liberalism and the more frankly petrifying fascism that Hollywood liberalism, by always appeasing, always already is.\(^{15}\) If names are no more (and no less) than petrified laughter, funny Jewish names, on the one hand, may be names that, in becoming *un*petrified, threaten to liberate the dream of happiness implicit in all names, a dream that cooler names, icily glittering star names like Robert, merely keep locked up and in suspense. On the other hand—though there’s no reason why these two hands can’t meet—Jewish names, especially at the beginning of the Cold War, may be the most tongue-twistingly thing-like of them all: the un-American-sounding names that fail to flow naturally, and so intensify their funniness as they turn petrifaction into something other than the extremity of fear: into the sign of the “magic” whereby the Jewish dream factory preserves, as through a process of deep-freezing, the whole swell *mise en scène* of a comically likeable material world.\(^{16}\)

Without being Jewish persons themselves, Dmytryk and Scott perform this magic well enough to find themselves implicated in en-Jewment—which, together with their refusal to talk about their politics, a politics of left materialism, after all, is why they went to jail. For all their success in liberalizing Leroy, if not in putting one over on him, *Crossfire’s* producer and director had no such luck with a committee of Montys, who, like Leroy, couldn’t be fooled into believing they weren’t Jews or something—what kind of a name is Dmytryk, anyway?—but for whom their
difference made the worst kind of difference. To clear his name—that is, to resume working in a Hollywood from which he would otherwise have been frozen out—Dmytryk, on leaving jail, would himself name names. “He ought to look at a casualty list sometime. There are a lot of funny names there too,” Robert Mitchum says to Robert Young after Robert Ryan makes his unfunny crack, in the film that would help put the names of its producer and director on another, but not unrelated, casualty list. Dmytryk got his name off that list by putting other people’s names on it; he survived the assassination attempt by assassinating his friends. The blacklist turned a series of funny names into a list of the dead. It parodied, by inverting, the “sentimental” lesson of Joseph Samuels and Sam Levene: that it is only by following Hollywood’s example and seeing people as things that we can imagine a world that could make us happy—a world we could ask about without interrogating. What kind of a name is Garfield, anyway? If only we did “know the kind.”

Comic Formalism

Swollen with “thing”s—that is, with the word “thing” and thus with a certain thingness of words in general—the dialogue of Crossfire at times borders on what Horkheimer and Adorno, in the chapter on anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment, call “uncontrolled mimesis.” Uncontrolled mimesis, “proscribed” by civilization, is precisely what makes the Jew so fascinating to the anti-Semite:

There is no anti-Semite who does not feel an instinctive urge to ape what he takes to be Jewishness. The same mimetic codes are constantly used: the argumentative jerking of the hands, the singing tone of voice, which vividly animates a situation or a feeling [ein bewegtes Bild von Sache und Gefühl] independently of judgment [unabhängig vom Urteilssinn], and the nose, that physiognomic principium individuationis, which writes the individual’s peculiarity on his face.17

Funny how the Jew’s comic materialism (“vividly animates a situation or a feeling”) coincides with a comic formalism (“independently of judgment”)—with a mimetic flair for bringing out what genteel language shuts up: its gestural or even animal unconscious. Later, Adorno will
locate an example of this comic formalism in the Austrian-Jewish critic Karl Kraus:

The sympathy that Kraus showed many dialect writers and comedians, in preference to so-called high literature and in protest against it, is inspired by complicity with the undomesticated mimetic moment. It is also the root of Kraus’s jokes: in them language imitates the gestures of language the way the grimaces of the comedian imitate the face of the person he parodies. For all its rationality and force, the thoroughgoing constructivism of Kraus’ language is its translation back into gesture, into a medium that is older than that of judgment.  

Translating language back into gesture, Kraus’s jokes, like those of the dialect writer or the comedian, make so-called high literature speak against itself: in their radical complicity with undomesticated mimesis, they turn that literature back into the gestural prehistory that, like an anxious immigrant parvenu, it struggles to overcome. How many Jewish jokes, from Freud and Proust to the Borscht Belt and Wendy Wasserstein, play on just this reversal of gentility into its repressed antecedents? How many of these jokes, that is, show the reversal as, precisely, an effect of gesture, where gesture is the part of language that, like a funny accent or an unassimilated parent, embarrasses language? That the embarrassment should strike at the very moment when language is most concerned to make a good impression accounts, of course, for the particular sting with which the jokes themselves strike. Just when language thinks it has everything, especially itself, under control, it starts gesturing, or even gesticulating, thereby hysterically displaying one of the classic signs of an always excessive Jewish identity. The Jewish comedian in Kraus does his most mischievous work when—to trope on Sander Gilman’s term—he voices “the hidden language of the Jews” in authors whom the revelation would mortify, when—to invoke one of Freud’s Jewish jokes—he changes “anti-Semitism” to “ante-Semitism.”

The radical comedy of undomesticated mimesis may once have played a role in what has become the culture industry: Horkheimer and Adorno evoke “the pure nonsense which, as buffoonery and clowning, was a legitimate part of popular art up to Chaplin and the Marx Brothers.” For the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the culture industry, of course,
is neither popular nor art, but rather a travesty and a betrayal of whatever buffoonery and clowning it may piously invoke in its occasional nostalgie de la boue. Yet the petrified laughter of a film like Crossfire alerts us to what is not so much excluded from as suspended in Horkheimer and Adorno’s totalizing chiasmus of entertaining totalitarianism. Anticipating a time of “liking things again,” Crossfire simultaneously gestures back toward a happiness as ancient as the gestural medium itself. The “funniness” of this otherwise straight-faced film suggests, that is, that not every Hollywood movie of 1947 is merely fraudulent and self-congratulatory in its relation to its comic antecedents. Indeed, audiences of 1947 were offered, along with Crossfire, an even more ambitious (if also more ambivalent) example of a Hollywood product that, in the name of leftist art, translated language “back into gesture,” back into authentically popular culture and “proscribed” Jewish mimetic origins. I am referring not to Gentleman’s Agreement, but to the other film with John Garfield, Rossen and Polonsky’s Body and Soul. Unlike Crossfire’s producer and director, none of the personnel involved in Body and Soul wound up in jail, but almost all of its authors and major players would soon find themselves treated like criminals. And while the film’s complicity with an illegal and “undomesticated” mimesis was by no means its most obvious offense, that complicity could only have had an aggravating effect, like that of a thumbed nose (“that physiognomic principium individuationis”), in the eyes of a vengeful Americanism. At any rate, in addition to Garfield, whom Huac hounded to death, the committee’s victims from this film alone included the actors Canada Lee, whom it also drove into an early grave; Anne Revere, Art Smith, and Lloyd Goff (also known as Lloyd Gough), all of whom were blacklisted; the director, Robert Rossen, who was first subpoenaed as one of the Hollywood Nineteen before the Nineteen became Ten, and who later, like Dmytryk, saved his career by recanting and informing; and the screenwriter, Abraham Polonsky, whose fateful middle name, Lincoln, wasn’t all that likely in the first place to keep his un-American-sounding first and last ones off Huac’s hit list, where they too ended up, and where they would stay for a decade and a half after his appearance as an “unfriendly” witness in 1951.

