SYLLABUS – Spring 2019
From Old World to New:
Becoming Modern As Reflected in Yiddish Cinema and Literature
Instructor: Miri Koral  Public Affairs 2242  Office Hours: 327 Royce Th 11:00 & by apptnt.
GE Course in Foundations of Arts and Humanities – Literary and Cultural Analysis

A 1,000-year heritage culture is buffeted by such powerful forces as urbanization, migration, radical social movements, assimilation, and calamitous mass destruction. Can it survive? Should it? How?

The surprisingly developed art form of Yiddish cinema allows us to examine the ways in which the creativity, traditions, and values of Yiddish culture evolved, diminished, or endured in the last century, and transformed into their present-day manifestations. Through viewing selected films (feature films made in Poland and the US. from the 1930’s to 2015 and contemporary documentaries – titled as needed), readings of the source literature, and in-class discussions, students explore transformational themes in depth. Each student also brings his or her own cultural heritage to bear, however diverse or at whatever level of expression.

By the end of the course, students will have gained a unique, comprehensive familiarity with an unusual art form, and insights into modern Yiddish culture: its profound creative influence on popular culture and the challenges of maintaining any cultural values and/or identity in today’s globalized world.

Participation in class discussions is encouraged and expected: come to class having completed assignments. Homework assignments include viewing films not completed in class, readings, and brief papers and attending at least one live local Yiddish cultural event outside of class (TBA). Films are viewed either through the CCLE Course Website Video Reserves Tab or the OID Lab - Powell Library, or occasionally in class. Readings are either on the CCLE class website or handouts. Grading basis: class participation (20%); assigned papers (40%); quizzes (20%) and final (20%). Papers: 3 pages of various specified lengths (1 – 3 pages). Papers are graded on evidence of viewing/reading assignment completion, thoughtfulness, writing skills, and use and citing of sources beyond Wikki.

Part I: CHALLENGES TO THE OLD WORLD: NEW IDEAS AND POLITICS
CLASS 1: The nature of “cultural”. Yiddish culture overview. Yiddish Cinema.
Assignment 1 (for Class 2)
- Reading: Chapter I of Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds, by J. Hoberman;
- Assigned Viewing: Thyves Kaf(The Vow) 1937.

CLASS 2: The Dybbuk and S. Ansky
Quizz # 1 In-class. We look at the powerful currents that made innovators and rebels out of playwrights Peretz Hirschbein and S. Ansky. What’s unique about it? We look at the unique and supernatural belief system of your wedding customs and the tradition of the badkhen (wedding jester). A look at mystical and supernatural beliefs external to the community. *Discussion: in what ways does the film based on Hirschbein’s The Vow seem innovative thematically (folklore and ritual; modernity/secularism vs. tradition/religion; supremacy of love), and in cinematic techniques? Viewing of a portion of The Dybbuk.
Assignment 2 (for Class 3):
- Reading: The Dybbuk, Act I of the play; “I Enlighten a Shtetl” by S. Ansky, and “A Half Year With Ansky” by H. Lunsky, in The Golden Tradition by L. Davidovitz. (CCLE class web page and handouts);
- Assigned Viewing: Der Dibek (The Dybbuk) (1937) in its entirety.

CLASS 3: Theater Vs. Cinema/ Original Work Vs. Film
S. Ansky: a rebel’s return to his ethnic and spiritual roots – a good thing? Why? *Discussion: what kabbalistic elements are immediately manifest in Act I of the play, The Dybbuk, and are they also manifest in the film? Are there ambiguities in the filmic portrayal of Kabbalistic rituals and beliefs? What influences of the avant-garde can one see in the filmmaking?
Assignment 3 (for Class 4):
- Reading: Chapt. 1, A Bridge of Longing by David Rokeby;
- Paper 1: Two films made in 1937 (The Vow, The Dybbuk) on similar themes, yet so different. Briefly discuss the similarities and differences in storyline. Limit: 1 page. Paper 1 is Due before Class 4.

CLASS 4: A Most Enduring Voice - Sholem Aleichem (“Hello”)
Meet Sholem Aleichem, the most iconic and famous name in Yiddish letters, and an enduring and surprising influence on modern Yiddish literature and modern American culture. Historical context of Russian Jewry. Viewing documentary, Sholem Aleichem: Laughter in the Darkness (2011). *Discussion: What themes in literature and film are universal?
Assignment 4 (for Class 5):
- Viewing: Tevye der Milkhiker (Tevye the Dairyman) (1939)
- Viewing: “Fiddler on the Roof” (1971)
- Reading: “Chave” (“Eve”) short story by Sholem Aleichem (CCLE class website); Chapter 3, Pp 56-66, A Bridge of Longing (CCLE Class site).

