

Greetings!

And thanks for your interest in **NEJS 182a: Jewish Life in Television, Film & Fiction**. I hope to upload a syllabus soon. In the meantime, please see the course descriptions below, and contact me with any questions, at rgreenblatt@brandeis.edu.

I look forward to meeting many of you in the Fall!

Rachel Greenblatt

NEJS 182a: Jewish Life in Television, Film & Fiction

Viewings likely to include these & more:

- Gertrude Berg & *The Goldbergs*
- *Gentleman's Agreement*
- *Bridget Loves Bernie*
- *Seinfeld*
- *Transparent*
- *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*

Readings likely to include these & more:

- Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen*
- Neil Gabler, *An Empire of their Own*
- J. Hoberman, Jeffrey Shandler, eds., *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*
- David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (revised edition)

Brief Description:

In this course, we examine the relationship between Jews and American mass entertainment, especially television, during the twentieth century. At a time when Jews were actively involved in both the business and creative ends of the new media that came to dominate fields as seemingly diverse as popular culture and political discourse, Jewish leading characters were largely absent from prime time network television. How did Jewish involvement in mass entertainment, the simultaneous absence of Jewish characters onscreen, and the role of television in American culture relate to each other? What, if anything, do those relationships reveal about Jewish identity and American society in this period?

In the first decades of the twentieth century, wireless radio transmission, the moving image, and, eventually, broadcast television emerged from the workshops of tinkering, perhaps visionary

inventors to become new means of communication and entertainment. Before long, they had become central to the very way Americans lived, consumed, communicated, and spent their leisure time. Television, in particular, came to play an enormous role in facilitating the “imagined community” that united Americans. During the same time period, the Jewish world underwent a complete demographic transformation, eventually making United States home to the largest Jewish population in the world. Among the Jewish immigrants, who brought Yiddish-language culture and entertainment traditions with them to the New World, were individuals who would play critical roles in shaping the new mass entertainment industry, and in creating its programming. And, indeed, as one might expect, in the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s, audibly “ethnic characters,” including Jews, were prominent in network radio programming, a trend that continued into the post-World War II birth of broadcast television.

Then, for three decades, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, leading Jewish characters rarely appeared on prime time television. For the first fifteen years or so of that period, on-air fictional characters were overwhelmingly suburban, white members of nuclear families. But the absence of Jewish leading characters from the small screen continued for another fifteen years after Norman Lear’s *All in the Family*, and a barrage of other like-minded shows, had burst the suburban bubble. In this course, we examine the paradox of on-screen Jewish absence from television, during a time of simultaneous Jewish involvement in so many other of its working parts.

This paradox is all the more important given the central role of broadcast network television during these years. For several decades, approximately from the 1950s through the 1980s and well into the 1990s, network television had an extraordinary hold on the American public. Some hailed the new opportunities of this “democratic” medium (a term also applied to the movies), replete with the potential to educate the masses and provide an easily accessible shared public sphere over vast geographic divides, while others denounced its nefarious effects on intelligence, education, political deliberation—to name just a few perceived foibles (dangers, some said).

Using Jewish characters as a case study of representation and self-representation of identifiably “ethnic” identities on American television, we will consider the both the changing world portrayed by network television, and the simultaneously evolving role of television in American life. We will focus primarily on television as an entertainment forum, with occasional attention to its news and non-fiction broadcasts.

To put broadcast America in sharper relief, we will also look briefly at Jews in cinema during this same time period, and occasionally refer to Jews and mass entertainment in Europe and in Israel. Why was the disappearance of the Jewish character more marked on prime time, entertainment television than in other media? What does this phenomenon suggest the relationships among broadcast television, ethnic and religious minorities, and public life in the United States during the twentieth century? What does it suggest to us about American multiculturalism in a post-broadcast age?



Jewish Life in Television, Film & Fiction

Fall 2018: Th 6:30-9:30pm
NEJS 182a

Prof. Rachel Greenblatt

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Examines the involvement of Jews in American television and film. Jews were active in both the business and creative ends of new entertainment media from their beginnings. Are there relationships among Jewish involvement in mass entertainment, portrayals of Jewish characters on-screen, and the role of television in American culture and society?