Notoriously paranoid, the committee needed no incisive hermeneutics of suspicion to detect the un-Americanism of Body and Soul’s makers, whose left-wing politics the film quite frankly propounds. As Michael
Rogin observes, “If any film gives [credibility] to the hallucinatory charge that a Communist conspiracy was seizing control of Hollywood . . . this is the one.”22 Though less programmatically anti-anti-Semitic than either Crossfire or Gentleman’s Agreement, Body and Soul is emphatically anticapitalist and unabashedly systematic in its critique of American society, far bolder than the other two films in linking racial oppressions—of blacks as well as Jews—with economic ones. Elaborating its critique in the form of a rags-to-riches story about a Lower East Side street kid named Charley Davis, played by Garfield, who becomes a boxing champion by submitting to the control of a crooked promoter, impudently named Roberts, after the film’s producer (one Robert Roberts, to be exact—as though there weren’t already enough Roberts in 1947), Body and Soul pulls no punches in presenting the promoter’s manipulation of both boxers and their public as a metaphor for the ruthlessness, corruption, and mendacity of American capitalism as a whole. But the same left hand that strikes out at the capitalist system also gestures toward the possibility of resisting it. For, at the end of the film, after Charley has watched his friend and coach, the black former champion named Ben Chaplin and played by Canada Lee, stand up to Roberts (Lloyd Goff), even though he dies as a result, Charley wins a fight that he had agreed to throw, and walks away from an angry, threatening Roberts, saying, “What are you going to do, kill me? Everybody dies. . . . I never felt better in my life.”

Commenting on the disagreement between the director, Rossen, and the screenwriter, Polonsky, as to how the film should end, Robert Sklar writes:

Rossen, as Polonsky recalls it, wanted Charlie [sic] to be shot down for his defiance as he leaves the arena after the fight. Polonsky says that he prevailed on the ambiguous, but surely upbeat, ending. “Bob Rossen was fundamentally an anarchist by disposition,” Polonsky later said. . . . “He also thought that death was truer than life, as an ending. But we who are radicals know the opposite is true.”23

Sklar goes on to argue that, much as we might applaud the victory of the soon-to-be-blacklisted Polonsky over the soon-to-be-informing Rossen, Polonsky’s account of the film and its ending should be viewed with a certain skepticism. And Sklar has a point. Despite Polonsky’s intelligence
and moral force and political commitment, and despite his status as one of blacklist’s great heroes and martyrs—as “the anti-Kazan,” the leftist intellectual in Hollywood who gave up twenty years of a filmmaking career rather than betray himself and assassinate his friends—one has to admit that the text of Body and Soul doesn’t quite support Polonsky’s oppositions between himself and Rossen, between radicalism and anarchism, between life and death. The film indeed ends happily, as Polonsky wanted it to, with Charley defiantly walking away from the capitalist villain. Luckier than the actor who played him, Body and Soul’s hero escapes assassination, at least for the time being. Within Polonsky’s screenplay itself, however, the dominant voice is less life-affirming than precisely surly: the noirish voice of “urban poetry,” a fancier version of Crossfire’s already self-consciously “literary” guy-talk; a voice one might even call the Rossen voice, were it not such a distinctive feature of Polonsky’s own style.

To an interviewer who remarked of Rossen, “His pictures frequently seem a mishmash of blue-collar melodrama and art film, as though he had always wanted to do both types of films and constantly mixed them up,” Polonsky replied, “You have him down cold.” Of his own style, however, Polonsky once observed, “I live dangled between the formal and argot without solution.” Exemplifying the very condition it describes, this statement also suggests how one man’s mishmash may be another man’s dangling without solution. Especially as embodied by John Garfield, who portrays his character with what one critic has called “a combination of tough cynicism and urban dreaminess,” the film’s style seems less a mixture of Rossen and Polonsky than the product of their surprisingly consonant, because similarly mixed, voices. And yet, the conflict over the ending does begin to open up what is more-than-Rossen in Polonsky, revealing Polonsky to be more “radical” than his tendentious formulation allows. Prevailing in that conflict, so that Charley Davis can finally affirm “I never felt better in my life” over “everybody dies” (the film’s chilling refrain), Polonsky in effect recovers a possibility of the formal-argotic, and indeed of popular culture itself, that gets put on ice by its reification, in 1947 and after, as urban poetry or arty toughness. Just before he spoke about being dangled between the formal and argot, Polonsky, asked whether he had been influenced by Clifford Odets (whose Golden Boy, written for Garfield, Body and Soul
deliberately revises), answered, “We both derive from Jewish jokes and street quarrels.” The word “argot” itself derives from the French argoter, meaning “to quarrel,” and argoter in turn derives from the Latin ergo. But just as Karl Kraus’s dialect writers and comedians show how language-as-gesture precedes and underlies language-as-rationality, so Jewish jokes, rehearsing the translation of ergo into argot, translate dialectic back into the dialect it always implicitly was. They reveal the comic or mimetic roots—not just the happy endings but also the happy beginnings—of political argument in general, in which, to recall Horkheimer and Adorno, argument becomes “the argumentative jerking of the hands,” like a “singing tone of voice, which vividly animates a situation or a feeling independently of judgment.” The “radicalism” of Jewish jokes consists in translating street quarrels back into plays of form, in shifting the action from the street to a kind of theater behind the street.

