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What's so Funny about *Les Aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (1973)?: A Cinematic Comedy between History and Memory

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Ne donnons pas trop d'importance aux *Aventures de Rabbi Jacob*. "After all, it's only a movie," eût dit Alfred Hitchcock.
Gérard Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille*, 2001[1]

Director Gérard Oury's (1919-2006) *Les Aventures de Rabbi Jacob* was a groundbreaking film that satirized French intolerance as it preached multiculturalism and *métissage*. Despite the plot of *non sequiturs* and Louis de Funès' burlesque hysterics, *Rabbi Jacob* merits our critical attention not only because it was the top French box office draw of 1973 and a 1974 best foreign film Golden Globe nominee (it lost to Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*), but for its imaging of the Jew, the Arab, and the bourgeois at the historical juncture of the Fourth Arab-Israeli War. Why did the original French audience of over seven million laugh at *Rabbi Jacob*? Why did a minority, including the hijacker of an Air France flight, find nothing funny about the film? Oury's screenplay, co-written with his daughter Danièle Thompson (1944-), in consultation with Rabbi Josy Eisenberg (1933-), host of *La Source de vie* on France 2 television since 1962, betrayed the noble or naïve belief that comedy served a therapeutic function inside the national culture of a liberal-democratic society. In the case of *Rabbi Jacob*, popular comedic cinema rather than avant-garde films or documentaries became the privileged means for French audiences to work through anti-Semitism and racism. *Rabbi Jacob* made the bourgeois bigot ready to proclaim "La France aux Français" laughable as it satirized intolerance as stupidity. Simultaneously, *Rabbi Jacob* imagined a transcendental French reconciliation with both, as well as between, Jews and Arabs. *Rabbi Jacob* thus was a serious rhetorical moral-political strategy that communicated an optimistic fantasy scenario thereby liberating French audiences from racist realities, societal divisions, and historical injustices. *Rabbi Jacob*, however, treated its Arabs and Jews differently: French culture served secular North African Arabs as a template for their universality whilst Jewishness, a cult of memory, demanded French acceptance of cultural plurality. Imagined communities—national identities—depend on every participant's ability to say that the collective "we" is fundamentally good despite the past and present crimes committed in "our" name.[2] *Rabbi Jacob* contributed to such a task and has continued to do so a canonized culture text since 1973.

This essay takes a historical approach to contextualizing *Rabbi Jacob* with the caveat that historians can never fully comprehend why people laughed at *Rabbi Jacob* or explain why individuals who "got" the joke did not find it funny at all. An audience in October 1973 did not react to *Rabbi Jacob* as an audience in October 2014 might only wearing more polyester and corduroy. The plot remains the same, but the cultural context that informs an audience's sense of humor alters. Historian Robert Darnton struggled to uncover why eighteenth-century Parisian print workers found it funny to torture cats—to

"get" the joke was to "get" artisanal culture under the Old Regime.[3] *Rabbi Jacob* was an informed comedic consumer product rather than a spontaneous labor revolt against authority. Yet as a cultural artifact *Rabbi Jacob* assembled a complex repertory of physical action (slapstick), shared identity (drag, parody, the burlesque, caricatures), irrationality (masking, absurdity), and language (puns, exaggerations, allusions), which invited spectators to laugh at a paradoxical recastings of French reality in 1973. Dominick LaCapra noted that the Voltarian smirk replaced carnivalesque laughter as a form of social protest—what Darnton described as "laughter, sheer laughter, the thigh-slapping rib-cracking Rabelaisian kind."[4] Carnival humor withdrew from the street and the marketplace only to make occasional appearances in cabarets and vaudevillian theatre. *Rabbi Jacob*'s fell back on carnival for humor and laughter, nonetheless, the latter were communication strategies for a Voltarian message. *Rabbi Jacob* was inextricably linked to visualizations of citizenship, identity, multiculturalism, and memory. *Rabbi Jacob* thus had an educational potential inside France's public sphere of rational debate albeit the real effects of humor on individual subjectivity in time cannot be measured. The aim of this essay therefore is threefold: to provide critical analysis of a film; to understand where those who produced *Rabbi Jacob* and those who consumed *Rabbi Jacob* were coming from; and, to reflect on the legacies of *Rabbi Jacob* in French culture.

Until recently, *Rabbi Jacob* and similar films were never analyzed through the *auteur*-ist lens because they lacked the stylistic and aesthetic innovation of *nouvelle vague* or politically committed directors.[5] As Guy Austin noted, there has been a scholarly tendency to think French cinema as intellectual or cerebral rather than comedic and corporal.[6] Comedy, however, has been France's most popular cinematic genre since World War Two. Critic Michael Kimmelman argued that the French obsession with comedic cinema evidences a pervasive social desire for escapism in producers, directors, and audiences who have refused to confront French realities since 1945.[7] To ignore or dismiss France's most successful cinema, however, is to disregard its potential complexity and reject comedy's moralizing power in a liberal democracy. As Rémi Fournier-Lanzoni observed, French film censorship, already lax under the Pompidou administration, seldom policed cinematic comedies for their politics.[8] *Rabbi Jacob* thus served as a vehicle for Oury to speak freely with French popular audiences about anti-Semitism and racism.

The Plot

A brief summary is advantageous to those unfamiliar with *Rabbi Jacob*. The pretext for the entire film is the bar mitzva of David Schmoll on the Rue des Rosiers, a historically Ashkenazi Parisian neighborhood. The family invited David's American-based relative, Rabbi Jacob (played by Marcel Dalio), to officiate the service. Rabbi Jacob and his American assistant thus depart Manhattan for France, Rabbi Jacob's beloved birthplace not visited since he fled during the Second World War, on mid-day Friday. An Orthodox Rabbi strangely flies directly into Shabbat to facilitate the plot. Like much of what is to follow, the audience must suspend its disbelief. Meanwhile, that Friday afternoon in France, a chauffer named Salomon (Henri Guybet) and his employer Victor Pivert (Louis de Funès), a bourgeois, racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic factory owner, race from Deauville, where Pivert's wife Germaine (Suzy Delair) fears he has a

mistress, to Paris in a Citroën DS. The DS carries a small upside down pleasure boat on its roof. Pivert is rushed to return and prepare for his daughter's marriage to a pimply-faced aristocrat on Saturday. As they drive, Pivert makes a litany of derogatory remarks about blacks, foreigners, and interracial marriage. Pivert then learns, to his stupefaction, that Salomon is expecting the visit of his uncle Rabbi Jacob, a Jew. Pivert's amazement that his chauffer is Jewish ultimately leads the car to overturn into a lake boat end down. Salomon, respecting the Shabbat, is fired and abandons his employer by the roadside. The stranded Pivert seeks shelter in a nearby factory—Le Yankee Chewing Gum plant—where Arab assassins led by Le colonel Farès (the Italian Renzo Montagnani), described by Pivert as "oily and curly-haired," happen to be torturing Mohamed Larbi Slimane (a tanned Claude Giraud), a socialist revolutionary from an unidentified resource-rich North African nation. Pivert accidently frees Slimane who then takes him hostage. In the interim, the police suspect Pivert rather than the assassins had fired a machine gun at gendarmes. Slimane and Pivert, pursued by assassins and the police, flee to Orly airport. The odd pair proceed to the toilets where they jump two Orthodox Jews stealing their clothes and—magically—beards and side locks. Emerging from the bathroom, the Schmoll family mistake Pivert for the French-born Rabbi Jacob visiting from Manhattan's Lower East Side with his American assistant to officiate his nephew's bar mitzvah. The film's title is misleading. These are not the adventures of Rabbi Jacob. They are the adventures of Pivert and Slimane in Hasidic drag.

The two imposters are taken with great fanfare to the Rue des Rosiers in the Marais for David's bar mitzva. Slimane, the secular Arab, serves as Pivert's religious guide as they attempt to conceal their true identity inside and outside the synagogue. Salmon is also there to welcome Rabbi Jacob and immediately recognizes his boss. The latter pushes Pivert into the most absurd and memorable scene of the film: a complicated Hassidic dance number that Pivert masters brilliantly. Soon after, Salmon and Pivert reconcile and Salmon and Slimane shake hands as self-identifying "distant cousins" before fleeing. Elsewhere, the assassins and police proceed to accost the real Rabbi Jacob and his assistant who they think are Pivert and Slimane. After even more screwball twists and a great deal of beard tugging, all conflicts are resolved and Slimane, now a newly elected president, leaves France with Pivert's daughter (Sylvette Herry or Miou-Miou), with the industrialist's blessing, and the support of the Fifth French Republic.

