New Yiddish Film and the Transvernacular

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NEW YIDDISH FILM AND THE TRANSVERNACULAR

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Abstract: After a silence of over half a century, a body of Yiddish-language films (broadly defined to include movies, television and web series) have appeared in Yiddish since 2005. Translated from an English or Hebrew script into Yiddish dialogue, these films showcase fluently spoken dialogue delivered by and for non- or non-fluent Yiddish speakers. While the Yiddish in these films can be described as “postvernacular”—a mode where the language's primary mode is symbolic—they also point to a novel use of Yiddish as a communicative language derived via translation. This study identifies two distinct streams: (1) films that employ Yiddish to match a given historical context, including the television series Shtisel (Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, 2013-) and the multilingual feature film, Félix et Meira (Maxime Giroux, 2014); the prologues to A Serious Man (Coen Brothers, 2009), and The Cobbler (Tom McCarthy, 2015); the Yiddish-language feature films Homeland (Dani Rosenberg, 2009) and The Pin (Naomi Jaye, 2014); (2) films that employ Yiddish as a new expression of Jewish culture, including the comedy web series YidLife Crisis (Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, 2014-present). The analysis proposes a new concept: “Transvernacular Yiddish,” or communicative Yiddish derived through translation from another language. This study suggests that transvernacularity offers a new stage in the development of Yiddish.  

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Introduction

The widespread assumption is that Yiddish film met its demise some seventy years ago, with its only revival in the rerelease of classic Yiddish films. As one example among many, the 2010 revised edition of Jay Hoberman’s authoritative history of Yiddish film, *A Bridge of Light*, ends with a chapter titled “A Post-Yiddish Cinema” that closes with the image of placing the book alongside a pebble on a Jewish grave. That same year, however, film scholar, Eric A. Goldman, author of the first full-length study of Yiddish cinema, observed in a 2010 newspaper review:

Twenty-seven years ago, I wrote a history of a cultural phenomenon that pretty much ended in 1950—the Yiddish cinema . . . But Yiddish cinema is far from dead! Something remarkable is occurring—Yiddish movies are again being made . . . I never would have imagined a quarter of a century ago that the Yiddish language would again be heard, other than the occasional phrase, on the silver screen. But over these last 15 years, there have been numerous films where most of the dialogue, if not all, is in Yiddish. Who knows? Maybe one day a Yiddish film will win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. If a Yiddish writer could win the Nobel Prize for Literature, why not an Oscar for a Yiddish film?

Since 2005, Yiddish cinema has experienced a small renaissance in multiple audiovisual formats: movies, television programming, and a web series. In contrast to the corpus of some sixty Yiddish films released before 1950, this new body of film is almost entirely the product of non-Yiddish speaking writers and directors, with non-Yiddish speaking actors offering up subtitled Yiddish dialogue for non-Yiddish speaking audiences. Aside from media reviews, these films have not been subject to sustained critical analysis.

This study examines this new chapter in the Yiddish film history in a mode that I term “transvernacular”: vernacular Yiddish achieved through translation out of another language. In this new mode, Yiddish appears as a fluently spoken language produced by, and for, non-fluent Yiddish speakers. Whereas translation out of Yiddish represents one of the primary modes in which Yiddish is encountered today, the new Yiddish films reverse this trend by creating spoken Yiddish dialogue through translation.

In order to examine the different expressions of the “transvernacular” in Yiddish film, I offer a close comparison of two streams of Yiddish film: (1) films that employ Yiddish to match a given historical context, including: the television series *Shtisel* (Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, 2013-) and the multilingual feature film, *Félix et Meira* (Maxime Giroux, 2014); the prologues to *A Serious Man* (Coen Brothers, 2009), and *The Cobbler* (Tom McCarthy, 2015); the Yiddish-language feature films *Beit