The happy ending of *Body and Soul* is best understood in relation to a short scene much earlier in the film, where Charley is standing out on the street in front of the boarded-up remains of his family’s candy store, which we have just seen bombed in an attack on a neighboring speakeasy that has killed Charley’s gentle, humorous father (played by Art Smith). A figure appears out of the grocery next to the candy store: it is the grocer, a metonymic shadow of the murdered father, who says, in the Yiddishly inflected accent of the Lower East Side, “Charley, it’s cold out. Why don’t you come in and get a little warm?” To which Charley responds, with a little coldness of his own, “Thanks, I’m waiting for somebody.” Obviously feeling the chill, the grocer says, “okay,” and disappears back into his store—located on but also, like the stage set that it is, literally behind the street where Charley continues to stand shivering. The grocer disappears, anyway, until a scene near the end of the film, where Charley, now a rich and famous boxing champion, has to confront the implications of his throwing an upcoming fight, on Roberts’s orders. Charley and his girlfriend, Peg, are visiting his mother in her apartment above the old candy store, when the grocer, now identified as “Shimen,” comes in carrying a box filled with bags:

**shimen:** Charley, Charley. You’re a sight for sore eyes.

**charley:** Hello, Shimen!

**shimen:** Good to see you, you look wonderful . . . (begins to drop the box)
CHARLEY (CATCHING THE BOX): Oh!
SHIMEN (TO MRS. DAVIS): He looks fine.
MRS. DAVIS: You know Miss Born, Charley’s fiancée?
SHIMEN: This I suspected. Here y’are, Mrs. Davis. Charley, something special for you (handing him grapes from one of the bags)—straight from the Garden of Eden.
CHARLEY: Thanks.
MRS. DAVIS: Have some wine, Shimen.
SHIMEN: What’s the occasion?
MRS. DAVIS: Charley’s last fight.
SHIMEN: You don’t say?
CHARLEY: Well, don’t spread it around, Shimen.
SHIMEN: I’m like a grave. Does that mean you won’t fight anymore?
CHARLEY: That’s right.
SHIMEN: Well? So you’ll retire champeen. That’s bad? It’s good. (Charley laughs.) To the future retired champeen of the world, good luck. And to my five dollars that I bet on the fight, good luck too. (Drinks.) Mmm, good. Excuse me. Charley, everybody is betting on you, the whole neighborhood, like you was the Irish sweepstakes.
MRS. DAVIS: People shouldn’t bet.
SHIMEN: No, no, Mrs. Davis, it isn’t the money, it’s a way of showing: over in Europe the Nazis are killing people like us, just because of their religion. But here, Charley Davis is champeen. (To Charley): So you win and retire champeen, and we are proud. Period. (To Peg): I’m glad I met you. And Charley, when you leave, stop in and say toodle-do. (Exits.)
CHARLEY: Suckers like Shimen shouldn’t bet.
MRS. DAVIS: Suckers like Shimen? You didn’t hear what he said, Charley.
It isn’t the five dollars, it’s the . . .
CHARLEY: (getting angry) I know, I know. I can still lose.

After admitting to Peg and to his mother that he in fact must lose, or lose his boxing career, the sixty thousand dollars he’s betting on the fight, and probably his life, Charley returns to the training camp where Ben tries to talk him out of fixing the fight. Interrupted by the arrival of Roberts, Ben defies Roberts’s order to leave, frenetically acts out a fan-tasmatic comeback, collapses, and dies from the blood clot on the brain
that Charley, having won the championship from Ben, has unknowingly exacerbated.

Although Ben’s defiance of Roberts (“You don’t tell me how to live”), a defiance he shows even in his death, gives Charley the courage not to throw the fight in the climactic scene that follows, a certain analytic focus on the guilt-laden symbolic negotiations between the black boxer and the Jewish boxer has occluded the narrative logic that situates the box-carrying Jewish grocer, a box-er in his own right, alongside the black mentor, effectively making them Charley’s co-teachers. Even the few critics who notice Shimen have a way of not noticing him. Michael Rogin, for instance, writes: “‘Everybody’s betting on you,’ a local named Shimin [sic] tells Charley. The only character marked by name and accent as distinctively Jewish, Shimin appears in this scene (and no other) to remind Charley, ‘Over in Europe the Nazis are killing people like us. Just because of their religion. But here Charley Davis is champion.’”

Of course, Shimen does appear in another scene. And if his appearance there is fleeting enough to be forgettable, this is itself significant, since Charley himself rebuffs Shimen, choosing the cold street over the warm grocery—choosing tough, bitter urban poetry over a different concoction of the formal and the argotic, one that the later scene will imbue with the tenderness and sweetness of grapes straight from the Garden of Eden.

But though Rogin, editing Shimen out of the street scene, gives him an even colder shoulder than Charley does, he is right about how Shimen is the only character in the film with a distinctively Jewish name and accent. And he aptly points out the “documentary effect” whereby “Shimin Rishkin”—immigrant names often undergoing revision—“was played by a Jewish comedian of the same name.” According to his 1976 obituary in Variety, Shimen Ruskin, as he semi-anglicizingly called himself in Hollywood, “began his career as a child actor in Vilna, Poland, giving recitals of Yiddish poetry and performing with the Vilna Troupe, where he played the child bridegroom in the premiere of ‘The Dybbuk.’” After emigrating to the United States at the age of fourteen, Ruskin “for many years was associated with the major Yiddish acting companies,” performed with John Garfield on Broadway, and went to Hollywood in 1940, appearing in such films as Dark Passage, Letter to an Unknown Woman, and Murder, My Sweet as well as Body and Soul, until he “was
called before the House Unamerican Activities Committee, where he denounced the Committee’s campaign of political intimidation and refused to recant his convictions or to inform on friends and associates. As a result he was blacklisted for 10 years and expelled from the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.”