The Moralizing Politics of a Cinematic Comedy

Decolonization, France's diminished standing in a Cold War world, a growing awareness of the Shoah, European integration, a youth generation's reassertion of radical individualism and sexual desire, and immigration are inseparable from *Rabbi Jacob*'s explorations of identity, memory, *anti-racisme*, tolerance, and *métissage*. While *Rabbi Jacob* was contradictory and its characterizations problematic, historians should acknowledge the film and its struggle to promote an affirmative culture that allowed for human difference (multiculturalism) and reconciliation (trans/national unity). *Rabbi Jacob* was a powerful communicator of liberal and moral imagery in its original context. The film depended on various humorous strategies to arouse laughter: incongruous juxtapositions, exaggerated characteristics, and relief from awkward tension. Laughter allowed audiences to collectively condemn negative impulses and visualize the resolution of conflicts through the re-establishment of social order. Paradoxically, *Rabbi Jacob*

achieved the conservative-Gaullist aim of having audiences share a collective laughter thereby reminding filmgoers of their membership to a national community while normalizing multicultural tolerance.

Kristin Ross observed that May 1968 disrupted de Gaulle's confident centrist-humanism as it revealed a widening gulf between the French right and left. The upheaval of 1968 "achieved unforeseen alliances and synchronicities between social sectors and between very diverse people working together to conduct their affairs collectively."[9] *Rabbi Jacob* re-imagines—through Pivert and Slimane's comical identity play—the foundation of new alliances of equality between the French, Jews, and Arabs. In 1973, the film presented a transcendent utopian vision of social peace to audiences in a France marked by a new anti-Semitism and intense racist violence against Maghrébin immigrants. In 1971, Marseilles witnessed the murder of Algerians in a wave of racist crimes.[10] Although an awareness of the Shoah inaugurated a reevaluation of deportation narratives in France, hatred of Jews continued although anti-Semites now expressed themselves in a new language of anti-Zionism. Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the *Front National* in 1972 proudly defending a French identity tied to whiteness and Catholicism.[11] Anxiety over Algeria and its aftermath, had given way to a debate over those who had come to live within French society; particularly, the stigmatized Algerian and Maghrébin worker. Uncertain economic futures, soon to be aggravated by the global oil crisis, provoked anti-immigration legislation and more racist attacks, including murders in Paris and its suburbs with *ratonnades* in Marseilles and Grasse during the summer of 1973.[12]

This context informed Oury when he decided to write a screenplay with the goal of making "a comedic film against racism" specifically for the broadest possible audience.[13] He was confident that a humorous, anti-racist film could serve moral imperatives as it maximized profits for financial backers. Oury's foremost ambition was moral rather than political. The director believed the French desperately needed a film that would "exorcise certain demons France feared" while "denouncing intolerance, racism, and anti-Semitism by making audiences laugh."[14] Oury felt the best means to combat anti-Semitism and racism inside France was not an intellectualizing or accusatory "*film à these*" that alienated general audiences, but a highly accessible movie that provoked laughter. Oury's un-consciously embraced themes the Dutch Johan Huizinga considered in *Homo Ludens* (1938). Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens* in opposition to the uncompromising radicalism and humorlessness of National Socialism. The historian called for a more playful politics that eased tensions and encouraged a spirit of fellowship between the bitterest of political opponents. As Huizinga put it, "it is the decay of humor that kills."[15] To Oury, the laughter evoked by comedy served as social medicine that could heal the collective.

Gaumont studios funded Oury's previous projects and its president, Alain Poiré, had just green-lighted *Rabbi Jacob* when the Schlumberger Corporation acquired the studio and halted all productions for financial restructuring. Having already secured actors and a crew, Oury desperately sought new financial backing in early 1973 only to have producer after producer inform him:

> A film on friendship between Jews and Arabs, come on, you must be kidding! You know, in any second the Orient risks exploding into violence again. And de Funès as a French bourgeois who is a racist, xenophobic, anti-Semite, disguised as an orthodox rabbi, with a beard and side locks,

> tossed into a hostage situation! Arabs will take it the wrong way, Jews even more. What do you want to prove anyway?[16]

Oury considered rewriting the screenplay for Hollywood before Bertrand Javal signed on as producer and assembled four million dollars in financing.[17]

Rabbi Jacob, like many postwar French comedies, benefited from transnational Franco-Italian funding. Hence, Oury knew different linguistic and national audiences would consume the film. As Vanessa Schwartz argued in *It's So French!*, a study of postwar Franco-American cinematic relations, France was not a passive receiver, but an active producer of mass culture.[18] *Rabbi Jacob* operated across transnational space; indeed, Tom Teicholz, a Jewish-American journalist, fondly recalled falling out of his seat laughing at New York's 68th Street Playhouse during the film's American release.[19] *Rabbi Jacob* can be read in a French context, but the film was part of a European production and global distribution system—*Rabbi Jacob* was a cosmopolitan film. At the same time, the Franco-Italian co-productions and dubbed releases of Jean Girault's beloved gendarme series, Oury's *Rabbi Jacob* or Edouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) made their directors no less engaged with specific national contexts, visual languages, and anxieties of French audiences or an audiences' awareness that films addressed particular subjectivities.

Oury ultimately directed a complicated cultural artifact whose message circulated throughout Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds. The film critiqued nationalist ideologies centered on xenophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism as it celebrated the possibility of post-national hybridity, multiplicity, and de-territorialized identities. A moral and political project, *Rabbi Jacob*, as shall be discussed, had obvious critical limits. The film, however, cannot be criticized as an amnesic reaction that completely elided France's role in colonization and deportation. Oury engaged with the history/memory couplet that acknowledged France's complex and problematic past within the limits of appealing to a broad French audience. Indeed, *Rabbi Jacob* should be thought in relation to France's cinematic dialogue with deportation and the Shoah. What Oury elected not to portray was a social portrait of a new anti-Semite or a racist organizing *ratonnades* on the screen. Nor was *Rabbi Jacob* an exploration into the struggles of postcolonial migrants. After all, those realities were humorless.

Rabbi Jacob nonetheless reflected a growing awareness of the Shoah and the *fracture colonial*. Yet factual cinematic representations documenting the wrongs necessitating reconciliation took a backseat to Oury's advancement of a well-meaning and forward-looking, albeit ahistorical, vision. Walter Benjamin's famous angel of history could see nothing more than catastrophes heaping more wreckage upon wreckage. Oury felt no burden to document death and inhumanity. *Rabbi Jacob* mourns neither the Shoah nor imperialism. Oury's angel of comedic cinema looked to the horizon. To Oury's credit, he never filmed that directly referenced the Shoah by having Pivert and Slimane flee the Rue des Rosiers through a tunnel rabbi Jacob's sister used to escape deportation during the Occupation.[20] He judged the scene too serious for a comedy.

French critics immediately recognized what Oury had attempted to do with *Rabbi Jacob*. They almost universally praised him for sugar-coating an anti-racist and philo-Semetic message in laughter for popular audiences. At *Le Monde*, Jean de Baroncelli saw in *Rabbi Jacob* the masterful fusion of a classical comedic motif—the substitution of characters—with burlesque vaudeville that rather than simply satirize the French racist

was "a discreet call to generosity and the communion of all peoples."[21] Oury, he found, had proven that a "*cinéma populaire*" could offer people more than vulgar divertissement, but also a moral education. Henry Chapier writing for *Combat* found that the film radiated fraternal warmth as it provoked "habitual crazy laughter" and "the noblest of messages."[22] To Chapier, the film was a moralizing sermon for the masses. Robert Chazal at the popular daily *France-Soir* praised *Rabbi Jacob* not only for providing "kilometers and kilometers of laughter," but for putting the anti-Semitic and anti-Arab Pivert "the incarnation of a certain French character [*bien de Chez Nous*]" before audiences to laugh at and thereby shame together.[23] At the Catholic daily *La Croix*, Henry Rabine lauded *Rabbi Jacob* as an "intelligent comedy."[24] Rabine left the theater impressed that Oury had discovered the perfect balance between "ha! ha!" and a message: "please, let's not be racist." Rabine also celebrated de Funès for perfectly caricaturing an "inter(national) imaginary" of the bigoted French bourgeois. As Rabine noted, the racist Pivert was himself a stereotype, but to laugh at him allowed audiences to confirm that they shared neither his values nor the values of those attacking France's real North African and Jewish communities.