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films that employ Yiddish as a new expression of Jewish culture, as represented by YidLife Crisis, the first web series to appear in Yiddish (September 2014–December 2016). Both of these streams rely on a process of translation into Yiddish from a non-Yiddish script, the delivery of the Yiddish dialogue by non- or non-fluent Yiddish speakers, and employ subtitles to render the Yiddish dialogue for their viewers. The first stream employs a mechanism for dealing with multilingual translation that Meir Sternberg first termed “vehicular matching”: the idea that language should be used as the story demands. This approach contends that linguistic diversity and accuracy in a film should be maintained rather than erased. It also tends to employ subtitles to offer an accurate rendition of the dialogue. It represents the alternative to the far more historically popular approach of homogenization, or the rendering of all dialogue into the language of the audience (i.e. a character who would be speaking Yiddish if the story were real is shown speaking English, perhaps with a Yiddish accent in what is termed “verbal transposition”).4 The second stream, which we find in YidLife Crisis, subverts the principle of vehicular matching, creating a universe on screen where a character is speaking Yiddish contrary to what the story appears to demand. This subversion employs subtitles self-consciously as an integral part of the narrative. Together, these two streams point to new innovation and dynamism in Yiddish film.

Yiddish Film before 2005

Much has been written about the golden age of Yiddish film that spanned the beginning of the cinema through 1950, with its highpoint in the mid-1930s. These movies formed part of a transnational Yiddish culture that included an interconnected community of writers, a periodical press comprising daily newspapers as well as specialized journals, popular and high theatre, and educational institutions. At its peak in the interwar period, modern Yiddish culture reached millions of consumers worldwide. A significant body of Yiddish feature films was produced in the major centers of Poland and the United States, as well as in the Soviet Union, with multiple film projects created and distributed in Polish-American partnerships. These films, many of which were commercially released, formed part of an international cinema culture and incorporated global trends. The writers, casts, and audiences for these films were predominantly Yiddish speakers.

As a diasporic language, Yiddish and its cinematic tradition emerged simultaneously in multiple countries, transcending national borders and standing out within a tradition of world cinema where language and nation correspond. In this vein, Leonard Koos’s study, “Films Without Borders,” singles out Yiddish cinema as “a significant moment in film history that challenges the purview of national cinemas and anticipates the confrontation of cultures and hybridity that characterizes transnational cultural politics.”5 At the same time, Yiddish film—like its literary and musical

4 These ideas have been adapted by film scholars based on Meir Sternberg’s seminal article, “Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis,” Poetics Today, vol. 2, no. 4 (1981): 221-239.
traditions—incorporated the co-territorial languages and cultures of the nations in which its speakers found themselves, be they Russian, Polish, English, or Hebrew. Yiddish cinema is inherently “heterolingual,” a term coined by translation scholar Rainier Grutman to refer to the juxtaposition of multiple languages or dialects within a single literary text. Yiddish film audiences were rarely unilingual speakers: even in the Yiddish centres in interwar Poland, where major cities such as Łódź or Warsaw had hundreds of thousands of speakers, the population was becoming increasingly conversant in Polish and viewing Polish films in the original. In the American Jewish immigrant centers, notably New York City, this linguistic acculturation away from Yiddish was even more prevalent.

During the era of classic Yiddish film, Yiddish also made an occasional appearance in mainstream Hollywood movies. For example, the 1932 film, Taxi, features over a minute of untranslated Yiddish delivered by actor James Cagney, who had learned the language as a child growing up in New York, in a scene where he overhears a Yiddish-speaking man and a confused Irish police officer and interjects in fluent, idiomatic Yiddish without subtitles. As film scholar Carol O'Sullivan points out, the Yiddish in this scene “is left as part of the acoustic landscape” as was the cinema convention in the early decades of the twentieth century, where a foreign language interlude could function as “a moment of colourful exoticism.” Moreover, Yiddish was spoken by a significant number of people in New York at this time (some 870,000 speakers were recorded in New York City on the 1910 census), and with it came the expectation that a proportion of movie audiences would understand the Yiddish. The standalone Yiddish scene functioned as a wink to Cagney’s own Yiddish connection as well as to the film’s many Jewish viewers.