Over in Europe the Nazis were killing people like us, but here . . . .

Being blacklisted wasn’t the same thing as being killed by the Nazis, although I am not sure that the survivors of John Garfield and Canada Lee would take much comfort from this observation. A colleague of both Garfield and Lee, and a survivor of their victimization and his own, Polonsky, for his part, said of the blacklist years: “It was like collaboration under the Nazis. And it was like the resistance. The spectrum took in everything human including the inhuman.”

The “like” in “like collaboration under the Nazis” and “like the resistance” somehow seems safer, more hygienically metaphorical, than the all too pointedly indeterminate “like” in “killing people like us” (even if “people like us” are killed “because of their religion”). Yet Shimen Ruskin, comedian and martyr, born
in Poland and banned in America, appearing like if not as himself in Polonsky’s film of 1947, has the accidental, retroactive effect of making the safer “like” look a little like the scarier “like”: he calls into question the reassuring distance he seems to affirm between over there and over here, between the violence that he and people like him had escaped and the violence that he and people like him would not escape, between the state-sponsored terror that had just ended and the state-sponsored terror that was just beginning.

Appearing like if not as himself, that is, Shimen Ruskin both enhances *Body and Soul’s* documentary style and does something that only seems to undermine it: as though anticipating the sitcom practice of giving characters the same first names as the actors who play them, Shimen-playing-Shimen causes a bit of show business—but in this case, a bit of “undomesticated,” indeed un-American, show business—to seep into the everyday life of ordinary people. This theatricalization of the everyday by no means renders it frivolous, or mitigates the film’s affront to the patriotic. Heir to Karl Kraus’s dialect writers and comedians, Shimen, with his background in the Yiddish theater, delivers not just the groceries but also, straight from the Garden of Eden, a whole tradition of outlawed comic mimesis, where language reverts to gesture and where argument gets translated back into the expressive forms that make it possible.

Or, to put it in more Polonskyan terms: where the formal and argot, far from standing in dialectical opposition, as high to low, operate in dialect-ical partnership, as process to product—specifically, as joke-work to joke. The ambassador to the film from an all-but-annihilated culture—a culture as un-German as it is un-American—Shimen represents what remains of a radical Jewish comic formalism, a formalism (“independently of judgment”) that, bringing out as it does the gesturing, gesticulating body hidden in genteel language, is also inevitably a materialism. For though Charley Davis indeed ends up repudiating one materialism—typified by the corrupting world of swell dames and swell apartments to which capitalist success condemns him—Shimen purveys another: a materialism of sensual pleasure—he’s a grocer, after all—without the usual sycophantic costs of betrayal and assassination. As Joseph Samuels/Sam Levene articulates *Crossfire’s* comic-materialist dream of a likeable world, so fellow character actor Shimen/Shimen
Ruskin, whose own funny name is never funnier than when it, too, traverses the line between life and show, stands for an intolerable happiness, the final destruction of which HUAC and its many collaborators will soon undertake, seeking to complete the work begun by their counterparts over in Europe.

Here again are Horkheimer and Adorno on the psychology of anti-Semitism, from their text of 1947:

Those blinded by civilization have contacts with their own tabooed mimetic features only through certain gestures and forms of behavior they encounter in others, as isolated, shameful residues [als isolierte Reste, als beschämende Rudimente] in their rationalized environment. What repels them as alien is all too familiar: it lurks in the contagious gestures of an immediacy suppressed by civilization: gestures of touching, nestling, soothing, coaxing. What makes such impulses repellent today is their outmodedness.36

The antimimeticism—the mimetic shame—that can turn into genocidal anti-Semitism is by no means limited to the most obvious forms of Jew-hatred: it manifests itself in, say, the Charley Davis who rejects Shimen’s offer of warmth and calls him a sucker, or in the Michael Rogin who represses one of his two scenes, or in the latter-day Jack Warner who decided, bizarrely but perhaps not so astonishingly, to delete Shimen’s line about Nazis killing Jews both from the latest reissue of the Body and Soul videotape and from the recently released DVD. Those “repelled” by Shimen and his kind might even include the Abraham Polonsky who, “when asked about the continuing Yiddishist themes in his work, . . . made jokes.”37 If the jokes themselves put off the Yiddishist themes, they also, of course, continue those themes. With his “tabooed mimetic features,” with his gestures and accent and name—“isolated, shameful residues in [the] rationalized environment”—Shimen, comedian and grocer, constitutes for Polonsky himself a guilty pleasure: the guilty pleasure of the primeval, old-world self, of the Pol(e) in Polonsky. For Rogin, whose account of “Jewish immigrants in the Hollywood melting pot” has achieved a certain paradigmatic status in cultural studies, a figure like Shimen is off-putting because he resists the masterplot of the Jewish-American success story, where “success” depends upon the masterful Jewish appropriation and exploitation of African American symbolic
labor: if not the Nazism of the Jews, Rogin’s culture industry is at least the racism of the Jews. For Polonsky, the trouble with Shimen—what makes the pleasure guilty—is also his failure to play the Man, albeit the Man of the left. In contrast with the muscular leftist popular culture to which the screenwriter of *Body and Soul* aspires, and which he embodies not just in Garfield but in a character like the angular, sharp-tongued, rigorously antistereotypical Jewish mother played by Anne Revere, Shimen, for all his radicalism, conjures up the “wrong” popular culture: metonym of the murdered maternal father, antonym of the feisty paternal mother, he recalls an “outmoded” popular culture of schmaltz and shtick and kitsch, a popular culture of the *yiddishe* Mama, of the *Mamaloshen*. Where the leftist egghead cracks wise to show he knows the ways of the street, Shimen’s comedy is of the more disconcertingly “touching” kind. A tender comrade indeed, Shimen, like Joseph Samuels, tenderizes comradeship to the point at which it might make another comrade nervous.