The Mythical Bourgeois

The film historian Jean-Pierre Jeancolas cited hyper-presentism and respectable good intentions as the defining characteristics of French domestic cinema during 1973 and 1974 season.[25] French films showed national audiences a contemporary France as they either wanted to see it or as they might dream it. He described the cinema as one of "*bonne compagnie*" that took audiences on a well-meaning tours of those on society's margins: peasants, leftists, ethnic and racial minorities, and immigrants. To Jeancolas, however, the season of 1973-1974 confirmed that French comedic cinema was "a dead genre, without an author or inventor" despite *Rabbi Jacob*'s box-office triumph. The French, Jeancolas admitted, still "laughed lots" in cinemas, but they did so "conventionally… even if sometimes the scriptwriters adapt their dated schemas and allusions to this or that contemporary issue."[26] Jeancolas was right: *Rabbi Jacob* stylistically lacked any comedic innovation. Oury borrowed much and innovated little on French classical comedic, vaudevillian, and *commedia dell'arte* theatrical traditions. The bourgeois Pivert's transformative narrative harkened directly back to the nineteenth-century French vaudevillian theatre of Eugène Labiche. Indeed, the film was a carnivalesque attacks on the ephemeral bourgeoisie similar to Luis Buñuel's surrealist *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972) and *Le fantôme de la liberté* (1974). The bourgeois Pivert was Oury's safe receptacle for France's negative compulsions because Pivert would not alienate working or lower-middle class audiences.

De Funès who played Pivert was the son of Spanish immigrants, a devout Tridentine Catholic, Royalist, and not without confessed anti-Semitic prejudices.[27] As de Funès told *Le Point* magazine, playing the role of Rabbi Jacob "did me good. It helped me clean myself up."[28] In an on-set television interview prior to the film's release, de Funès mispronounces Hasidic and then seeks the proper pronunciation when he tells a journalistic he plays a Hasidic rabbi in the film.[29] As the fictional Pivert, de Funès found himself in the uncomfortable spot of mocking the notion of stable identity through black-face and Jewish drag. The life-long Catholic de Funès confirmed the Second Vatican Council's condemnation of anti-Semitism as he denied Catholicism its claims to

universality. The majority of the gags in the film centered on Pivert learning to perform as a Hasidic rabbi not only by wearing a beard and side-locks, but also speaking Yiddish, a conversational style (Slimane tells him to answer all questions with a question), Hasidic dancing, and religious practices. Pivert's successful identity performance was a parody that subversively questioned essentialist or racialized identity. Jewishness like Catholicness or Frenchness was performance. Catholic, French, and bourgeois identity thus lost their naturalness in the process.

The character Pivert fits into a popular theatrical tradition that maligned the bourgeoisie for its values well documented by Sarah Maza.[30] The "*bonne compagnie*" that *Rabbi Jacob* gave audiences was not just of the Jewish and Arab "Other," but also with the elite bourgeois whose genealogy of ridicule traces back to Molière. Pivert is a wealthy philistine with exaggerated and crass behaviors corresponding to no self-identifying elite political or economic group. Theoretically, he corresponds to the Marxian definition as a member of a dominant class who owns the means of production. Pivert is a Catholic and Parisian abstract bourgeois, as opposed to a provincial, protestant or a *grande* variant, concerned with preserving the symbolic capital of his status across generations. Pivert may emerge a tolerant bourgeois, but his preoccupation with status remains. As the still racist Germaine sputters "mais il est…" as her daughter leaves with Slimane and implied future sexual and marital union, Pivert interjects "il est president de son pays" before the word "Arab". Pivert's daughter is marrying a secular man with impeccable French at the pinnacle of power inside his society. As a Comédie-Française trained actor, Oury knew the reconciliation of differences through marriage defined comedy as a genre. Pivert's support for his daughter's choice to marry a foreign republican is a recasting of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*'s Jourdain's eagerness to see his daughter marry foreign royalty, the Turkish Sultan's son (the bourgeois Cléonte in disguise).

French audiences could not look at Pivert and recognize the "average" Frenchman because his bourgeois social status made him "someone else" entirely.[31] Maza famously argued that the bourgeoisie worked as a negative "other" similar to the Jew, the American, and, one should add, the Arab in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. French rejection of bourgeois, Jewish, American, or Arab values, all constructs of the social imaginary, contributed to the definition of coherent national identity. As an imaginary, the crass, capitalist, and piously Catholic Pivert celebrates his pseudo-aristocratic bourgeois status and whiteness. He opposes republican equality, fraternity, and color-blind assimilation:

> Victor Pivert: Raciste! Moi, raciste! Salomon...Raciste! Enfin, Dieu merci, Antoinette épouse un Français bien blanc. Bien blanc... Il est même un petit peu pâlot, vous trouvez pas ? Avec ses petits boutons…
> Salomon: …et son cheveu sur la langue.
> Victor Pivert: Il a un cheveu, mais il est riche, riche comme moi, et catholique comme tout le monde !

Pivert values wealth and its intergenerational preservation whilst holding the masses—the cinematic audience—in contempt. Pivert dismisses Slimane's optimistic faith in speaking truth to his people by informing the revolutionary that one can indeed lie to them: "Moi, à mon usine, je lui mens toute la journée, au peuple! Mais il aime qu'on lui mente, le

peuple! Le peuple!" In the context of post-'68 trade unionism, burgeoning fears of restructuring and downsizing, and the Lip factory occupation, Pivert was a villain guilty not of owning the means of production, but of treating employees with contempt.

After all, a labor dispute and its resolution facilitate the plot's advancement. Pivert is aghast when the chauffer Salomon "outs" himself as a Jew along with his family and that his uncle Jacob is a rabbi. Pivert recovers, "Écoutez, ça fait rien," and keeps Salomon nonetheless, "je vous garde quand même." The labor unrest only arises when Salomon, wearing only boxers and his chauffer's cap, is dragging Pivert's inverted DS through water in a rainstorm. Salomon threatens to go "en grève" only to have Pivert beat him with an umbrella. At shore, Pivert asks Salomon to turn on the headlights. Salmon refuses and informs his employer that he cannot work during the Shabbat, places a yarmulke on his head, and begins chanting the Lecha Dodi before an uncomfortable Pivert. Pivert tells Salomon to make an exception and continue working. Salmon's refusal leads Pivert to call his Sabbath "*bête*" and walk the chauffer through a mimed preverbal door to unemployment. Only when disguised as rabbi Jacob and fearing capture does Pivert renegotiate with his former chauffer:

> Salomon: Moi, je n'ai qu'une question à vous poser: Mon patron m'a flanqué à la porte parce que je refusais de travailler le samedi. Qu'est-ce que vous feriez à ma place ?
> Pivert: Demande-lui de te réengager, il té dira oui ! Demand-lui de té augmenter, il te dira oui!
> Salomon: De me doubler ?
> Pivert: Il te dira oui !
> Salomon: De me tripler?
> Pivert: Il…Il te dira non!

Pivert is not a virulent French anti-Semite. He calls Salomon's observance of the Shabbat "stupid," but he does not see Salomon as part of a "menace". *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is no reference point for the fictional Pivert. Pivert may know nothing of Judaism, but he never spews hatred of the Jew as an abstract idea, transcendent evil, or shadow force. The only shadow force operating in France is a group of Arab assassins. Pivert betrays bourgeois values without deranged extremism. Moreover, Pivert holds no political opinions on Israel or Zionism.

