

# Got Jewish Milk?

## Screening Epstein and Van Sant for Intersectional Film History

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### ABSTRACT

Rob Epstein's *The Times of Harvey Milk* (USA, 1984) and Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (USA, 2008), the two major films that narrate the life and tragically dramatic death of gay politician and activist Harvey Milk (1930–1978), are widely recognized as part of the queer cinematic canon but are less often categorized as Jewish films. While Epstein's film adroitly presents a "Kosher-style" Milk, the Jewishness of Van Sant's Milk is less certain; however, a well-established pattern of gay and lesbian Jews citing Milk as one of their own—what I term "Jewqhooing"—enabled a Jewish reception of *Milk*. Querying and queering the Jewishness of Milk (the man as well as the movies that purport to represent his life and times) illuminate the complex ways Jewishness continues to be cinematically conveyed or whitewashed as well as the intersections between queer and Jewish film history.

Harvey Milk was an iconic gay activist whose life has been the subject of two major films: Rob Epstein's award-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (USA, 1984)<sup>1</sup> and Gus Van Sant's biopic *Milk* (USA, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Widely recognized as part of the queer cinematic canon, these two films are less often categorized as Jewish films.<sup>3</sup> Querying—or should I say, queering—the Jewishness of Milk (the man as well as the movies that purport to represent his life and times) illuminates the complex ways Jewishness continues to be cinematically conveyed or whitewashed. When we ask whether we've got—or want—Jewish

Milk, we necessarily wander into the too-often invisible intersections between queers and Jews, cinematic and otherwise. Moreover, the status of Milk for gay and lesbian Jews and the response of that community to Van Sant's film make *Milk* an interesting limit case for the very definition of a Jewish film and for the legibility of the queer Jewish subject.

### **Cinematic Jews, Cinematic Gays: Parallels and Intersections**

The Jewishness of both Epstein's and Van Sant's *Milk* needs to be situated within a film history that contains repeated parallels and intersections of the gay and the Jewish question. The anti-anti-Semitism film *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, USA, 1947)<sup>4</sup> set the stage for one paradigmatic, though troubling, relationship between gays and Jews in cinema. The film, about the investigation of the murder of a Jewish man by an anti-Semitic US soldier, was the cinematic companion to *Gentleman's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, USA, 1947);<sup>5</sup> both films were credited with indicting US anti-Semitism as unpatriotic after the war against fascism had been fought and won in the European theater. However, as many scholars have noted, the fight against anti-Semitism in these two films comes at the cost of Jewish bodies.<sup>6</sup> In *Gentleman's Agreement* Gregory Peck, who plays a journalist writing an exposé of anti-Semitism, pretends to be a Jew to get his story. In the effort to teach the liberal lesson that Jews are just like everyone else, Jewishness becomes defined by anti-Semitism, which must be eradicated. This leaves no cinematic space for Judaic practice (synagogues are deemed Jewish churches!) or cultural particularism. *Crossfire* literalizes the disappearing Jew with the murder plot: For the vast majority of the film, Jewishness is represented only as a dead body and an off-screen victim of anti-Semitism. Notably, the adaptation process of *Crossfire* offs the queer body: In Richard Brooks's *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), the novel on which *Crossfire* is based, the murder victim is a gay man. Both the Production Code's prohibitive rules regarding sexuality and the desire to cinematically expose US anti-Semitism in the immediate post-Holocaust era led to the substitution of Jew for gay. Years later, *Bent* (Sean Mathias, UK, 1997)<sup>7</sup> — a film based on Martin Sherman's play of the same name which helped to make visible gay Holocaust history—explicitly reverses the substitution at the heart of *Crossfire*. In the film's final scene, Max, a gay concentration camp prisoner who has been masquerading as a Jew, replaces his yellow star with a pink triangle prior to electrocuting himself on the camp fence.<sup>8</sup>

Such substitutions set up an analog between the experience of gays and that of Jews as oppressed minorities who often have the opportunity and the burden to pass or assimilate. This analog has a clear cinematic dimension: Both Jewish and queer film histories have been defined by closets, open secrets, and coded images. A comparison of two canonical documentaries about film, *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, France, UK, Germany, USA, 1995),<sup>9</sup> informed by Vito Russo's book of the same name, and *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream* (Simcha Jacobovici, Stuart Samuels, Canada, USA, 1998),<sup>10</sup> loosely based on Neal Gabler's book *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1988), illuminates the parallel and sometimes overlapping histories of queer and mainstream Jewish American film.<sup>11</sup> Both documentaries include a discussion of stock characters who function as comic relief; both talk about the professional consequences of being out, especially for actors (which meant that Jews changed their names and gays felt compelled to play it straight off- and on-screen); both identify the Hays Production Code and its enforcer, Joseph Breen, as the official vehicles of anti-Semitism and homophobia, and the blacklist as a backlash against the open secrets of gayness and Jewishness. Perhaps the most profound parallel between these two documentaries and thus Jewish and queer film history is the emphasis on gay and Jewish identifications and desires strategically being performed through codes, "subtext," and indirection. Thus *Hollywoodism* presents Wild West shootouts as indirect pogrom imagery (reflecting the background of Jewish studio heads) and the white picket fences of the Hardy Boys as a fantasy of an America where outsiders could become insiders. Similarly, *The Celluloid Closet* turns our attention to the queer cinematic metanarrative performed by the song "Secret Love" in *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, USA, 1953); and to the same-sex desire represented by gunplay in *Red River* (Howard Hawks, Arthur Rosson, USA, 1948) and by the Alan Ladd photo in Sal Mineo's locker in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, USA, 1955). Such strategies of indirection mean that the Jewishness and the queerness of a film often reside in the eyes of the beholder; indeed the recent renaissance of Jewish film studies is in part indebted to the notion of Jewishly literate viewers decoding "encrypted Jewishness."<sup>12</sup> Henry Bial has argued that the charting of Jewish film history prior to the 1960s necessarily entails an understanding of "double-coding" that is dependent on "reading Jewishly."<sup>13</sup> Following Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's insight that "Jewish film is what happens when it encounters an audience," Alisa Lebow prioritizes reception and the necessity of