By 1950, Yiddish cinema had come to an abrupt end. The obliteration of the Yiddish heartland in Poland in the Holocaust, the submerging of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union, and the rapid linguistic assimilation of American Jewry away from Yiddish marked the end of feature film production in Yiddish for Yiddish audiences. The cinema of the newly formed State of Israel, where large numbers of Yiddish speakers settled after the Holocaust, evolved predominantly in Israeli Hebrew. Within mainstream Jewish culture, Yiddish declined in status as a language of new artistic creation and increasingly became a language of memory and nostalgia.

The period of Yiddish film silence coincides with the turn toward what scholars Jeffrey Shandler and Cecile Kuznitz have termed “postvernacular” Yiddish, where the language’s primary mode is symbolic rather than communicative. Postvernacularity offers a theory for understanding post-Holocaust manifestations of Yiddish where a majority of both its producers and consumers employ fragments of the language to

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express aspects of their identity. For example, performers at a klezmer concert might sing a Yiddish song and greet their audience in Yiddish, with the understanding that neither party is fluent in the language, in order to add a layer of significance.\(^\text{10}\) In his 2006 book, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, Shandler writes:

Contrary to established definitions of its legitimacy as the equal of other languages, *Yiddish in the postvernacular mode is not necessarily thought of, or even valued, as a separate, complete language*. Its partial, restricted use, including frequent atomization into a limited inventory of individual idioms and words (and even fragments of words), suggests that Yiddish is esteemed for its difference from, rather than its similarity to, other languages.\(^\text{11}\)

A very few Yiddish film projects emerged between 1950 and 2005. A single feature fiction film with significant Yiddish content appeared in the United States in *Hester Street* (1975), a nostalgic depiction of the Jewish immigrant experience on New York’s Lower East Side at the end of the nineteenth century. An adaptation of Ab. Cahan’s novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, *Hester Street* includes both Yiddish terms embedded in English and full Yiddish dialogue spoken by recent immigrants and traditional rabbis. *Hester Street* reflects the changing status of Yiddish as a lesser-used language within the postvernacular mode: the non-Yiddish speaking actors worked with a dialogue coach; all of the Yiddish dialogue is paired with English subtitles. Although the film received critical acclaim, and star Carol Kane was nominated for an Oscar, it remained the sole feature film with substantial use of Yiddish dialogue for thirty years. Instead, Yiddish in world cinema entailed individual words and phrases, often to comedic effect, the most famous example of which is perhaps the Hollywood Western comedy, *Blazing Saddles* (1974), where Mel Brook plays a native American chief who speaks untranslated Yiddish and English with a strong Yiddish accent. The Łódź duo “Dzhigan and Schumacher,” who had performed to mass audiences in interwar Poland and abroad, created two comedy shows that aired in Israel in the 1970s. In the 1970s and 1980s, three young New York Jewish filmmakers produced short Yiddish films: *Dos mazl/Luck* (USA, Josh Waletzky, 1974), a student film featuring children retelling a folktale; *The Bent Tree*, an animated short based on Itzik Manger’s song, *Afn veg shteyt a boym* (USA, Sally Heckel, 1980), and *Der brunem/The Well* (USA, David Greenwald, 1983), a tale about a Romani boy set during World War II. The first full-length documentary entirely in Yiddish to appear since 1950 was *Brussels Transit* (Belgium, Samy Szlingerbaum, 1980), a film about the search of the filmmakers’ family for refuge after the Holocaust, narrated in Yiddish.\(^\text{12}\) In the 1990s, for a niche audience of secular Yiddish speakers, New York Yiddishist film

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producer Roland Millman produced two short subtitled Yiddish instructional videos featuring actors from the Yiddish theatre: *Shvits: My Yiddisheh Workout* and *No Shmaltz! My Yiddisheh Cooking Video*.