Of course, the audience knows little about Pivert. What did this bourgeois do during the war? Might one assume Pivert was a Pétainist? What was his role in the national trauma? Did he collaborate? Was Pivert's wartime conscious clear? When did he choose to make a stand? Was not Pivert the guilty bourgeois happy to cloak himself in the Gaullist myth and stand side-by-side with resistance fighters after the war? Or, was Pivert more in line with the interviewees of Marcel Ophuls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969)? Was Pivert not unlike Monsieur Verdier, the bourgeois who carefully played the waiting game? The actor de Funès spent the Parisian Occupation breaking into comedic theater during the day and earning a living playing jazz piano at night.[32] Pivert, like de Funès, would have been in his late-twenties during the Occupation. The French had questioned the official Gaullist history that the persecution of French Jews was the Nazi occupier's fault. Could audience members imagine Pivert supporting deportation policies between de Funès gesticulations? Was to laugh at Pivert a collective condemnation of lingering anti-Semitism and postcolonial racism impacting France's real Jewish, North African, and black communities?

Despite his flaws, the bourgeois—a stand-in for negative French compulsions—forced into Jewish drag emerges in the end a good person with proud rather than excessive claims of national superiority (Pivert's glee as the French Republic's helicopter lands to return the newly elected Slimane to his country). The Catholic bourgeois fittingly recuperates his self-identity in the courtyard of the Hôtel des Invalides where on the 5 January 1895 the accused traitor Alfred Dreyfus suffered his military degradation. In the courtyard, Pivert, still dressed as a rabbi, meets the real Rabbi Jacob:

> Victor Pivert: Écoutez-moi, Rabbi Jacob, écoutez-moi! Il faut que je me confesse. Voilà...je ne suis pas juif.
> Salomon: Ça ne fait rien, Monsieur, on vous garde quand même!

Pivert invokes Catholic penance as he confesses the sin of not being Jewish. Salomon lightheartedly forgives him. Pivert's "je ne suis pas juif" is different than the controversial slogan adopted by May '68 students: "nous sommes tous des juifs allemands." Students rallied around the slogan after French authorities attempted to block student protest leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German-Jew, reentry to France from Germany. The statement conflated Gaullist treatment of Cohn-Bendit with the Vichy government's treatment and deportation of Jews thereby revealing how students suffered under a Fascist regime. Sarah Hammerschalg contrasted French students' adoption of Jewish identity—claiming Jewish particularity and exception as "the Jew"—with Dreyfusards solidarity with Dreyfus as a human and citizen whose "Jewishness" led to suspicion of his guilt as a foreigner.[33] In 1968, students linked the "Jew" positively to a political marginality that they embraced for themselves.

Pivert does not claim Jewish identity for himself despite an impulse to self-identify as Jewish. He is neither an outsider nor the Other and cannot abandon his Catholicism. Pivert does not claim Jewish identity as a symbolic status for himself. He is not a German-Jew. For Pivert to claim "Jewishness" would go against the two dominant modes of constructing "Frenchness": universalist-assimilationist Republicanism and exclusionary hyper-nationalism. Salomon's reply does not open the category of Jewishness to all. Instead, Salomon, as a fictional "real Jew" rather than the "Jew-*cum*-allegory," extends the bourgeois Pivert solidarity by replicating Pivert's initial response to discovering Salmon was Jewish. The righteous insider is embraced by the outside in a symbolic reversal of power. Edouard Drumont denied the Jew legitimacy as part of the *France réelle*; Salomon extends the boundaries of legitimate inclusion from the margins. Salomon's words are reminiscent of Robert Misrahi's *La Condition reflexive de l'homme juif* (1963) who wrote "the Jew should always and wherever champion the universal against the particular and the shared identity of mankind against differentiations among men."[34] Salomon is the anti-thesis to the right-wing bourgeois Gentiles—"La France aux Français"—gathered in the courtyard for a racial-financial bourgeois union, but, Salomon is also not an Orthodox Hassid. The character of Salomon is an imaginary Jew in the Satrian sense of the *juif engagé* who serves as the film's ethical authority and subversively extends to Pivert a reversed universalism.[35]

The Imaginary Jew

As the preceding discussion showed, Oury, no different than French and French-Jewish intellectuals, was trying to "work through" the history of anti-Semitism, Jews,

Judaism, and the Shoah in *Rabbi Jacob*. Oury found himself unconsciously or consciously oscillating between the effort to portray assimilated French Jews and reifying the Jew's Jewishness when claiming Frenchness. In the film's Sartrian moment, it is Pivert the anti-Semite who forces Salomon to confront his Jewishness and, out of an act of authenticity, to return to Jewish identity and revolt against work. Salomon performs a dialectical nationality to defend himself from the anti-Semite. And yet the film centered not on the Sartrian Salomon, but his uncle's Hassidism. On the Rue des Rosiers, Salomon is like Virgil from Dante's *Inferno*. He is the modern French Jew who can combat anti-Semitism, be a good citizen, and interpret tradition. Rabbi Jacob, and Pivert's experience in rabbi-drag, dialogued instead the lost Jewish culture and community of pre-World War Two Europe. *Rabbi Jacob* therefore was an attempt to recover an authentic Jewish inheritance lost in the Shoah.

Did Oury's philo-Semitism lead him to essentialzied representations of Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism little better than anti-Semitic essentialism? The portrayal of Jews and Judaism inside *Rabbi Jacob* and the film itself, however, are best interpreted with knowledge of Oury's and his daughter Thompson's biographies. In 1919, Oury was born Max-Gérard Oury, the son of Belarussian-Jewish violinist Serge Lazare Tenenbaum and the French-Jewish Marcelle Oury, fashion editor at *Paris-Midi* and *Paris-Soir*. His first childhood memories were of costume parties full of perfumed, absinthe drinking women at the home of fashion designer Paul Poiret where he brushed shoulders with a cosmopolitan crowd composed of Africans, Asians, and Eastern Europeans. Oury's maternal great-grand father Léon Léopold Oury (1825-1900) was an Alsatian who served as Toulouse's rabbi and was awarded the *Légion d'honneur* on the field during the Franco-Prussian War. Tenenbaum was absent from Oury's life and his widowed maternal grandmother "Mouta" Berthe née Goldner (1871-1949) and mother raised him in an unobservant household.

After his baccalaureate, Oury successfully entered the *Comédie-Française* at the invitation of Édouard Bourdet. He was genuinely shocked to find himself banned from theatrical radio broadcasts and from the stage in Paris and later in Marseille as a Jew after the Armistice with Germany.[36] Oury recalled being relatively apolitical and oblivious to anti-Semitism during the Interwar period. Marcella first accepted the 1941 Vichy mandate that Jews declare their Jewishness to the police writing in a letter that she was "*mère juive d'un fils qui ne l'est pas*."[37] However, she regretted the decision and, according to Oury, waited for the postman to unlock the mailbox so she could rip the letter to pieces. The well-connected family had declined filmmaker Jean Renoir's request to travel to the United States.[38] Instead, Oury escaped to Geneva with his mother, grandmother, wife (the actress Jacqueline Roman), and daughter (the director Danièle Thompson) for the duration of the war. Oury denied his daughter's paternity to avoid her potential classification as a Jew. Danièle Thompson's given name was a refutation of Jewish identity.

In 1945, Oury returned to a liberated Paris where he rejoined the *Comédie-Française*. Oury's pathway to cinematic comedy was not immediate. He moved from theater and radio to screenwriting and directing in the 1950s (he had appeared in his first feature during the Occupation) and began a career as a screenwriter and director in the 1950s.[39] It was the comedian de Funès who convinced the director to abandon his mediocre gangster films and *histoires macabres* for comedy in the early 1960s.[40] Relying

on de Funès physical humor and his own screwball plots, Oury propelled himself to the apex of domestic cinematic success with *Le Corniaud* (1965), *La Grande Vadrouille* (1966), *Le Cerveau* (1969), and *La Folie des grandeurs* (1971). In *La Grande vadrouille* (1966), a record-breaking comedy starring Bourvil and de Funès, Oury turned his attention to the Resistance and Occupied France. Historian Henry Rousso qualified the film as "one of the few films to have made children of parents who survived the short rations of the 1940s regret that they had not been born before the end of the war."[41] *La Grande vadrouille* exemplified a vision of a comedic cinema that denounced evil through laughter thereby making the past bearable and the present optimistic. *Rabbi Jacob*, betrayed a similar desire to promote philosemitism through laughter as well as an ethnographic ambition to document Jewishness as a cult of memory.