“watching Jewishly” in her work on Jewish autoethnography, including queer Jewish autoethnography.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, at points Epstein and Friedman’s *Celluloid Closet* suggests the affinity and potential intersections between gays and Jews. A highlighted scene from the transformational film *The Boys in the Band* (William Friedkin, USA, 1970) features Harold, played by Leonard Frey, explicitly identifying himself as a “Jew fairy.”<sup>15</sup> And a scene included from Paul Mazursky’s *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (USA, 1976) depicts white Jewish mother Shelley Winters asking black Antonio Fargas if he’s Jewish, and his response: “No, I’m gay.” Indeed, the slippage between Jewish and gay in that scene in particular, and in the cinematic interchange/paralleling between gays and Jews in film history in general, gestures toward what is now a well-documented open secret history of Jewish queerness: the sense that circumcised men who prove their manliness through study in homosocial spaces or through business rather than through physical strength or production of goods are feminized, and thus are not real men according to heteronormative definitions of masculinity.<sup>16</sup> And Jewish women, those stereotypically mouthy beings who worked in the public sphere while their men studied and prayed, similarly do not conform to heteronormative models of femininity. This open secret of Jewish queerness impacts the cultural performances of all Jews, whether they identify as straight, gay or lesbian, or queer.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, it has meant that narratives of Jewish assimilation perforce include gender and sexual assimilation.<sup>18</sup> Such assimilation patterns, in tandem with prohibitions against homosexuality embedded in Halakhah (Jewish law), often foreclose or complicate rich and explicit performances of the queerJew. (I use this term to avoid one identity category being relegated to the adjectival, condiment position.) Put another way, too often Jewish gays and lesbians are explicitly represented—or represent themselves—as belonging primarily to either the Jewish or the gay camp.<sup>19</sup> One identity category might substitute for, suggest, or parallel the other; however, as Janet Jakobsen notes, such analogizing “tends to create two distinctive groups” or “tends to make the first term the center of analysis while marginalizing (if including at all) any analysis of the second term.”<sup>20</sup> Thus the queerJew risks being relegated to a specifically Jewish closet or exiled from Jewish life. Perniciously, queer Jews are in danger of being straightened out while Jewish queers are potentially de-Jewed.

However, such a history of Jewish queerness (which includes but is not limited to gender-bending) might be and has been mobilized to *actively* resist heteronormativity. Jewish overrepresentation in feminist and queer activist,

artistic, and academic spheres is suggestive of this mobilization—think, for example, of Bella Abzug, Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Leslie Feinberg, Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner, and, of course, Harvey Milk. By naming names, I am engaging in a very particular form of Jewhooing, defined by David Kaufman as “the naming and claiming of famous ‘members of the tribe’—and the consequent projection of group identity onto them.”<sup>21</sup> Kaufman argues that “the main motive of Jewhooing today remains the construction of Jewish identity and the related countering of assimilation—an unconscious attempt to reverse the very processes of social integration and de-Judaization that touch most every Jew in the modern world.”<sup>22</sup> The naming and claiming of specifically queer Jews becomes an intersectional form of resistance to both ethnoreligious and gender/sexual assimilation; queer Jewhooing—what I will henceforth refer to as “Jewqhooing”—affirms and simultaneously constructs queer Jewishness, especially along ethnic rather than religious lines. Jewqhooing needs to be understood as a refusal to have Jewishness or queerness substitute for, parallel, or suggest the other; those who Jewqhoo profess faith in the plenitude of both/and rather than the impoverishment of either/or. Jewqhooing is an assertion of being twice blessed rather than doubly abjected and constitutes a communal refusal to reside in one closet or another. Rather than winking and nodding at the potential for grounding a queer life in Jewishness, Jewqhooing celebrates, realizes, and extends that potential. Unsurprisingly, a prominent “Jew fairy” politician such as Harvey Milk is a prime candidate for Jewqhooing, and Rob Epstein’s *The Times of Harvey Milk* cinematically elects him to that office.

### **Rob Epstein’s “Kosher-Style” Milk**

No gay decoding is necessary when it comes to the life and death of Harvey Milk, the San Francisco supervisor who was instrumental in defeating Proposition 6, also known as the Briggs Initiative. (John Briggs, a California state senator, was the sponsor of this proposition, which would have made it illegal for gays and lesbians to work in California public schools.) Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were murdered by former Board of Supervisors member Dan White in 1978. An openly gay politician known for his tireless activism and coalition-building skills, Milk opted to be an out politician and activist, even though he anticipated assassination. And just as Milk’s position in gay history is assured, so too does Epstein’s *The Times of Harvey Milk* hold a central place in

gay film history. Thomas Waugh deems Epstein's documentary "a breakthrough in the homo history genre because of its wealth of audiovisual documentation of newly visible gay public life in the late seventies and early eighties, especially mainstream electoral politics," and argues that its winning the 1985 Oscar for best documentary "symbolized once and for all the real end of famine."<sup>23</sup> B. Ruby Rich regards *The Times of Harvey Milk* as "one of the landmark films of the gay documentary movement by anybody's standards."<sup>24</sup> This film—along with *Word Is Out* (Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, Rob Epstein, USA, 1977), *Common Threads* (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, USA, 1989), and *Paragraph 175* (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, UK, Germany, USA, 2000)—represents Epstein's use of documentary to unlock the historical closet for spectators across the spectrum of sexual orientation. Moreover, the grassroots and coalition politics successfully practiced by Harvey Milk and foregrounded in Epstein's documentary not only were crucial for his own times but also functioned as a model and a call to arms for the AIDS-ravaged era in which the film was released and feted.