Not that one has to be a leftist male intellectual like Polonsky, or like Rogin, to have this embarrassed relation to the film’s ambassador from mimetic prehistory. Repellently alien yet “all too familiar,” off-puttingly “outmoded” in the intimacy of his impulses, Shimen, inviting Charley to come in from the cold, would lure every shivering Cold War subject back into someplace like a winter garden: a pleasure dome like the Yiddish theaters that were themselves anachronistic survivors on the mean streets of Charley Davis’s Lower East Side. His initial invitation refused, the repressed Shimen returns to figure not just the gravity (“I’m like a grave”) that the film is otherwise reluctant to name as distinctively Jewish, but also the performance matrix from which it even more ambivalently derives: that of the distinctively Jewish levity (“say toodle-do”) to which his name itself pays documentary tribute.

Acknowledging its origins in an alternative and older Jewish popular culture—a comic culture less of the street than of the (undomesticated) playhouse, less of quarrels than of the “infectious gestures” behind the quarrels—the film nonetheless takes care to circumscribe the acknowledgment. If it names its comic Jewish character after the comic Jewish actor who plays him, it makes sure that, even when Shimen returns for his “big” scene, this avatar of tabooed mimesis stays within the confines of a role so minor as to border on a cameo, and ends up—even before
the 1993 censoring of his speech all but reduces him to a face on the cutting-room floor—looking less like an honored ancestor than like an “isolated, shameful residue” indeed. Nor can this circumscription of the acknowledgment, this freezing of the film’s assets, simply be dismissed as the work of the treacherously cynical director. About Polonsky’s own reticence concerning his work’s persistent Yiddishkayt, Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner write:

He was preoccupied with universal issues that go to the heart of Western culture and history, of capitalism and revolution, of loyalties and betrayals that have less to do with ethnic identities than with the rise and fall of cultures and states. No doubt he long regarded the Jewish elements in his work as incidental, the necessary accretions to any story line that grows out of personal experience.40

Had Horkheimer and Adorno been asked to comment on Body and Soul, they might have pointed out what the film already knows: that the Jewish elements in Polonsky’s work are its universal issues. The “isolated, shameful residues that survive in their rationalized environment,” or—in a phrase of Polonsky’s that makes him sound remarkably like Horkheimer and Adorno, “the undestroyed element left in human nature”41—Polonsky’s continuing Yiddishist themes, emematized and minoritized in Shimen’s “outmoded” name and accent and person, atavistically rehearse a tabooed mimetic stage whose contagious gestures no one, not even the toughest modern customer, ever entirely escapes. As the unhappy fates of Body and Soul’s personnel attest—thanks to huac, no film has a longer casualty list, extending from star to screenwriter to supporting cast—something about the film seemed so repellently alien as to provoke the xenophobic rage of a congressional committee. The provocation, however, may have come less from the film’s overt political ideology than from its form, like “the singing tone of voice, which vividly animates a situation or a feeling independently of judgment”: from its traces of undomesticated mimesis, whose gravest offense, sufficient to raise the specter of the enemy within, consists, uncannily, in not being alien enough.

The film, that is, may construct a cordon sanitaire around the embarrassing icon of its “proud” ethnic identity, an ethnic identity that is at the same time an aesthetic lineage; and yet, one wonders about the efficacy
of this protective device, even as a means for producing an illusion of containment. For all that Shimen’s old-world performance style makes him seem as distant and archaic as the Garden of Eden, he personifies the capacity of the film itself—a critical and commercial hit—to deliver, into the homes not only of the self-avowedly Jewish Mrs. Davis and her neighbors, but also of the ethnically unmarked Mrs. America and hers, something juicier than a rather schematic anticapitalism: the promise, like that of grapes straight from Eden, of “an immediacy suppressed by civilization.” More subversive than the film’s explicit political theme, the tempting, staining fruit of mimesis is as sweet, as sticky, and as intoxicating as the wine with which Shimen and the others toast Charley’s upcoming victory and retirement. Charley himself, or the charismatic Garfield, is of course the official body and soul of the film’s leftist popular art. But likeHUAC’s most monstrously representative member, John Rankin of Mississippi, who, as we have seen, entertained his colleagues by revealing the “real” Jewish names of various left-leaning movie stars, the committee as a whole would have had little trouble sniffing out the film’s “real” Jew, the racial precursor behind John Garfield and even Julius Garfinkle, the true performing body hidden within the virile, “American” encrustations of Hollywood star and New York actor alike. Behind Garfield, behind Garfinkle, the committee could easily have detected the funny-sentimental bit player who would end up denouncing it—and who, without ever threatening to steal the show, never ceases to be disturbing, since a sucker like Shimen, at once victim and vampire, could suck even good Americans “back into a medium that is older than that of judgment.”

Figures like Shimen and Samuels/Levene are disturbing, that is, because, instead of merely satisfying the demand for prescribed ethnic performance within the great American variety show, they implicitly, and radically, reach out to “ethnicize” those who must seem untouched by them, who must appear to regard them from a safe distance. (Anglicizing “Rishkin,” “Ruskin” in turn gets yiddishized by “Shimen.” What kind of a name is Ruskin, anyway? Russian?) It is precisely such disturbing figures who embody the mimetic Jewishness that every anti-Semite “has an instinctive urge to ape” but that, ashamed of this urge (itself mimetic), he sets out to destroy instead. For the blacklist as for the Nazi, “people like us,” that is, like Shimen, present the risk of a contagion too
desirable to be endured. With the pushiness ascribed by anti-Semites to Jews in general, a figure like Shimen mimes the regression of language to those “gestures of an immediacy suppressed by civilization: gestures of touching, nestling, soothing, coaxing.” Thus, when he says, for instance, “This I suspected,” he sounds a little suspect himself, issuing his invitation to inversion, performing, in his “awkward” Yinglish, the pleasure of the syntactical somersault. But then, no less awkwardly, no less suspiciously, he flip-flops again, this time semantically: “That’s bad? It’s good.” As written by Abraham Lincoln Polonsky, these lines rewrite American English so that it “doesn’t sound American.” Or rather, they coax out the un-American accents already latent in American speech. In the best Krausian way, Shimen’s—and Polonsky’s—“language imitates the gestures of language,” as the syntactical reversals continue: “To the future retired champeen of the world, good luck. And to my five dollars that I bet on the fight, good luck too.” No, no, Mrs. Davis, it isn’t the money: more than the Jewish greed that routinely accompanies Jewish pushiness in one of anti-Semitism’s drearier vaudeville acts, what arouses suspicion here, along with the mimetic agitation of language’s body, is a similarly regressive “vivid animation,” in which things have feelings, a primitive, even Edenic, state of affairs, not to be confused with commodity fetishism, whereby luck, or happiness—the Yiddish glik means both—redounds to things and people alike. Thanks to Shimen’s happy idiomatic “mistake,” in other words, we glimpse a world like Crossfire’s world of likeable things, where “things” includes “people,” and where this objectification needn’t inspire terror. Indeed, the argotic acrobatics of the immigrant tongue bring us even closer to that world, by fracturing civilized rules of objecthood, affect, and affection.