Rabbi Jacob therefore must be considered Oury's first cinematic attempt (in the comedic genre no less!) to work through the trauma of French Jews being stripped of citizenship, deported, and murdered. What *Rabbi Jacob* does not explore is the reality of Sephardic and secular French Jews or Israeli and Hebraic culture in 1973. It was an absence in the knowledge of practiced Judaism that led Oury to hire the liberal Rabbi Eisenberg, son of Polish immigrants who immigrated to Strasburg, as a consultant to assure an accurate portrayal of the religion in *Rabbi Jacob*.[42] The film represented an attempt by Oury and Thompson to reconnect with a Jewishness denied by Oury's mother's secularism. *Rabbi Jacob* was a recreation of an authentic Yiddish and Eastern European culture Oury never knew. The emergence of a more pluralistic France after May 1968 gave Oury the opening to re-imagine the particularity of Jews. Oury, a French Jew who survived World War Two, confronted a quandary later examined by Alain Finkielkraut (1949-) in *Le Juif imaginaire* (1980): what was an authentic Jew? Oury's Rabbi Jacob was Finkielkraut's "*juif imaginaire*": a series of nostalgic Hasidic, *Ostjuden*, and Ashkenazi images rather than the Sephardic cultures of those who had experienced the mellah and now resided in France.[43] Oury was a generation older than Finkielkraut, but they shared being raised by families who provided no Jewish education. The Judaism of *Rabbi Jacob* hence was earnest pastiche rather than parody. Oury revealed the uniqueness of Jewish religious tradition without detailed reflection on their real plurality inside France.

The character Rabbi Jacob therefore functions as the return of memory. The rabbi leaves the thriving Hasidic culture of New York City to return to Paris, a city that deported its Jewish community. The actor who played the real Rabbi Jacob was a direct allusion to deportation. Marcel Dalio, born Israel Mosche Blauschild, was a French celebrity throughout the 1930s who is known for his sympathetic portrayals of assimilated Jewish aristocrats in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and *La Règle du Jeu* (1939).[44] Dalio, who fled to Hollywood after France's defeat, appeared in Occupation period French propaganda posters as "*le juif typique*". The poster's failed to explain how Dalio's features—he played Emil, a French card dealer, in *Casablanca* (1942)—were typically Jewish in the sense of a biological race promoted by Nazi thought. Oury subversively casted Vichy's "*le juif typique*" as his "*le juif imaginaire*" who symbolically returned from exile in the United States as a Hasidic rabbi rather than as the assimilated Jews he played in the 1930s. The Frenchman who once menaced the pure French race with his Jewish-looks was now costumed as the Hasidic Jew. Yet Dalio's costume of Jewishness was just a costume that de Funès wore just as easily.

Was the irony of Dalio's role lost on audiences? Was Oury's clever casting of Dalio an inside joke? Film critics who may have reflected on Dalio's biography and his performance as the "real" Rabbi Jacob remained silent. Dalio's was only mentioned as a cameo performance. In the same way, French media avoided discussion of *Rabbi Jacob*'s publicity campaign that centered on the image of de Funès dressed as the Hasidic rabbi. Anti-Semitic racial ideologies of twentieth century echoed in the provocative de Funès' "Jew-face" advertisement. Those who first saw the advertisements and film posters, however, would know that the celebrated comedian de Funès was not Jewish. The advertisement plastered across Parisian walls was itself a powerful allusion of Vichy and the Occupation. Indeed, the image reverberated in a 1970s culture sphere inundated with what Henry Rousso called "forties revival" that elevated the "dark years" to the level of obsession.

One of *Rabbi Jacob*'s most iconic moments is the elaborate klezmer dance set to a freylekhs score composed by the Franco-Romanian Vladimir Cosma (1940-). Hasidism had a tradition of bringing round dances and music into spiritual worship. Hasidic men danced to celebrate joy, to remind of community, and for spiritual release or repentance.[45] Rabbi Jacob's dance is joyous as it evokes a millennialist ghost dance linked to revitalization and resistance. Out of nowhere young, mute Hasidic men encircle the disguised Pivert's to dance as Rabbi Jacob once did before the war. Pivert, intoxicated by the spirit, masters the complicated choreography. The dance, nonetheless, fits the classic definition of a ghost dance: a devastated minority whose social and cultural structures have been shattered makes a mystical plea for dignity and restoration. *Rabbi Jacob*'s ghost dance actualizes Oury's vision of Judaism as a cultural heritage embedded in a past. Oury's Jew may still be an outsider inside in France, but an outsider who has claimed the positive values of religious tradition rather than suffered from the negative stigma of race. In his second autobiography, *Ma grande vadrouille* (2001), Oury wrote that no protesters ever gathered outside *Rabbi Jacob* screenings. This was perhaps false. The leftist *Politique hebdo* reported a serious altercation between anti-*Rabbi Jacob* "Orthodox Israelites" and pro-*Rabbi Jacob* cinemagoers in front of the Latin Quarter's Cluny-Palace theater.[46] According to *Politique hebdo*, the riot required a police intervention. This isolated incident reveals that for some Orthodox Jews *Rabbi Jacob*'s carnivalesque portrayal of their beliefs was offensive. That no North African groups protested *Rabbi Jacob*'s portrayal of Arabs or Arab-Jewish relations perhaps only testified to the marginalized position of the community within French society at the time.

The Arab Question

The filming went incident free between March and July 1973 in Manhattan, Normandy, Saint-Denis, and Paris. The only setback arrived when Parisian authorities refused to issue a permit to film on the Rue des Rosiers due to traffic circulation concerns. Oury therefore decided to recreate an entire Jewish neighborhood, including the synagogue, later demolished, with the help of a working-class North African community in a suburban Saint-Denis neighborhood slated for demolition.[47] A couscous restaurant named "*El Djézaïr*" (Algiers) became the delicatessen "*A l'Étoile de Kiev*," a halal butcher became kosher, shop owners repainted their storefronts with the names Blum, Rosenberg, and Rosenfeld while some two-hundred residents made a brief vocal

cameo by yelling out "Shalom Rabbi Jacob!" The film thus concealed a Maghrebian community in its attempts to construct a simulacrum of a historically Jewish Parisian neighborhood.

On the morning of 6 October 1973, Parisian commuters discovered posters of a side locked and bearded de Funès plastered on metro walls. They would find a *Rabbi Jacob* advertisement again in their evening newspapers after reading that Egypt and Syria had invaded Israel starting the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Gérard Beytout and Georges Cravenne, *Rabbi Jacob*'s distributor and publicist, Javal, the producer, Oury, and other financial backers met on 7 October to decide whether or not to cancel the film's release.[48] The first private screening for financial backers proved a complete flop: not a single laugh, palpable tension, and voiced concerns that scenes mocking Jews and Arabs would infuriate the two communities.[49] Beytout feared the war would make the provocative *Rabbi Jacob* posters polemical and bring a spectrum of political positions from Anti-Semite to Zionist and Anti-Arab to Pro-Palestinian to bomb cinemas. The 18 October the (the start of the Israeli counter-offensive) release date held and no violence erupted at opening night screenings.