Here I want to extend the significance of Epstein's *The Times of Harvey Milk* by including its underappreciated but seminal role in the Jewqhooring of Milk. Unquestionably, Milk is a doubly iconic figure for gay and lesbian Jews; this was true during his life, and it has become even more pronounced in the years since his death. Thus, as one might expect, Milk is an oft-Jewqhoored figure. During the fight against the Briggs Initiative, a gay Jewish group that called themselves the "Lost Tribe" cited Milk as their leader.<sup>25</sup> Lesléa Newman, a prolific writer in multiple genres who is probably best known for her children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), Jewqhoored Milk in her prize-winning short story "A Letter to Harvey Milk."<sup>26</sup> The titular fictional letter was penned by Harry Weinberg, who knew Harvey from the old neighborhood; it was written for a class taught by a lesbian teacher who, inspired by Milk, came out to and was subsequently exiled from her birth family. The story not only does the Jewish memory/historical work that Kaufman identifies as central to Jewwhooring but also creates an alternative kinship relationship between Barbara, the writing teacher, and Harry; additionally, it charts a continuum of queer Jewishness that extends from the Shoah to the contemporary moment.<sup>27</sup> Kaufman argues that cultural group Jewwhooring is often done in institutional sites such as museums, and he specifically cites the relatively new National Museum of Jewish History in Philadelphia.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, when in 2011 journalist Mark Segal took the newly opened museum to task for neglecting the LGBTQ Jewish experience, he

Jewqhooded Milk as an emblematic figure who needed to be featured.<sup>29</sup> Keshet, a Boston-based Jewish GLBT organization, includes Milk in their heroes poster series, which serves as an exemplar of the Jewqhooping phenomenon.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, Epstein's Jewqhooping of Milk in his prize-winning documentary is consonant with the pivotal role he has played in using documentary to portray not only a mosaic of queerfolk but also the ways in which the boundaries between straight and queer are and always have been permeable. Epstein was part of the Mariposa group that directed and produced the historic gay documentary *Word Is Out*, which in 1977 presented twenty-six in-depth interviews with the goal, as the film's subtitle puts it, to tell the "stories of some of our lives."<sup>31</sup> According to Waugh, this "epic vision of cultural and class diversity" accounted for one of the reasons *Word Is Out* "scored" at the time it was made.<sup>32</sup> The release of a thirtieth-anniversary edition of the film attests to its historical significance and its outlasting other "affirmation" documentaries of the time. Just as Epstein and Friedman's later film *The Celluloid Closet* exposed a secret queer history of Hollywood that enthralled and empowered some gay spectators, so too did some of the stories in *Word Is Out* reveal that heterosexual marriages do not preclude gay lives and loves. The Academy Award-winning documentary *Common Threads*, also an Epstein and Friedman film, documents some of the life-and-death stories represented by panels in the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. In this documentary politically and professionally diverse gay men, a hemophiliac child, and a reformed heterosexual junkie are tied together by an AIDS death sentence, abetted by the initial homophobic, victim-blaming societal response to the epidemic. And in *Paragraph 175*, Epstein and Friedman recover the history and some individual stories of gays persecuted by the Nazis but intentionally strive to move beyond the substitution narrative of *Bent* and its potentially misleading assumption that Jews and gays were consigned to the same fate during the Shoah. Notably *Paragraph 175* might be read as contextualizing the final shot of *Word Is Out*: It focuses on a banner at a gay rights parade that reads, "When they came for the Jews, I said nothing. When they came for the gays, I said nothing. And when they came for me, there was no one left to say anything . . . a Roman Catholic Priest in Nazi Germany."<sup>33</sup>

Yet in Jewqhooping Milk, Epstein not only contributed to an inclusive documentarian signature that both preceded and came after *The Times of Harvey Milk* but also extended his specifically Jewish off-screen memorialization of Milk. Epstein, a gay Jew who knew Milk from the Castro neighborhood and

as a local politician, was keenly aware of Milk's heritage; indeed, after Milk was killed, he and a friend "felt there should be a Jewish service as well [as the famous candlelight march]." <sup>34</sup> According to Epstein, "We contacted Temple Emanu-El, the big Reform synagogue in San Francisco. That set in motion the Jewish service that took place soon afterwards." <sup>35</sup>

Early in the film, narrator Harvey Fierstein informs us that Milk was born to Long Island Jewish parents; thus Milk's Jewish lineage is established at the outset of the documentary. Such an introduction to Milk's Jewishness brilliantly and accurately represents the complexities related to his own Jewish identification. Milk has been categorized variously as a non-Jewish Jew, a secular Jew, a Jew estranged from Judaism in particular and institutionalized, homophobic religion in general. <sup>36</sup> According to gay activist Naphtali Offen, who knew Milk and cofounded the Harvey Milk Democratic Club in 1976, "He had really strong feelings about the role that organized religion was playing in oppressing gay people. He felt alienated from Jewish religion." <sup>37</sup> In the famous recording he made to be played in the event of his assassination, he explicitly requested that no religious services be held, and it is notable that, antithetical to Judaic death rites, he was cremated, and his ashes were scattered in the Pacific. <sup>38</sup>

However, Milk's estrangement from Judaism is only one part of Milk's Jewish story. In categorizing his late uncle, Stuart Milk avers that "Harvey absolutely identified himself as a Jew," although he "was not religious or observant." <sup>39</sup> He was a New York Jew; for that particular hypervisible Jewish type, geographic distinctiveness and ethnoreligious identity are not easily separated. Indeed, according to Lenny Bruce, "If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish." <sup>40</sup> Unpacking Bruce's Jewish coding schema, one views New York City in particular and urban life in general as aligned with a Jewish sensibility. A description of Milk by Sharyn Saslafsky, a political friend who used to visit Milk at his famous camera store on Castro Street to speak a bit of Yiddish together, suggests that New York pride and Jewish pride were intermingled for Milk: "He wasn't a religious Jew, but he was always proud of being Jewish. . . . He always had a sense of pride that he came from New York." <sup>41</sup> Moreover, Saslafsky suggests that Milk's politics were informed by his Jewish sensibility: "We would also talk about Yiddishkayt, about what Judaism stresses. . . . That was clearly very important to Harvey. I believe his concern for justice, fairness, equality and ethical behavior came from his Jewish background." <sup>42</sup> Milk's nephew supports that reading: "Jewish sensitivity to civil rights absolutely had an impact on Harvey. In fact, he was the one who told



me about how much support Jewish organizations and Jewish individuals gave to minorities. He often said that Jews feel they cannot allow another group to suffer discrimination, if for no other reason than that they might be on that list someday.”<sup>43</sup> Saslafsky, affiliated with Sha’ar Zahav, a gay synagogue founded in San Francisco in 1977, just a year before Milk’s untimely death, also has memories of Milk occasionally attending that synagogue’s services.<sup>44</sup> Allen Bennett, the gay rabbi of the congregation at that time, recalls that “[Milk] wasn’t there to pray, he was there to get votes. . . . So he certainly understood there was a Jewish community he could relate to.”<sup>45</sup>