What Horkheimer and Adorno call uncontrolled mimesis in fact evokes just such a precivilized world, for this mimesis bespeaks nothing so much as “the urge to lose oneself in identification with the Other,” especially the inanimate other. In mimesis, formalism and materialism become one. When, as in Karl Kraus’s or Shimen Ruskin’s jokes, language imitates the gestures of language, the gestures it imitates are those in which the personality animating language becomes saliently thing-like. Just as Crossfire’s things included people, so Body and Soul invites us to imagine how, to borrow Polonsky’s words, the human might
include the inhuman, but an inhuman that has yet to assume the aspect of barbarism and cruelty. Hence, of course, the film’s intolerable seduction. Whether merging with “earth and slime” or, if he lives in the modern city, just with money, the mimetic comedian exemplifies the dirtiness anti-Semites love to hate, and hate to love, in all Jews—all of whom, conversely, they see as mimetic comedians, as “playing themselves,” albeit less obviously than Shimen or Jack Benny or Jerry Seinfeld or Roseanne. Far from compromising the moral gravity of his reference to European genocide, Shimen’s comic performance embodies the very thing that the Nazis had just tried to wipe out, and for which their nicer American cousins were busy preparing less drastic solutions. Over in Europe the Nazis are killing people like us because we make them laugh.

Against that would-be final solution, Body and Soul tenders one last image. As Charley, who “never felt better in [his] life,” walks with his lover Peg away from the menacing Roberts, we see, just above the words “The End,” a sign saying “candies”: a sign, of course, of the old candy store, damaged but undestroyed, like “the undestroyed element in human nature,” back to which Shimen Ruskin would lead us.

That the destruction is neither over nor simply “over in Europe,” and that “people like us” doesn’t just mean “Jews,” are signaled in the film’s other decisive scene of instruction—like Crossfire, it has two—which immediately follows the scene with Shimen in Mrs. Davis’s apartment. After Shimen leaves and Charley explains to his mother and Peg that he’s throwing the fight, the champ returns to the training camp where he witnesses the death of Ben. The force of this scene undeniably has a lot to do with Ben’s lesson in courage: seeing him defy Roberts, Charley ultimately chooses to do the same in the film’s climactic fight scene. As in Crossfire, however, the shift from a Jewish to a non-Jewish teacher doesn’t mean that Jewish teaching has dropped out of the picture. Though that shift, in Crossfire, supposedly removes the taint of “Jewish propaganda,” it replaces “a Jewish person . . . or something” with something Jewish. And though the shift from Shimen to Ben, in Body and Soul, presumably helps the film transcend its “incidental” “Jewish elements” in favor of “universal issues,” the resulting universality must remain colored by the specificity of the Jewish and black performers who exemplify it. Moreover, if the final scenes of the film imply a continuity of Jewish and African American pedagogies, this continuity extends beyond the message
of racial pride. To be sure, Ben, as Rogin points out, “echoes [Shimen’s] message: ‘It always felt so good after the fight. Walk down Lenox Avenue. Kids all crazy for you. And proud.’” But like Jewish pride, black pride occasions embarrassment because it expresses itself in the shameful rudimentary gestures of mimetic intimacy. The broadly histrionic, even pantomimic, manner in which Canada Lee performs Ben’s defiant death scene—as Rogin describes it, “the distraught black man collapses backward, gets up, starts swinging wildly, . . . and falls face down”—suggests the mimetic excess attending the translation of language back into gesture. And the fact that Ben’s last name is Chaplin, just as the hero’s first name is Charley, locates both the black teacher and the Jewish pupil in a tradition of “popular art up to Chaplin and the Marx Brothers”: a pariah tradition that, as Charles Chaplin’s emblematic place in it reminds us, neither limits its membership to Jews nor ever quite casts off the aura of Jewishness that surrounds it—and that would account for the anti-Communist harassment of both Chaplin and the actor who plays his fictional namesake.

What makes Lee’s performance of Ben’s death scene almost painfully embarrassing is not just the “wildness” of his gestures but the way in which they inflect tragedy toward comedy. While powerfully evoking pity and terror, Ben’s delirium and death are staged in a way not inconsistent with Chaplinesque and Marxian modes of “buffoonery and clowning.” Even in his enactment of black pain and rage, Lee reveals a certain face of comic mimesis: his performance of anguish brings to mind “the grimaces of the comedian imitat[ing] the face of the person he parodies.” Not that Ben, or Shimen, or even Charley Davis, lacks something to grimace about. But when is comic formalism ever a purely formal exercise, empty of affective content? With his voice, his face, his body, Canada Lee vividly animates a feeling like the pleasure Ben and Charley both experience after winning more than a fight (Ben: “It always felt so good”; Charley: “I never felt better in my life”)—or like the anger blacks and Jews both feel as a result of the genocidal violence directed against them because of their “tabooed mimetic features.”