Rabbi Jacob's Arabs—a revolutionary and assassins—appeared in the context of Pan-Arabism, repressive post-independence regimes, and Palestinian nationalism. The latter manifested itself in the dramatic events of the 1970 Jordan air-hijackings and the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics Massacre. In *Rabbi Jacob*, the figure of the Arab is linked to violence. *Rabbi Jacob*'s Arabs have neither heritage nor tradition. Slimane is secular and cosmopolitan. He understands Pivert's Catholic gestures and communicates Jewish traditions to Pivert without professing a faith in Islam. Moreover, Slimane was the film's only character modeled after a real personage: Mehdi Ben Barka (1920-1965). Ben Barka was a charismatic Moroccan leftist opposition leader who disappeared from the brasserie Lipp on the Boulevard Saint-Germain at midday on 29 October 1965. The charismatic Slimane is captured by his assassins behind the Parisian café Les Deux Magots also on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. One of the assassins humorously references Ben Barka's kidnapping when he expresses a worry: "Mon Colonel, on ne peut pas l'enlever comme ça en plein Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Ça a déjà été fait." Le colonel Farès bore a resemblance to General Mohamed Oufkir (1920-1972) later convicted of torturing and murdering Ben Barka in a French court. Ben Barka's disappearance scandalized de Gaulle and led to questions of France's complicity in the abduction. In the aggressive, "Che"-Guevara-quoting Slimane, Oury re-imagined Ben Barka's story culminating in a Third World leader's victory.

Oury wrote and filmed *Rabbi Jacob* before the war and the ensuing energy crisis that represented a critical juncture in France's "Arab" policy. Since the 1962 Evian Peace Accords ending the Algerian War, Gaullist France, sensitive to US-Soviet hegemonic ambitions and French oil companies' need to diversify, sought to reassert its place in the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Foreign policy realignment culminated in the 1967 Franco-Israeli divorce and a later pro-Arab armament sales policy. De Gaulle presented France as more Arab-friendly when it castigated Israeli territorial ambitions by calling Jews "an elite people, sure of themselves and domineering" on 27 November 1967.[50] Slimane never mentions Israel or Palestine, but the scene, intended to be heartwarming, in which Salomon and Arab revolutionary embrace as "distant cousins" appeals to Arab-

Israeli peace. By "being" a Jew, Oury's Arab re-gains consciousness of his proper Semitism thereby setting a condition for an end to violence.

Paradoxically, a comedic film that advocated for peace brought death in the name of the Palestinian cause. The morning after *Rabbi Jacob*'s release, Danielle Cravenne, thirty-five, wife of the film's publicist, and mother of two, boarded an Air France Boeing 727 at Orly airport destined for Nice. Somewhere over Clermont-Ferrand, Cravenne, wearing a mink coat and carrying a large crocodile-skin purse containing a small dog, brandished a twenty-two caliber rifle, a pistol, and a list of demands.[51] Cravenne had become first Frenchwoman to hijack an airplane. She demanded:

> That the film *Rabbi Jacob* should not appear on any theater screens. During twenty-four hours all French automobiles must remain stationary. All circulation other than by bicycle is forbidden. That all French armament factories and all armament factories in the world halt their production. That the French government assists in the reconciliation of Arabs and Israelis and the re-establishment of peace.[52]

Cravenne threatened to crash the plane into the Pierrelatte nuclear power plant, the Lyon airport, or the Shell-Berre oil refineries if her demands were not met. She eventually allowed a refueling landing at Marignane airport near Marseille where all passengers and crew disembarked with the exception of the captain and chief steward. In the late afternoon, three police officers, disguised as a sandwich-bearer and two mechanics, entered the plane and shot Cravenne to death.[53]

Cravenne demanded *Rabbi Jacob*'s prohibition because she was pro-Palestinian, but the press made little of her demands and presented her foremost as a mentally ill homemaker. Of course, Cravenne had every reason to believe the hijacking would end with a highly publicized trial and not her death. She informed the pilot that Jean Kay's 1971 hijacking of a Pakistani Airline flight in support of Bengalis independence inspired her to make a "spectacular act" calling attention to her cause (Kay's trial had concluded the first week of October 1973 with his acquittal).[54] Cravenne's hijacking was no less foolhardy than Kay's hijacking, but while André Malraux praised Kay for his political conviction, the French press rendered Cravenne's politics irrelevant. *France-Soir* considered Cravenne "more of a lunatic than a political extremist." She was "a woman too delicate" who was clearly in a "depressive state" and "entirely without reason."[55] Her story was the tragic history of a manic depressive rather than an ideologue opposed to *Rabbi Jacob*.[56]

Oury dismissed Cravenne as a desperately depressed woman although her husband admitted she was passionate about the unfolding of events in the Middle-East.[57] *Libération* alone identified Cravenne as an "impassioned idealist" and considered it intolerable that she was shot like a "rabid dog" for protesting *Rabbi Jacob* as anti-Palestinian propaganda.[58] News of the hijacking disappeared overnight and critics never once referenced the event in *Rabbi Jacob* reviews. *Rabbi Jacob*'s producers certainly wanted to distance the film from the hijacking over fears it would be seen as a publicity stunt gone wrong.[59] Oury long maintained that Cravenne had never seen the film and held "an entirely false idea" of its politics.[60] He later speculated that Cravenne, who he thought was in the process of converting to Judaism, targeted *Rabbi Jacob* as anti-Semitic out of ignorance. If Cravenne had just seen the film, she would never have requested its prohibition. Some years after, Oury changed his explanation for Cravenne's motivations:

Cravenne was a militant pro-Palestinian and found *Rabbi Jacob* had anti-Arab orientations. George Cravenne's *Le Monde* obituary, however, reported that his former wife found *Rabbi Jacob* anti-Semitic.[61] The casting of Cravenne as a lunatic lacking reason rendered her attempt to politicize *Rabbi Jacob* unreasonable to those who considered *Rabbi Jacob*'s message universal.

Two film critics substantiated Cravenne's claim that *Rabbi Jacob* was anti-Arab. Shortly after film's release, *L'Humanité'*s François Maurin denounced *Rabbi Jacob* as unfunny and xenophobic in its portrayal of Arabs.[62] The pro-Palestinian Maoist Pascal Bonitzer, however, articulated a more substantial critique of Oury's portrayal of Arabs that he feared only reconfirmed racist French ideas. Bonitzer, who mentioned his Jewish heritage in the article, accepted that Oury's film was fundamentally well-meaning, but his message was ineffectual because it ignored a reality: "the real object of racist hatred in France: the Arab worker (Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian..)."[63] Bonitzer linked racism to class exploitation, "*c'est l'argent qui fait le racisme*," and it was the Arab factory worker who suffered most. Bonitzer thus argued that Oury's mass promotion of an abstract reconciliation narrative failed to address the source of anti-Semitism and racism: capitalism. Bonitzer, however, was genuinely angered by the film's representation of Arabs as the mythical Arabs of French fantasy—assassins, presidents, revolutionaries, seducers, and spies. Oury's anti-racist film paradoxically portrayed Arabs as racist stereotypes. Bonitzer contrasted these Arabs with Oury's far more complex portrayal of Jews and Jewish religious traditions. Bonitzer was correct. Oury's film contains not a single "real" North African who suffered violence at the hands of the French racist. What French audiences needed was a "truly antiracist film" that departed from the concept of shared ideological struggle. Who would buy tickets to such a serious film?

To French audiences, there was certainly nothing unsettling about the French-speaking, rational, secular, cosmopolitan, and democratically elected Slimane played by a tanned Frenchman. One may read Oury's decision to have the tanned Giraud play Slimane as provocative; Giraud's Slimane perhaps said "yes, you too look Arab after too much sun on the beach!" But the characters Slimane and Le colonel had no features beyond their darker skin color, curly hair, and aggressive demeanor that defined both as Arab. This made it all the easier for audiences to accept that an attractive, well-spoken Arab who frequented stylish Parisian cafes (as opposed to an actual immigrant living in Saint Denis) would marry a bourgeois woman. Surprisingly, *Libération* followed Bonitzer's review with a series of interviews between Oury and journalists Pierre Audibert and Hélène de Gainsberg praising the "*Rabbi Jacob* phenomenon."[64] Oury directly addressed many of Bonitzer's criticisms in the interviews. He admitted that he could have made a film called *Les aventures de Mohamed Larbi Slimane* wherein the factory owner Pivert substituted himself for an Algerian factory worker in the master-valet style of Molière. The problem Oury sensed was that *Les aventures de Mohamed Larbi Slimane* could not be a comedy although he never elaborated as to why.[65] Perhaps Oury found nothing funny about being an immigrant worker in France? Perhaps he knew nothing about Arab/Muslim culture? *Rabbi Jacob*, Oury admitted, was nothing but his best attempt to tackle a serious subject through a genre he believed best suited for the broadest of possible audiences.