The choice of Harvey Fierstein as the narrator of *The Times of Harvey Milk* ensures that the New York Jewishness of Milk is present throughout the film and that the progressive politics associated with his secular ethnic sensibility is associated with his times—that is, the gay civil rights movement. Fierstein’s New York Jewish speech patterns echo Harvey Milk’s own; moreover, Fierstein’s palpable grief over Milk’s murder reminds us that he was *mishpocha* (Yiddish for extended family) in more ways than one. Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (Paul Bogart, USA, 1988),<sup>46</sup> which gave voice to the challenges and absolute necessity of refusing to choose between being gay and being Jewish,<sup>47</sup> strengthens the identification between Fierstein and Milk, and the former’s Jewqhooing of the latter. Aptly, documentary filmmaker Jon Else refers to Fierstein’s narrative voice as that of “a tribal elder.”<sup>48</sup>

For Epstein the challenge of the documentary was “to tell a story retrospectively but have it play in the present tense for the audience.”<sup>49</sup> Thus the challenges and possibilities associated with this historical narrative of gay liberation echo those associated with the ur liberation story of Exodus recounted each year at diverse Passover seders: Jews are exhorted to merge past and present as if they themselves were being freed from Egypt.<sup>50</sup> An exodus narrative is reinforced thematically in the film when we are told that Milk “emigrated” to San Francisco; indeed at one point Milk is referred to as a “gay immigrant,” an identity marker reinforced by the iconic image of him at the 1978 Gay Freedom Day parade, holding a sign that reads, “I’m from Woodmere, NY.” Thus his geographic origins and identifications, allied to his ethnoreligious origins, are on full display, as an immigration narrative is used to foster the times he represents. Notably, although the archival image used in the film only calls on the Jewish geography of Woodmere, New York, Stuart Milk recalls that Harvey’s signage at marches would proclaim, “I’m from Woodmere. I’m Jewish. I’m gay.”<sup>51</sup> Whether accurate or not, Stuart Milk’s

memory aptly summarizes the Jewqhooing work of this image in combination with Fierstein's voice chronicling Milk's geographic and political journeys.

We know from the historical record that Milk's Jewish consciousness was inseparable from his consciousness of the Holocaust. When dining with a German friend of his lover Joe Campbell in 1958, Milk challenged the notion that ordinary Germans were ignorant of the death camps with such vehemence that Campbell assumed Milk was suffering from a persecution complex and Milk believed Campbell to be an anti-Semite.<sup>52</sup> Milk's political consciousness and strategizing were informed by the heroic resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and he often invoked the Holocaust and the Nazis to illuminate the horrors of homophobia and the need for coalition politics as well as sustained vigilance to all forms of injustice and discrimination. When battling Briggs, Milk routinely accused the senator of "making wild inflammatory remarks that, to anyone who knows the facts, sounds as if it were the KKK talking about blacks or Hitler about Jews."<sup>53</sup> Of course by comparing Briggs to Hitler, Milk was also invoking Nazi discourse on and action against gays. When we try to discern whether the political invocation to remember Nazi Germany functions to keep gays and Jews in parallel planes or to establish these two groups—and Milk himself—as embodying the overlapping orbits of the Jewish queer, we return to the possibility of double-coding and the ways in which Jewqhooing can be accomplished through directorial choices and spectatorship.

Epstein's documentary features voice recordings from Milk's successful fight against Proposition 6; these include the Holocaust comparisons that were an established part of his political rhetoric: "Look what happened in Germany. Anita Bryant [who actively promoted anti-gay measures in Florida and served as a model/catalyst for Briggs] already says that Jews and Muslims are going to Hell. You know she's got a shopping list." In accord with the coalitional and intergenerational political vision that marked Milk's political career (one that at least some would code and have coded as Jewish),<sup>54</sup> and in spite of his distrust of institutionalized religion, he cites religious minorities—including but not solely Jews—as needing to be in league against contemporary forces of homophobia. Very early in the documentary, right after the opening archival footage of Dianne Feinstein<sup>55</sup> announcing Milk's death and before Fierstein's narration begins, we see footage of a celebratory Milk at the 1978 Gay Freedom Parade and glimpse a pink triangle on his black armband. Later in the film, that same sequence is repeated and expanded: We see the previously mentioned shot of Milk holding

the sign bearing the Jewish marker “I’m from Woodmere, NY,” then the footage used at the opening of the film without the sign. This footage is also part of the final sequence of the documentary. There we see the black armband (but not the pink triangle) from the front; at the very edge of the frame, we see part of the Woodmere sign. Taken together, the Holocaust allusions and comparisons in *The Times of Harvey Milk* tend to reference both historical and contemporary Jewish and gay subjects, with Milk himself as a coded crossroad.

Epstein also includes an explicit reminder of not only Milk’s Jewishness but also his cohort’s awareness of his Jewish identity when political consultant and friend Tory Hartmann recollects Milk’s encounter with Ruth Carter Stapleton, the evangelical sister of Jimmy Carter.<sup>56</sup> As Hartmann tells it on camera, Milk’s Jewishness didn’t stop Carter Stapleton from promising this gay man that “if he committed himself to Jesus, his homosexuality would disappear.” Without missing a beat Milk expressed surprise that she would shake his hand; to her confusion at this response, Milk delivered a punch line that stunned Carter Stapleton into silence: “You never know where that hand has been.” Thus Milk uses his sharp and queerly playful wit to counter this two-pronged religious/sexual conversion script. In one frame of footage from a Castro Street fair, a sign advertising “all beef kosher style hot dogs” can be seen in the background. Directly and indirectly, Epstein seems to have captured Milk’s “kosher style” without overstating or misrepresenting Milk’s performances of and commitments to Jewishness.