Of course, to the extent that the film itself continues to find these mimetic features embarrassing, Charley’s big fight at the end will have to play up the virilizing anger at the expense of the feminizing pleasure—so much so, in fact, as to go beyond, or rather, below, mimesis. For in
place of such gestures as “touching, nestling, soothing, and coaxing,” the climactic boxing match offers punching, bruising, maiming, and stupefying. And to the extent that the film’s embarrassment compels it to embrace a tough-guy popular culture instead of a tender-comrade popular culture—even Shimen, of course, wants Charley to win, though, importantly, to win the title of “retired champeen”—the big fight will seem to mark the knockout victory of an aesthetic derived from “street quarrels” over one derived from “Jewish jokes.” As a result, critics will forget about Charley’s relationship with Shimen and focus instead on his relationship with Ben, reducing the film to yet another instance of Jewish blackface, in which Jewish men appropriate the “authentic” masculinity of black men, all the while submerging the jazz standard with which the film shares its title and making Peg a painter with a European accent, so as to effect what Rogin calls the film’s “European high-culture choice” and its “African American sacrifice.” But “European” doesn’t always have to mean “high-culture,” as demonstrated by Karl Kraus’s “sympathy for dialect writers and comedians, in preference to so-called high literature and in protest against it.” Just as Polonsky acknowledged his debt to “Jewish jokes and street quarrels” (emphasis added), making them one aesthetic rather than two, so are the black boxer from Harlem and the Jewish grocer from Europe performers in the same mimetic mode. Behind many a black prizefighter and many an Irish cop, today as in 1947, one can no doubt discover a soft or sweet Jewish man who mustn’t be seen too much. Sometimes, though, when there’s a Jewish person behind one of these butcher-looking figures, this may be because, as performers, the cop and the prizefighter are themselves radically “Jewish” comedians.

Best Picture

What happens when Jewish performance, far from being a matter of too much, becomes one of not enough—when the anxiety that you will turn into a Jew gives way to the anxiety that a Jew will turn into you? What happens, in other words, when the Jew is played by a wasp? This is the question posed by the third “Jewish” picture of 1947. The year’s big Oscar winner, Gentleman’s Agreement is now the least watchable
of the three films—for many of the same reasons that made it the big Oscar-winner. While *Crossfire* and *Body and Soul* both cannily assume the protective shading of noirish intrigue, mitigating the earnest didacticism of the “social problem” picture or the improbable optimism of Popular Front melodrama, *Gentleman’s Agreement* makes no such generic amends for the middlebrow piety with which it treats its theme of anti-Semitism in America. Not that the film can be called artless. On the contrary, while *Body and Soul* and *Crossfire* revel in a look of low-budget grittiness, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, in the tradition of Important Pictures from *The Life of Emile Zola* to *Crash*, takes care to wrap its high-mindedness in an equally imposing glossiness. It even goes so far as to theorize the latter, in a speech one of its characters makes in defense of “things” and the human cathexis of them. But while *Crossfire* associates the fantasy of a world of likeable things with the film’s one Jewish character, *Gentleman’s Agreement* plays it safer and chooses as its spokesperson for materialism a young Christian divorcée, the hero’s girlfriend, who, showing him the quietly tasteful house she has built and decorated deep in the Connecticut suburbs whose “restricted” housing policies give the film its title, explains: “When you’re troubled and hurt, you pour yourself into things that can’t hurt back.” This observation almost amounts to the housing policy, or at least the design scheme, of the film itself which, recognizing that some things can hurt back, preemptively swaths itself and its characters in folds of discreet plushness, its silken empire flung from the hills of Darien to the offices and restaurants and apartments of Manhattan.

Pouring *itself* into an aesthetic of things-that-can’t-hurt-back, of gentle things, *Gentleman’s Agreement* becomes a textbook illustration of the gentility it takes to task. Elia Kazan, who would win an Oscar for directing it, would remark, many years later: “Whenever I see it, it reminds me of the illustrations in ‘Redbook’ and ‘Cosmopolitan’ in those days. I mean, those people don’t shit.” (Or, as Kazan put it in 1952, in a supplement to his aggressively sycophantic testimony before *HUAC*: “I think it is in a healthy American tradition, for it shows Americans exploring a problem and tackling a solution.”) The film’s thing-love, its materialism, that is, represents a choice of wasp good taste over *Crossfire*’s Jewish luxuriousness: a choice of safe things over funny things, of a defensive materialism over a comic materialism. To pour oneself into things that can’t hurt
back is not to “lose oneself in identification with Other,” as Horkheimer and Adorno articulate the aim of mimesis, but rather to guard against such mimetic self-dissolution. Unlike the Rabelaisian unfreezing of the laughter preserved in funny Jewish names, this liquefaction brings, in place of happiness, mere insurance against pain. And if liberatory thawing in no way precludes the luxurious comic congealment that makes things and people swell, the an-aesthetic of Gentleman’s Agreement reveals, as double of the liquid self, the brittle self. So fundamental is the film’s defensive protocol that it undergirds, and thus itself restricts, whatever comic “relief” the film provides.

“Fundamental,” to be sure, need not mean “total”: the film cushions itself against being “hurt back” in part because it risks giving offense. If not quite as daring as it pretends to be—the film, for instance, fails to make the obvious connection between anti-Semitism “over in Europe” and anti-Semitism over here—Gentleman’s Agreement has enough audacity to identify John Rankin as a professional anti-Semite. “Give me the lowdown on your gut when you hear about Rankin calling people kikes,” Phil Green, the Gentile hero, played by Gregory Peck, imagines saying to his Jewish friend. Though usually dismissed nowadays as timid and naive, Gentleman’s Agreement has the distinction of being the only pre-seventies Hollywood film, as far as I can tell, to denounce, if not HUAC itself, its then-presiding genius. Here playing the Jewish friend, Dave Goldman—a man of gold, what Robert Sklar calls “the Canada Lee role,” this film’s Jewish counterpart to Body and Soul’s dignified African American—John Garfield observes, “There’s a funny kind of elation about socking back.” Which is to say that John Garfield is also playing the John Garfield role. And if this film’s idea of a happy ending is to have his character buy a house in previously “restricted” Connecticut, this assimilationist triumph nonetheless puts the slugger from the street in the heart of Anglo-Saxon suburbia. Yet this happy ending is only structurally comic. As in Body and Soul, John Garfield throws the punches while somebody else throws the punch lines. There may be a funny kind of elation about socking back at gentleman’s agreements and genteel anti-Semitism, but that elation has nothing funny about it.