The interviews outraged critics at *Les Cahiers du Cinema* who condemned the "longwinded" conversations for giving readers with a favorable opinion of *Rabbi Jacob*.

In an unsigned 15 November 1973 letter published in *Libération*, *Cahiers du Cinema* accused the newspaper of failing to engage in an ideological struggle against *Rabbi Jacob*, a bourgeois product of mass consummation and accused Audibert and Gainsberg of being undercover "*UDR* [*Union pour la défense de la République*, the Gaullist party] journalists."[66] These critics found nothing funny about *Rabbi Jacob* rather they identified the comedy as part of a discourse diluting the capitalist origins of racism and the exploitation of Arab workers. The letter proclaimed that the French could only collectively overcome racism when every individual recognized he or she feared Arabs and Jews. In contrast, Oury sent audiences the wrong message. He told them,

> You, you average Frenchman who recognizes himself in Louis de Funès; it is true that you are a racist, but that's no big deal. You are only a racist on the surface, but not deep down. There is enough humanity and unused generosity in you, so that when you want, you will renounce racism as nothing but a silly little game.[67]

Audiences made *Rabbi Jacob* a financial triumph because the film flattered viewers and allowed them to leave cinemas reassured of their morality.[68] For the Maoists at *Cahiers*, who preferred a cinema that inculcated viewers with an ideological reality, *Rabbi Jacob* only encouraged complicity with a system of domination.

Conclusion: Nostalgia

Rabbi Jacob made no gesture at a subversive laughter inspiring political action or public outrage. Oury sought a stabilizing laughter that encouraged tolerance and philo-Semitism. The political efficacy and social utility of a moralizing comedy may seem trivial in comparison to more cerebral and ethically engaged films that challenged collective memories and questioned disparities. What cannot be denied was that *Rabbi Jacob* served as a locus where a population lightheartedly engaged hyperbolic representations of their social world and re-imagined the possibilities of identity. *Rabbi Jacob* was neither reactionary in its portrayal of human difference nor escapists in its subject matter. The temptation to assess *Rabbi Jacob* as evasionist and its representations essentialist ignores the nuanced moral and political ambitions of the film in the specific sociocultural context of its production and release.

We cannot measure *Rabbi Jacob*'s impact on French society in 1973. We can be sure that the film's message stemmed neither anti-Semitic nor racist violence. One might wonder how in a Post-*Rabbi Jacob* world was it possible for Prime Minister Raymond Barre to make a Freudian slip after the 3 October 1980 bombing of the Rue Copernic synagogue on TF1: "This odious bombing wanted to strike Israelites who were going to synagogue and it hit innocent French people who crossed the Rue Copernic."[69] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *Rabbi Jacob* was available for private screening through periodic VHS, DVD, and televised re-releases. Since 2001, TF1 Vidéo has reissued the DVD on an almost annual basis. In 2009, *Rabbi Jacob* was the most frequently shown film on French television with thirteen screenings viewed by an estimated total audience of 6.8 million.[70] The continued accessibility of *Rabbi Jacob* facilitated the film's cultural canonization. Humor tends to have a temporal specificity that often renders it unable to travel intact across time. What our parents once found funny, we now find offensive just as we might find a younger generation's comedic tastes

vulgar. *Rabbi Jacob* has stood the test of time, but does the film's popularity reflect a continued ability to make audiences laugh? It may not matter.

Dominique de Villepin proclaimed once that *Rabbi Jacob* was "part of all our [French] memories" because it was "part of the patrimony of French families," a film seen and re-seen always with the same joy.[71] Is the joy felt a product of nostalgia for the world *Rabbi Jacob* imagined in 1973? Joy does not mean audiences still laugh or laugh for the same reasons as original audiences. The film's talismanic endurance in French culture perhaps reflects a desire to return to a past that never existed at all. Does the film function as a congratulatory reminder to the French of their commitment to tolerance? In retrospect, the conditions for *Rabbi Jacob*'s interethnic friendship might also be appealing in the contemporary. Oury portrayed interethnic friendship as arriving through empathy, shared understanding, and moral certitude rather than through reflection on individual or societal culpability for past or present inequalities in the genre of morally ambiguous tragic drama. Two recent examples of this style are Mathieu Kassovtiz's acclaimed *La Haine* (1995) and Austrian director Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005). Although *La Haine* shows deep camaraderie between a Maghrébin, a Jew, and black, the three youths remain on the margins of French society. In both films, the guilt of France and the French cannot be transcended in the present.

when France 2 television flew the director to Israel for the film's twentieth anniversary in 1993, Oury acknowledged in an interview that *Rabbi Jacob*'s optimism belonged to a different era.[72] At a checkpoint, Oury encountered an Israeli Defense Force's soldier who reenacted the scene when de Funès' attempted to call gendarmes attention to his kidnapping by Slimane. In Israel, Oury lamented that the hope for Arab-Israeli reconciliation found in the Salomone-Slimane metaphor was difficult to imagine twenty years later. The Jewish-American journalist Tom Teicholz, who fell out of his seat laughing at *Rabbi Jacob*'s American release, reviewed the film in 2006. He neither laughed nor felt like he was watching a comedy so much as "a long ago dream of a time when anti-Semites were funny vaudeville characters, Jews just wanted to be understood for the warm and fuzzy people they were and Arab leaders were just a handshake away from living in peace with their Jewish neighbors." Oury had hoped to follow *Rabbi Jacob*'s success with a political comedy mocking South American and Southern European dictators that reunited Oury, Thompson, and Eisenberg as screenwriters and many *Rabbi Jacob* cast members. De Funès' declining health prevented filming. The second-half of Oury's cinematic corpus, however, returned to mythical Jewish experiences from the rescue of a Jewish boy from the Gestapo in *L'As des As* (1982), the first Shoah comedy, to *Lévy et Goliath* (1987), a Parisian set comedy about Orthodox Jews.[73] *L'As des As* returned to themes apparent in *Rabbi Jacob*: the possibility of friendship and reconciliation between supposed enemies, in this case a German and a Frenchman united to save a Jewish child, while, in the words of Jean-Paul Belmondo, who co-produced the film, "stigmatizing, via the lighthearted tone of comedy, anti-Semitism and intolerance."[74] Rabbi Eisenberg, identified by the press as the "technical consultant" for *Rabbi Jacob*, officiated over Oury's 2006 graveside where he asked attendees to "according to the Jewish tradition thank God for having given life to the one that departs us," the only religious aspect of Oury's otherwise secular burial at Montparnasse cemetery.[75]

In 2008 interview, Thompson confessed she doubted *Rabbi Jacob* could be made in the present because of political correctness.[76] It is humorous, hypothetical question to ask if the entire cast and crew would be prosecuted for incitement to racial hatred if they made the same film today. And yet cultural references to *Rabbi Jacob* abound. Whatever disruptive potential *Rabbi Jacob* had in 1973 had become emptied by the 21st century as it has recirculated through endless repetition as an object of cultural hegemony. The film no longer compels contemporary audiences to think or reconsider; instead, it confirms shared knowledge of French popular culture. At the 2007 *Césars*, a side-locked Valérie Lemercier recreated the shtetl dancing scene from the film provoking discerning glances from American guests.[77] The scene was a tribute to Oury, but what multicultural message was conveyed by dressing as a Hasidic rabbi in 2007? *Rabbi Jacob* also had a failed musical theater spinoff with an ambiguous song by French rapper MC Solaar entitled "*Le Rabbi Muffin*".[78] MC Solaar's video for the song had Black and Arab Yeshiva students doing a Hasidic inspired dance to hip-hop lyrics about bar-mitzvahs. The song contained such nonsensical phrases as "Bouge ton corps ou ton bady c'est Beth din, de New York jusqu'à Paris dans le style Ragga Muffin." The video implies that *Rabbi Jacob*, as a cultural touchstone, somehow unites multicultural France. In more recent years, the Hasidic dancing scene has become a favorite of white French flash mobs. There is nothing more French than pretending to be a Hasidic Jew? *Rabbi Jacob* has indirectly provided multiple French generations with a misleading understanding of Judaism reduced to Orthodox traditions and Yiddish culture. As a Jewish activist from Lille lamented, almost all adult French base their entire knowledge of Judaism on *Rabbi Jacob*.[79]Oury's film continues to provide French families with a virtual ethnographic experience into Judaism.