### **Van Sant and Black’s Underexposure of Milk’s Jewishness**

Without question the 2008 biopic *Milk* (which deservedly earned two Oscars) pays homage to its documentary predecessor. The credits of Van Sant’s *Milk* begin with, “Special thanks to the Academy Award–winning film *The Times of Harvey Milk* for its enormous contribution to the making of this movie and to Rob Epstein.” Van Sant’s and Black’s admiration for the documentary inspired their desire to bring Milk’s story to an even larger and mainstream audience.<sup>57</sup> The activists/politicos featured in Epstein’s documentary who were still alive served as historical consultants for *Milk*, and a number had cameos in the feature film.<sup>58</sup> Epstein granted Van Sant permission to use footage of the candlelight vigil from the documentary, and he shared oral histories that were part of the documentary’s preproduction process with the director and screenwriter as well as cast members.<sup>59</sup> Indeed film critic B. Ruby Rich has suggested that the

influence of the documentary on *Milk* might be captured by the phrase “adapted screenplay.”<sup>60</sup> Certainly the dramatization in *Milk* of several archival scenes in *The Times of Harvey Milk* contributes to this sense of adaptation from one genre to another. However, the differences between the films are equally noteworthy, some of which are attributable to genre as well as to the more than two decades that separate the two cinematic events. While Epstein’s documentary project was to view Harvey Milk as representing a political epoch (after all, only one half of the phrase “the life and times” makes it into the title), Van Sant provides us with a docudrama of an activist politician’s life. Thus while Milk’s lovers are present in the post-*Brokeback Mountain* biopic,<sup>61</sup> the trial of Dan White and the White Night Riots are relegated to historical footnotes. Given the Jewqhooing embedded in Epstein’s documentary, the ways Van Sant and Black deracinate Milk’s Jewishness, even as they provide a spectacular and more intimate portrait of him to a much larger audience, merit analysis.

The only explicit reference to Milk’s Jewishness is made very early in this biopic, when Milk introduces himself to a homophobic Castro business-owner: “I’m not an interloper—a Jew perhaps, but I hope you’ll forgive that.” Even if we read, as I do, Milk’s asking for forgiveness for “perhaps” being a Jew as strategic, rhetorical, and subtly ironic, it’s hardly enough to Jewishly define the film, notwithstanding Milk’s privately pronouncing the man a “schmuck.” This lone moment of explicit Jewish identification was barely audible when I first saw the movie in a theater. Rich reports that when *Milk* initially came out she both appreciated the movie and was a bit disappointed. Some of that disappointment related to the disconnect between Sean Penn and the Jewish geography question of the historical Harvey Milk. Writes Rich, “Had I turned into a purist who wanted to see a New York Jew, as Harvey was, play the part? I’d never been such a literalist before.”<sup>62</sup> While Harvey Fierstein’s narration reinforced that part of Milk’s legacy in Epstein’s documentary, the Jewish dimension of Harvey Milk is oddly underexposed in Gus Van Sant’s magisterial biopic of the queer political icon.<sup>63</sup>

To be sure, *Milk* has some of the Jewish-coded markers included in the documentary that preceded it. Woodmere is mentioned twice: when Milk likens his Castro Street camera store to the shop of Morris and Minnie Milk of Woodmere, and among a list of places where gay youth needing hope reside. Significantly, Milk never explicitly claims Woodmere as his place of origin.<sup>64</sup> Some Holocaust comparisons and references are also included. Most significantly, Sean Penn as Milk is shown on a small-screen television speaking words very similar to those

documented in *The Times of Harvey Milk*: “Look what happened in Germany. Bryant has already said Jews and Muslims are going to Hell. So you know she has a shopping list.” While accurately conveying Milk’s use of the Holocaust in his political rhetoric, this is a moment in the film when Milk’s image on television makes him seem smaller than life. Moreover, the connection between the Jews of this speech and Milk himself is diminished by the lack of direct and indirect Jewish identifications threaded throughout the documentary. Iconic shots from the 1978 Gay Freedom March are recreated in *Milk*; notably, although the pink triangle on Penn’s black armband is much more prominent than it is in the archival footage included in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, the sign that self-identifies Milk as originating from Woodmere, New York, is absent. A line of marchers holds banners; one of these depicts an image of Hitler, while the words “Once the Jews” are seen just behind and above another banner imprinted with an image of Anita Bryant. These shots suggest that gays are the new Jews of a potentially fascist state. Thus the Jewish-gay relationship tends to be one of parallelism and even substitution, and Milk is not Jewishly identified enough to serve as connecting tissue for those not already inclined to view Jewishly.

Like the historical Milk, Dustin Lance Black was well schooled in the anti-gay tendencies of organized religion. Growing up Mormon in San Antonio, Texas, Black credits Milk—as he encountered him through Epstein’s documentary—with giving him hope and the courage to come out. He continues to experience religious and familial exile. In his moving Oscar acceptance speech, Black stated, “If Harvey had not been taken from us 30 years ago, I think he’d want me to say to all of the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight who have been told that they are less than, by their churches, by the government, or by their families, that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures of value and that no matter what anyone tells you, God does love you.”<sup>65</sup> Black received kudos from the media for this speech as well as letters from young gays indicating that his film and his words at the Oscars prompted their families to talk to them about being gay for the first time. However, in a subdued voice, he also told an interviewer that his Oscar talk resulted in “one letter from a cousin . . . expressing the great shame I’ve brought to our family. . . . I was disappointed by that.”<sup>66</sup>

Notably, one of the few creative liberties Black took as he moved from the historical, documentary record into the realm of a historically based but fictionalized biopic related to cultural/religious representation. Although the historical record indicates that Milk attended a baby shower at Dan White’s home, Black’s