Rather, funniness here devolves into a merely parrying function, as comedy shrinks back into its anxious culture-industry stereotype. Lacking Crossfire’s Jewish comic materialism, the film also lacks Body and
Soul’s Jewish comic formalism. Instead of imitating the gestures of language, the comedy of this “solemn and self-important” film consists in deflecting them. Relegated to “supporting” status, but deprived, unlike their confreres in the other two films, of the contagiousness minority can confer, its two comedians epitomize two different ways of fending off an intimacy, whether with things or with people, that, in 1947, it is by no means paranoid to imagine as potentially hurtful. One of these two characters is an Einstein-like Jewish scientist, implausibly named Joe Lieberman, whose irreverently “brainy” jokes about Jewishness and anti-Semitism exemplify, for Kathy Lacey, the film’s Christian heroine, the salutarily non-paranoid relation to those subjects, a refreshing exception to the rule of Jewish “oversensitivity.” As her journalist boyfriend, masquerading as a Jew, begins to merge alarmingly with the mask, Kathy, wanting him to lighten up a little, offers him the counterexample of Professor Lieberman, who “feels the problem [of anti-Semitism] deeply, but . . . has a sense of humor about it.” That Lieberman is played by Sam Jaffe, who would become another victim of the blacklist, testifies ironically to the ever greater need for a sense of humor against the crushing evidence of its defensive inefficacy.

As Jaffe shares Sam Levene’s first name and Shimen Ruskin’s fate, so his old-fashioned, almost vaudevillian, character resembles Levene’s in Crossfire and Ruskin’s in Body and Soul—or would resemble them, were Gentleman’s Agreement the kind of film to indulge in such comic atavism. Preferring a sleeker, more “modern” comic personation, it more prominently features its other comic character—a chic but good-hearted fashion editor played by Celeste Holm, who, polishing her trademark role as the wisecracking gal who gets the laughs but not the guy, picked up as her consolation prize an Oscar for her supporting performance. Of that performance, Kazan rather ungraciously remarks: “Celeste Holm did well, but she got an Oscar because she had [screenwriter] Moss Hart’s wittiest lines.” In 1947, the same year in which he was writing those lines, Hart—as if he had read Horkheimer and Adorno, or at least met them—said of Hollywood: “It is a very totalitarian town. Its people are the most frightened of those in any industry.” Without endorsing Kazan’s backhanded compliment, I would still suggest that Hart explicates the political terror behind both his own (Jewish) wit and Holm’s hysterical (but non-Jewish) embodiment of it. With HUAC and
the studio heads cracking down, and with assassination in the air, the 
wrty woman’s wisecracks signify not a potentially subversive sharpness 
and looseness of tongue, but rather a self-consciousness so compulsive 
as to become self-policing, beating the cops themselves to the punch. 
And though Holm’s character, Anne Dettrey, does finally stop biting her 
tongue long enough to accuse Kathy of “hypocrisy” with respect to the 
Jewish question, this “catty” outburst, as Anne characterizes it, marks 
both wit’s end and the end of her viability in the narrative. Proposing 
to replace Kathy in Phil’s affections, in effect proposing to him period, 
she commits sexual suicide, driving him back into Kathy’s arms, so that, 
after the happy ending that puts a Jew in Connecticut, comes the even 
happier one that puts the Christian male and Christian female leads 
together again.

Thanks to Holm’s fashion editor, the repellent “pushiness” of the Jew 
gets displaced onto the secondary, not to say minoritized, woman—a 
Comic and cosmopolitan (or at least as cosmopolitan as Cosmopolitan 
magazine), but not comicosmopolitan—she must not be permitted to 
relax long enough for wit to soften into pleasure—Holm’s Anne is fre-
quently paired with Garfield’s Dave, as if to imply an affinity less roman-
tic than sibling. Ring Lardner Jr., is said to have quipped that the moral 
of the film is “that you should never be mean to a Jew, because he might 
turn out to be a gentile.” But the film—which could have been called 
Jewish Like Me—also shows how a Gentile might turn out to be a Jew. In 
keeping with the assimilationist project of Gentleman’s Agreement, racial 
cross-dressing here presupposes—and demonstrates—the minimalism 
of Jewish difference, as opposed to its mimetic hypervisibility in Crossfire 
and Body and Soul. Peering into the mirror as he conceives his plan to 
play Jewish, Phil sizes himself up thus: “Dark hair, dark eyes. Sure. So 
has Dave. So have a lot of guys who aren’t Jewish. No accent, no man-
nerisms. Neither has Dave.” In this decor of upholstered things and sub-
tilized people, “Jewish” and “Gentile” traits are exchanged so equitably 
that the film even ends up producing a paranoia for Christians.

Yet comedy’s role here is to allay anxiety, not to provoke it. Like Lieb-
erman’s healthy sense of humor, Anne’s pathological wit seeks to ap-
pease the true wielders of power. The film’s comedy, that is, can only 
compensate for its Garfield-like pugnacity, instead of reinventing more
shamefully rudimentary gestures, like the reaching and touching that get rebuffed as pushiness. The film’s strategy worked insofar as it got its three Oscars—more than Body and Soul’s one or Crossfire’s none. Almost at the same moment, however—in October and November of 1947, to be exact—the comedians were beginning to face the assassins, and we know what would happen in the next few years to John Garfield, and to Sam Jaffe, and to Anne Revere, who here plays mother not to Garfield but to Peck. Of course, everybody dies, to quote Garfield, or, rather, Garfield’s character, in Body and Soul. Moody, tough, or solemn, all three Jewish pictures of 1947 record an increasingly petrifying climate for Jews, for African Americans, for Communists, for liberals, for witty women, and for comedy itself. All three of them accordingly subject comedy to a certain isolating procedure, as a result of which not too many laughs seem to be in store. Two of them, however, take advantage of the chilly climate as a means precisely to store the laughter that might appear merely dead but that, like a deadpan expression, keeps the promise of happiness alive. By turning their apparent seriousness into a medium for comedy’s survival, these Jewish pictures, pictures of forgotten ancestors coming back to life, show us radically old ways to come in and get a little warm.