Rabbi Jacob defined the borders of inclusivity as it denounced the prejudices of white, Catholic Europeans towards minorities in 1973. Henri Bergson wrote that laughter was a repressive function that sought to illegitimate separatist tendencies in a society.[80] Laughter was "made to humiliate, to give to the person who is its object a painful impression. Society avenges itself through laughter for the liberties one has taken with it."[81] If *Rabbi Jacob* encouraged a mode of symbolic violence in its original context, it struck justly and maybe even inspired thoughts of goodwill. *Rabbi Jacob* chastised those who might embrace a territorialized humor of insult that constructs exclusive Volkish identities and negative minority subjectivity.[82] It presented an alternative reality where differences were negotiated and the superiority of reactionary Frenchness questioned. The film, however, only addressed a small portion of the real hatred expressed by white and/or Christian Europeans towards their nation's postcolonial denizens. As this essay has argued, *Rabbi Jacob* was inseparable from the history of Jews in France and the postwar acceptance that being Jewish was compatible with integration into France. The latter point does not hold true for France's Muslim/Arab community who Islamophobes still assume cannot be assimilated because of Muslim/Arab inferiority and aggressiveness. The question that remains is will France ever laugh at *Les aventures de Imam Mohamed*? Would such a film acknowledge Arab/Muslim culture as equal in value therefore meriting survival and worth? Does *Rabbi Jacob* alienate young French citizens with minority identifications? Has *Rabbi Jacob* taken on a privileged status in a culture system that demands those grappling with inclusion to appreciate its values?

[1]Gérard Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille* (Paris: Plon, 2001), 54.

[2]Alan Larson Williams, *Republic of Images: a History of French Filmmaking* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3]Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome History and Memory in France Since 1944*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 223-234;

[4]Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 52-53, 300, 304; Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 96-99; Also see Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 88.

[5]See Rémi Fournier-Lanzoni's discussion of *Rabbi Jacob* in Rémi Fournier-Lanzoni, *French Comedy on Screen: A Cinematic History* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 129-133.

[6]Guy Austin, "Body Comedy and French Cinema: Notes on Les Visiteurs," *Studies in French Cinema* 6,1 (April 2006), 43–52.

[7]*The New York Times* 4 November 2008.

[8]Fournier-Lanzoni, *French Comedy on Screen*, 131.

[9]Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.

[10]Benjamin Stora, "The Algerian War in French Memory: Vengeful Memory's Violence," in Ussama Samir Makdisi and Paul A Silverstein, *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 151-176.
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[14]Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 266; Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille* (Paris: Plon, 2001), 157.

[15]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* trans. R.F.C. Hull (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 207, 210.

[16]Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 253.

[17]*Le Point* 22 October 1973, 107.

[18]Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of*

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[20]Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille*, 136; Hélène de Gainsberg and Pierre Audibert, "Les aventures de Gérard Oury réalisateur de 'Rabbi Jacob'," Libération 9 November 1973.

[21]*Le Monde* 21-22 October 1973.

[22]*Combat* 18 October 1973.

[23]*France-Soir* 19 October 1973.

[24]*La Croix* 28-29 October 1973.
[25]Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le cinéma des Français: la Ve République, 1958-1978* (Paris: Stock, 1979).
[26]Ibid.,

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[28]Ibid., 109-110.
[29] Tournage du film de Gérard Oury "Rabbi Jacob". 12 juin 1973 Midi trente
[30]Sarah Maza, The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary: 1750-1850 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
[31]Ibid, 5.
[32] Jean-Jacques Jelot-Blanc, *Louis de Funès, une légende* (Paris: Carrière, 1993), 33; Bertrand Dicale, *Louis de Funès, grimace et gloire* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 19-22.

[33]Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3-7.

[34]Robert Misrahi, *La condition réflexive de l'homme juif* (Paris: R. Julliard, 1963), 249.
[35]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Reflexions sur la question juive*. (Paris: Paul Morihien, 1946).

[36]Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 30-31.
[37] Oury, Memoires, 102. Edler's documentary
[38]Dido Renoir and Alexander Sesonske, eds., *Jean Renoir: Lettres d'Amérique* (Paris: Presse de la Renaissance, 1984).
[39] *Médecin des neiges*, Marcel Ichac (1942).
[40] Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 205; *La Menace,* Gérard Oury (1950); *La Main chaude*, Gérard Oury (1960); *Le Crime ne paie pas*, Gérard Oury (1961).
[41]Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 232

[42]Pierre Billard, "Rire: la qualité 'Oury-de-Funès," *Le Point* 22 October 1973, 110.
[43]Alain Finkielkraut, *Le juif imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
[44] Rémy Pithon, "Le Juif à l'écran en France vers la fin des années trente," *Vingtième Siècle* 18.18 (1988): 89-100
[45] Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*, pp. 173–184, 226–231 (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1998);
[46]Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille*, 58; *Politique hebdo* 15 November 1973.

[47]*France-Soir* 6 October 1973; Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 260; Oury, *Ma grande vadrouille*, 41-54, 157.

[48]Cravenne was the top French publicist of the time and best remembered as the founder of *Les César*. Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 264.

[49]Auberi Edler, "Il était une fois…Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob," *Il était une fois* TV5, France, 14 May 2009.
[50]

[51]*France-Soir* 19 October 1973.

[52]*Libération* 20-21 October 1973.

[53]The agents were members of *la groupe d'intervention de la police nationale de marseille* formed in 1972.

[54]Jean Kay, *L'Arme au Coeur* (Paris: Denoël, 1972).

[55]*France-Soir* 19 October 1973; *France-Soir* 20 October 1973; *France-Soir* 20 October 1973.

[56]*Le Figaro* 19 October 1973

[57]*Le Figaro* 22 October 197; *Libération* 20-21 October 1973.

[58]

[59]Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 264.

[60]Ibid., 265.

[61]*Le Monde* 14 January 2009.

[62]*L'Humanité* 24 October 1973.

[63]*Libération* 1 November 1973.

[64]*Libération* 8 November 1973; *Libération* 9 November 1973; *Libération* 10-11 November 1973.

[65]*Libération* 9 November 1973.

[66]*Libération* 15 November 1973; The Maoist reaction led to a great deal of self-criticism at *Libération* and debates over the newspaper's cinematic commitments. See François Marie Samuelson, *Il était une fois 'Libération': reportage historique* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 227-228.

[67]*Libération* 15 November 1973

[68]Oury never responded to the article in *Libération*. He considered the letter an example of "intellectual terrorism practiced by the mullahs *fachos-gauchos*." Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 268.
[69] Raymond Barre "Cet attentat odieux qui a frappé des français innocents" Télévision Française 1 IT1 NUIT 03 oct. 1980

[70]Emmanuel Berretta, "Le top 20 des films à la télé en 20009," *Le Point Online* 12 February 2009
[71]*Agence France Presse* 20 July 2006.
[72]Oury, *Vadrouille*, 50.

[73]*L'As des As*, Gérard Oury (1982); *Lévy et Goliath,* Gérard Oury (1987).

[74]Jean-Paul Belmondo, "Lettre ouverte aux 'coupeurs de tête," in Oury, *Mémoires d'Éléphant*, 329.

[75]*Agence France Presse* 24 July 2006.
[76] *Paris Match* 30 September 2008.
[77] Valérie Lemercier, "Un hommage à Gérard Oury," *Les César* Canal Plus, France, 25 February 2007
[78]MC Solaar, "Le Rabbi Muffin," *Le Rabbi Muffin* (Single), France, 2008; *Le Figaro* 29 October 2008.
[79] *Guysen Israël News* 17 December 2003; Also see See Shaina Judith Hammerman, "The Fantastic Hasid: Fashioning Jewishness on-Screen," (PhD Diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2013).
[80] Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris: PUF, 1940), 135.
[81] Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 219; Ibid., 150.
[82] Didier Eribon, trans. Michael Lucey, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

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