Milk is shown at the baptism of White's son in a Roman Catholic church. When Milk first accepts White's invitation to the christening, he tells his aghast staff, "I would let him christen me if he would vote for the gay rights ordinance; we need allies." Thus Milk's Jewishness, represented by that early "perhaps," becomes an even more disposable commodity. The baptism sequence is a relatively long one. During the ceremony Milk smiles and waves at White, wanting to ensure that his presence is registered. When White's wife, Mary Ann (Hope Tuck), interrupts their political talk later in the sequence, White apologizes for the "shop talk," which Milk identifies more specifically as being related to the gay-rights ordinance. When Mary Ann White suggests that such a subject is "inappropriate" at her son's christening, Milk quips, "Don't knock it till you've tried it," exhibiting the queer sense of humor the historical Milk evinced during his conversion exchange with Ruth Carter Stapleton. In Epstein's documentary Milk's ironic resistance to Christian homophobia served to reinforce his status as a queer Jew; here, however, he is presented as holding his ground as a gay activist immediately after he has professed, albeit jokingly, a willingness to sell his Jewish soul for a straight ally. According to Black, the minor transformation from historical baby shower to fictional christening was intended to convey White's religious orientation "more vividly."<sup>67</sup> Without being a purist and without underestimating or devaluing how much this movie matters just the way it is, I can't help wishing that Black had also chosen to portray Milk's historical New York Jewish sensibilities more vividly.

Despite the lack of Jewish inflection to Van Sant and Black's *Milk*, the film has furthered the tradition of Jewqhooing that iconic figure. Following Milk's untimely and tragic death, a Jewish memorial service was held not only at Temple Emanu-El, a major Reform synagogue in San Francisco, but also at Sha'ar Zahav, the aforementioned gay San Francisco synagogue Milk occasionally attended. Indeed, mourning and memorialization can become prime expressions of Jewhooing and Jewqhooing, and this has certainly been true for Milk, whose assassination positioned him as a queer Jewish martyr. In 1998 Sha'ar Zahav marked the twentieth anniversary of Milk's death with a special *yahrzeit* (memorial) program. In emphasizing Milk's legacy, Rabbi Jane Litman advocated "looking to the heroes of our community for moral guidance. Our social action fund is named after Harvey Milk. He is a bright star in our firmament."<sup>68</sup> Litman's language, in particular her repetition of the plural possessive "our," exemplifies the naming and citing of Milk in order to do the "group identity" work Kaufman associates with Jewhooing. In memory of the sleepless night that followed Milk's murder and in

honor of this gay Jewish martyr, the congregation held a *tikkun leyl*, an all-night study session more typically associated with Shavuot, the holiday that marks the giving of the Torah to the Israelites.<sup>69</sup> Thus in this queer Jewish space, Harvey Milk becomes symbolically linked to the Torah, which, tradition teaches, needs to be studied, remembered, and transmitted from generation to generation. While Jews in general are People of the Book, queer Jews are potentially People of Milk.

In 2008, a decade after the aforementioned *yahrzeit* service, Sha'ar Zahav and the San Francisco Jewish film festival<sup>70</sup> cosponsored a screening of Van Sant's *Milk*, organized by the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation.<sup>71</sup> Saslafsky, who traded Yiddishisms with Harvey at his camera store, as well as Avi Rose, a member of the Lost Tribe, reminisced about Harvey and his times before the screening.<sup>72</sup> Sharon Papo and her spouse, Amber Weiss, attested to the importance of the film, especially after the anti-gay marriage Proposition 8 was passed even as Obama was elected to his first term. Said Papo, "I've felt devastated since Prop. 8 passed, but the film rejuvenated and re-inspired me. And to see it with Jews from all walks of life makes me very proud of my Jewish community."<sup>73</sup> So although Van Sant and Black served primarily queer Milk, at least some of its viewers savored queer Jewish Milk. Even the most critical of film critics should not underestimate the sweetness of an "LGBT megahit"<sup>74</sup> based on this queer Jewish icon or the excitement that a much Jewqhooded figure had arrived on the national big screen as an emblem of mourning for the past and the Prop 8 present, as well as a harbinger of hope for the future.

### **Conclusion: Has Jewishness Come Out of the Cinematic Closet?**

Both Epstein's and Van Sant's films have participated in the cultural work of Jewqhooding Harvey Milk and thus merit inclusion in the Jewish cinematic canon. *The Times of Harvey Milk* does some of that work within the documentary itself, while *Milk* leaves much of that work to the realm of reception—that is, to viewers who are literate in the often still-coded intersections of queerness and Jewishness in life, art, and history.<sup>75</sup> Taken together, the two films devoted to the life and times of Harvey Milk, made almost a quarter of a century apart, beg the question of whether a Jewish movie is made by its director, its screenwriter, its actors, or its audience. In Talmudic fashion and in keeping with the work of such scholars as Henry Bial, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Alisa Lebow, and Nathan Abrams, I want to preserve and honor all these possibilities. I also want

to resist the seductive narrative that genre is ethnic and ethical destiny. To be sure, the biopic has historically been a conservative genre heralding the values of liberal individualism and whitewashing ethnic identity in general and Jewish difference in particular (*The Life of Emile Zola* [William Dieterle, USA, 1937], anyone?).<sup>76</sup> Yet before we accept genre determinism on the Jewish question, we might also remember that *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, USA, 1968), a biopic of Fanny Brice (and, arguably and indirectly, of Barbra Streisand), is credited with making the explicitly Jewish mouthy woman sexy, at least in some quarters.<sup>77</sup> Concomitantly, the centrality of the propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935) to the history of documentary should temper the temptation to laud that genre for its essential ethical commitments.<sup>78</sup>

Ultimately, for me, the subtle but important shift from *The Times of Harvey Milk* to *Milk* raises the question of whether the double coding of Jewishness in film has been relegated to the past. According to a progressive narrative of Jewish cinematic expression proffered by Bial, Abrams, and Eric Goldman, the explicit representation of Jewishness has been largely normalized and diversified.<sup>79</sup> Put another way, Jewishness has come out of the cinematic closet, and viewers no longer require a decoder ring to recognize, as Bial puts it, that “a Jew without a beard is still a Jew.”<sup>80</sup> Ironically, however, a 2008 film devoted to not only the times but also the life of one of the most iconic queer Jews relegated a Jewish angle of vision to the provisional realm. Van Sant’s, Black’s, and Sean Penn’s *Milk* is indeed only “perhaps” a Jew; a more Jewish-positive identification remains dependent on critical spectatorship that includes knowledge not only of the historical Milk but also of the intersections of Jewish and queer cinematic history. Both *The Times of Harvey Milk* and *Milk* should be considered part of that busy crossroads.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Notes