CLASS 5: Enlightening Ideas Vs. Entrenched Small-Town Notions
Quizz # 2 In-class. Meet Mendele Mokher Sforim, “grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature and modern Hebrew literature vs. the backward shtetl. An internal sea change: Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah). How did it spread and what did it seed? Why is it so important to modern Yiddish literature (and film)? The shtetl: common characteristics; an illustrated overview and the shtetl’s place in Yiddish literature
PART II: NEW WORLD CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: URBANIZATION AND IMMIGRATION

CLASS 6: Movement Away: To Cities and To America
Quiz #3 in-class. *Discussion: How does the film “The Light Ahead” depict the duel between superstitions vs. Enlightened thinking — is this still happening today? How does it depict stirrings of a new labor movement and foreshadow the Holocaust? In what significant ways does a shtetl differ from today’s suburb? Intro to Sholem Asch and the psychological and social themes explored in his provocative works. Rise of the labor movement among Jews in the US in relation to values of the Haskalah/Enlightenment covered earlier Viewing part of Uncle Moses (1930).
Assignment 6 (for Class 7):
II Reading: Chapters from Uncle Moses (Sholem Asch) — “Uncle Moses Visits Masha” and “The Blue Room” (Google Books); Sections on the making of the film “Uncle Moses” in Hoberman’s Bridge of Light, which highlight the transference of artistic elements from theater to cinema (CCLE course website).
> Viewing: Uncle Moses (Uncle Moses) in its entirety (1932)

CLASS 7: Getting Ahead: By Luck or Pluck
How was the shtetl transposed to American urban life, and to what benefit? How does assimilation affect a heritage language and traditional values? Reading parts of Uncle Moses in class. *Discussion: Based on the film and readings of Uncle Moses, what constitutes a morally ambiguous character? Why is it of value to depict such a character? Etymology of “klezmer” — historical origins and revival.
Assignment 7 (for Class 8):
II Reading: Virtual Shtetl Website, YIVO Website: Pre-War Lodz, Warsaw, Cracow
> Viewing: Yidl Mitn Fidl (Yidel With His Fiddle) (1936).

CLASS 8: Eastern European Jewish Urban Life Between the Wars
Jewish culture adapts to urban life in E. Europe; the cities of Lodz and Warsaw as major centers of Jewish cultural life prior to 1939 and their transformation to Holocaust ghettos. Other major urban centers of Jewish life in E. Europe. *Discussion: Why move to a city and what city would you/ could you move to if you were an early-20th-Century Jew? How are traditional values kept/lost? Negative and positive effects of urbanization as depicted in Yidl Mitn Fidl. How does the framing device in Yidl Mitn Fidl give the viewer what he/she needs to know — i.e., a sense of place and time and overall setting, and the inner life of a character? Viewing part of Mamele (Little Mother) (1938).
Assignment 8 (for Class 9):
> Viewing: Mamele (Little Mother) (1938) in its entirety.
> Viewing: Partisans of Vilna (documentary, 1986)
> Paper 3: As depicted in Mamele, give some examples of the ways traditional Jewish cultural and family life are upended in 1930’s urban Poland. What’s at stake in giving up tradition? What is gained/lost? Limit: 1 page.

PART III: ANNIHILATION, RESISTANCE AND RENEWAL: HOLOCAUST AND AFTERMATH

CLASS 9: The Jerusalem of Lithuania and the Legacy of Resistance
Quiz #4 in-class. Welcome to Vilna and meet A. Sutzkever. The “Jerusalem of Lithuania” has its memory keeper, the incomparable poet Avrom Sutzkever. The Vilna Ghetto posed excruciating moral dilemmas to the young leaders of the Resistance against the Nazi terror. Discussion: Could language be crucial in forging resistance? Can resistance take more than one form? Viewing a pre-War travel vignette of Vilna and Black Honey, the Life and Poetry of Avraham Sutzkever (2018).
Assignment 9 (for Class 10)
II Reading: Selected poems by Avrom Sutzkever (CCLE class website); D. Katz, “Mohicans” from Words On Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish
> Viewing: Lang iz der Veg” (Long is the Road) (1947).

CLASS 10: Dislocation In Post-World War II and the Culture In a New Homeland
What is the post-War role of Yiddish and the effects on Yiddish culture? Are there revivals of Jewish/Yiddish culture in Vilna and Poland today? *Discussion: Making a Yiddish film in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust; what is more effective — documentary or feature film in exploring such serious themes? How do post-WW II Displaced Persons (DP) camps compare to present day refugee camps (in Africa and Asia), in terms of purpose, location, administration, inhabitants? Did Yiddish culture play a part in Holocaust survivors being able to connect with a “normal life”? Yiddish in Israel: In-class viewing of Mameloshn/Kinderloshn (Mother Tongue/Children’s Tongue)
(documentary, 2003). The nationalist ideal and its misguided assault on Yiddish in Israel; the status of Yiddish today. What is the value and means of transmitting a language and culture when there are opposing needs?

**Bibliography – Films**

- *Tkies Kaf* - The Vow (1937) – *Unkl Mozes* - Uncle Moses (1932)
- *Der Dibek* - The Dybbuk (1937) – *Mamele* - Little Mother (1938).
- *Tevye der Milkhiker*” - Tevye the Dairyman (1939) – *Lang iz der Veg* - Long is the Road (1947).

**Bibliography - Publications**

- Selected Sholem Aleichem stories from his collection *Tevye the Dairyman*; excerpt from Sholem Asch’s novel *Uncle Moses*; selections from the writings of Avrom Sutzkever related to the Vilna Ghetto; and selections from the books listed below:

**WEBSITES:**

- [YIVO Website](https://yivo.org/Home)
- [Virtual Shtetl](https://sztetl.org.pl/en)
- [Jewish Virtual Library website](https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org)
- [Polin Jewish Museum](http://www.polin.pl/en/ (virtual tour))
- [California Institute for Yiddish Culture & Language](http://www.yiddishinstitute.org)