1. *The Times of Harvey Milk* (dir. Rob Epstein, 1984; DVD: The Criterion Collection, 2011).
2. *Milk* (dir. Gus Van Sant, screenplay Dustin Lance Black, 2008; DVD: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2001).
3. See, for example, the last chapter of B. Ruby Rich's *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), titled "Got Milk? Van Sant's Encounter with History." In *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), Nathan Abrams briefly mentions *Milk* (85) but does not provide any extended discussion of the film.
4. *Crossfire* (dir. Edward Dmytryk, 1947; DVD: Turner Home Entertainment, 2005).
5. *Gentleman's Agreement* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1947; DVD: 20th Century-Fox, 2000).
6. See, for example, Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 38–47.
7. *Bent* (dir. Sean Mathias, screenplay Martin Sherman, 1997; DVD: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003).
8. In *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), I wrote, "Although I recognize that historically incorrect and competing narratives of victimization can potentially be drawn from this emotionally harrowing moment—that is, it's worse to be gay than Jewish—I do not think that is the source of dramatic tension or the intention of this scene. Rather, this image insists that the particularity of gay victims of the Shoah needs to be recognized, that the Nazi persecution of homosexuals must become a distinct narrative." For additional commentary on this final scene and its implications for queer Jews, see pp. 74–75. It is worth noting that, in the directors' commentary to *Paragraph 175*, Epstein and Friedman indicate that *Bent* reflects their inadequate education about pink triangles and the persecution of gays, which caused them to "lump together" the experiences of gays and Jews, an analogy they strove to disrupt in *Paragraph 175* (see n. 33, below).
9. *The Celluloid Closet* (dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1995; DVD: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 2001).
10. *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream* (aka *Hollywood: An Empire of Their Own*) (dir. Simcha Jacobovici, Stuart Samuels, 1998; DVD: Warner Home Video, 2006).
11. Although beyond the scope of this article, an in-depth analysis of the relationship

- between Jacobovici's documentary and Gabler's argument, as well as the ethnoracial politics of the film, would be a worthy scholarly project.
12. Samantha Baskind uses this term in "The Fockerized Jew? Questioning Jewishness as Cool in American Popular Entertainment," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25.4 (2007): 3–17.
  13. Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
  14. Alisa Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xxiii.
  15. In the directors' commentary track on *The Celluloid Closet* DVD, Epstein and Friedman note that Frey went on to play Motel, the tailor, in the paradoxically paradigmatic Jewish American film *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, USA, 1971). They also report that when their film *Paragraph 175* was shown at Sundance, some assumed that its emphasis on "gays and Jews" meant that it would "definitely . . . be nominated" for major awards.
  16. See, for example, Jonathan Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), esp. "Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction," 1–18.
  17. "Queer" is a coalitional term that strives to honor the diverse communities represented by each letter of the GLBT acronym. However, it is also a term that challenges gender and sexual identity politics as well as the normalizing of a binary sex/gender system. By using the term "Jewish queerness," I strive to liberate Jewishness from the stranglehold of assumed heteronormativity and historically overdetermined "respectability" (George Mosse's term), which has impacted the lives of all Jews and impoverished many, especially those self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, feminist, or queer.
  18. See, for example, Warren Hoffman, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), and Riv Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
  19. In *First Person Jewish*, Lebow devotes a chapter to "first person filmmakers . . . [who] have difficulty even negotiating these two identities in the same frame, developing, rather, a puzzling circumspection with regard to queerness or Jewishness, or both" (111). She continues, "If one identity (queer, for instance) is loudly proclaimed, it may at times follow that the other is just as 'loudly' suppressed" (117).

20. Janet Jakobsen, "Queers Are Like Jews, Aren't They? Analogy and Alliance Politics," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini, 67.
21. David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooring the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 275.
23. Thomas Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period, 1969–1984," in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 113, 109–110.
24. Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, 125.
25. Stacey Palevsky, "Never Forget the Legacy of Harvey Milk," *Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, December 5, 2008 (Ethnic NewsWatch 367697017).
26. Lesléa Newman, *A Letter to Harvey Milk and Other Stories* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).
27. For an extended reading of this short story, see Helene Meyers, "To Queer or Not to Queer: That's Not the Question," *College Literature* 24.1 (1997): 179–180.
28. Kaufman, *Jewhooring the Sixties*, 390.
29. Mark Segal, "There Are No Gay Jews," *Windy City Times*, January 18, 2012, [www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=35755](http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=35755), last accessed July 26, 2017.
30. Lesléa Newman is also part of this series.
31. *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (dir. Mariposa Film Group [Peter Adair, Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, Rob Epstein, Lucy Massie Phenix, Veronica Selver], 1977; DVD: Milliarium Zero, 2010).
32. Waugh, "Walking on Tippy Toes," 116.
33. *Paragraph 175* (dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2000; DVD: New Yorker Films Artwork, 2002). In the director commentary on the DVD, Friedman indicates that, prior to doing research for the film, they had seen *Bent*, had only very generalized and inaccurate knowledge about gay victims of the Nazis, and did not make appropriate distinctions between the gay and the Jewish experience. Epstein reports that, as the project went on, it became very important to them to challenge the erroneous assumption that the numbers of and methodology of dealing with the two populations were analogous; thus it became important to clarify that Christian gays were not slated for systematic elimination and to represent "a different and specific piece of history." Whether the documentary succeeds in "deconstructing a lot of the mythology" is arguable.

34. Iris Mann, "'Milk' Captures Doomed Life of Gay, Jewish Politician," *Jewish Journal*, December 10, 2008, [jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/67513/](http://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/67513/), last accessed July 26, 2017.
35. Ibid.
36. Rebecca Spence, "Harvey Milk, in Life and on Film, Typified the Proud Jew as Outsider," *Forward*, December 19, 2008 (EthnicNewsWatch 367872356).
37. Ibid.
38. Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 374.
39. Mann, "'Milk' Captures Doomed Life."
40. Qtd. in Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 19.
41. Spence, "Harvey Milk, in Life and on Film."
42. Mann, "'Milk' Captures Doomed Life."
43. Ibid.
44. Joshua Schuster, "Slain S.F. Supe Harvey Milk Eulogized at Sha'ar Zahav," *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, November 27, 1998 (Ethnic NewsWatch 367636145).
45. Spence, "Harvey Milk, in Life and on Film."
46. *Torch Song Trilogy* (dir. Paul Bogart, screenplay by Harvey Fierstein, 1988; DVD: New Line Home Entertainment, 2004). This 1988 film is an adaptation of Fierstein's 1982 play.
47. This is especially evident in the scene in which Arnold Beckoff (played by Fierstein) says Kaddish for his non-Jewish lover, who has been murdered by homophobes, and is challenged by his mother (played by Anne Bancroft), who objects to the comparison between her son's lover and her husband. It is noteworthy that Fierstein is also a presence in *The Celluloid Closet*.
48. *The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, Jon Else, special edition features.
49. *Times of Harvey Milk*, audio commentary on DVD.
50. Notably, Passover seders are often occasions for linking the Exodus story to other liberation and social justice movements. Such practices embody the coalition politics for which Harvey Milk was known.
51. Mann, "'Milk' Captures Doomed Life."
52. Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 21.
53. Ibid., 231.
54. In *The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, "Director's Research Tapes," special edition features, San Francisco Superior Court Judge Lillian Sing recognized Milk as one of the earliest proponents of coalition politics and lauded him for recognizing the

- discrimination Chinese Americans have endured. According to Sing, Milk “was able to do so because he was not only gay but also Jewish. From that background, he had a sense of fighting against injustices.”
55. At the time of Milk’s death, Dianne Feinstein was president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. She succeeded George Moscone as mayor of San Francisco. Today she is best known as a senator from California.
  56. Other pre-production interviews included in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, “Director’s Research Tapes,” special edition features, also indicate awareness of Milk’s Jewishness. At one point Scott Smith, Milk’s lover (played by James Franco in *Milk*), suggests that the 17,000 votes Milk won in his first campaign were significant given that he was “a person with long hair, Jewish, gay.” He also reminisces about the morning car trips they often made to the House of Bagels, and then to a local shop that supplied the whitefish, pickled herring, and “big globs of cream cheese” that went on the bagels. Such food might reasonably be considered a marker of ethnic Jewishness, especially given that “Milk talked briefly about opening a Jewish delicatessen in San Francisco” (Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, 40). These pre-production interviews would likely have been among the materials Epstein generously shared with Van Sant and Black. At the twenty-fifth anniversary candlelight memorial marking Milk’s and Moscone’s assassinations (*The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, special features), Tom Ammiano follows Rebecca Moscone’s remembrance of her father by stating, “As Harvey might say, I’m very *farmisht* [Yiddish for mixed up or befuddled].”
  57. See Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, 240–241, and *The Times of Harvey Milk*, DVD, “Two Films, One Legacy,” special edition features.
  58. “Two Films, One Legacy.”
  59. “Two Films, One Legacy”; *Milk*, DVD, “Remembering Harvey, special features”; Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, 259 n. 12.
  60. Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, 259 n. 12.
  61. For a discussion of the ways *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, USA, 2005) “signal[ed] a new era” (185) and constructed gay cinema for a mainstream audience, see Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, 185–201.
  62. It is worth noting that other critics found Penn more convincing as a Jewish New Yorker. For example, Peter Travers, in his review of *Milk* for *Rolling Stone* (November 26, 1998), comments that “Penn uses makeup to lengthen his nose and look more like Harvey. He adopts a New York accent to get Harvey’s inflections” ([www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/milk-20081126#ixzz3eeYuQ6QA](http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/milk-20081126#ixzz3eeYuQ6QA), last accessed July 26, 2017).
  63. It is worth noting that in *Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk* (New York:

- Newmarket Press, 2009), released in conjunction with the film and including an introduction and interview excerpts by screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, there is no mention of Milk's Jewish heritage, including and especially in the timeline devoted to his "East Coast Life pre-1972." This sharply contrasts with the narration in *The Times of Harvey Milk*, which at the outset identifies Milk as the product of Jewish parents.
64. Notably, while *Milk* dramatizes the "pooper scooper law" archival sequence from the documentary, it leaves out Harvey Milk's citing New York as a model.
  65. Qtd. in Ari Karpel, "Forty Under 40: Dustin Lance Black," *Advocate* (May 6, 2009), [www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2009/05/06/forty-under-40-dustin-lance-black?page=0,0](http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2009/05/06/forty-under-40-dustin-lance-black?page=0,0), last accessed July 26, 2017.
  66. Ibid.
  67. Dustin Lance Black, *Milk: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), 109.
  68. Schuster, "Slain S.F. Supe Harvey Milk."
  69. Ibid.
  70. The San Francisco Jewish Film Festival has been the prototype for Jewish film festivals nationally and internationally.
  71. Palevsky, "Never Forget."
  72. Ibid.
  73. Ibid.
  74. Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, xxvi.
  75. Following Bial, I emphasize literacy rather than identity to avoid the specter of essentialist spectatorship.
  76. For a discussion of the history and politics of biopics, see George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). For discussions of the erasure of Jewishness in Dieterle's *Life of Emile Zola* in particular and the whitewashing in biographies more generally, see, for example, Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), and Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982).
  77. *Funny Girl* (dir. William Wyler, 1968; DVD: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2001). See Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 87–92, for the role this film played in changing reception of the Jewish woman.
  78. See J. Hoberman's "'Triumph of the Will': Fascist Rants and the Hollywood Response," *New York Times*, March 3, 2016, which exemplifies the continued wrestling with the identity and cinematic impact of this film.

79. See Eric Goldman, *The American Jewish Story Through Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).
80. Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 19.

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