During the same period, classic Yiddish cinema was given a second life when the pre-1950 Yiddish films were restored and rereleased through the National Center for Jewish Film, a non-profit film archive founded in founded 1976. 13 This venture marked part of a renewed interest in Yiddish culture in the 1970s and 1980s that coincided with the klezmer “revival” in the United States and abroad. The release of over forty of these feature films, with new English subtitles, caused a revitalization of Yiddish cinema as new audiences were exposed to it for the first time in film festivals as well as on DVD. These efforts helped to establish a canon of Yiddish cinema that had not existed previously as many of these films had been lost or forgotten. Film scholars published first scholarly studies of Yiddish cinema: Eric A. Goldman’s *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film, Past and Present* (1983, 2011) provided a pioneering overview; 14 New York film critic Jay Hoberman’s above-mentioned *A Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* offered a transnational history of Yiddish film (1991, revised 2010); Sylvia Paskin’s anthology, *When Joseph Met Molly: A Reader on Yiddish Film*, brought together scholars to examine themes such as gender and psychoanalysis in Yiddish cinema. 15 The recent republication of Goldman and Hoberman’s books points to an abiding and expanding interest in Yiddish cinema produced before 1950, with a focus on the “classics” of the 1930s: *Der dibuk/The Dybbuk* (Michal Waszynski, 1937); *Tevye* (Maurice Schwartz, 1939); four dramas by renowned director Edgar G. Ulmer (Grinefelder/Green Fields, 1937, *Fishe der krimmer/The Light Ahead* (1939), *Yankl der shmid/The Singing Blacksmith*, 1938, and *Amerikaner shadkhn/American Matchmaker*, 1940); and Molly Picon’s musical comedies *Yidl mitn fidl, Yiddle With His Fiddle* (Joseph Green, 1936) and *Mamele* (Joseph Green and Konrad Tom, 1938), among others. These films, many of whose soundtracks are of very poor auditory quality, are paired with elliptical subtitles, with long swathes of dialogue condensed into a single line of English text. One could argue that much of the dialogue in these films offers an experience of an “acoustic landscape,” with auditory or visual elements such as music or the use of shadow and light superseding the spoken dialogue. In a postvernacular reading, for audiences relying on subtitles, the Yiddish in these films serves symbolic rather than communicative purposes. Much of the critical and popular response evinces a discourse of backshadowing in reading the films through the lens of the Holocaust. For example, Ira Konigsberg’s widely cited study of *The Dybbuk* characterizes the restoration of the film as follows: “The dead were returned to life, and a culture long vanished, wiped out by the Holocaust, was resurrected on the screen.” 16

13 See National Center for Jewish Film, Yiddish Film Restored by NCJF, http://www.jewishfilm.org/Catalogue/yiddish.htm.
The advent of new digital technology has been accompanied by an expansion of Yiddish audiovisual material, including film. Tsvi Sadan’s 2011 study, “Yiddish on the Internet,” suggests that Yiddish has entered a new stage in its sociolinguistic development as a “cyber-vernacular,” with the potential for Yiddish speakers to form virtual speech communities in cyberspace. While this “cyber-vernacular” stage represents a potential reversal of the postvernacular mode back to a vernacular in a virtual setting, Sadan’s findings point to a preponderance of what he terms “cyber-postvernacular” usage whereby Yiddish is employed symbolically rather than as a means of communication: for example, Yiddish words serve to decorate a webpage rather than convey information. Since the publication of Sadan’s study, the entry of Yiddish into the cyberage has comprised a rapid expansion of websites and blogs both devoted to, and in, Yiddish. The Yiddish Book Center (Amherst) has made available a vast digital collection online that includes Yiddish-language audio-books, lectures, and oral interviews in addition to virtually the entire library of Yiddish published books. Further, the availability of accessible new user-friendly and inexpensive or free technologies for audiovisual production—including dubbing and subtitling—has facilitated the creation of films in lesser-used languages such as Yiddish. The prevalence of smartphones with filming capacity has rendered the creation of short films effortless, in particular among younger generations who are conversant in new technologies. Today one can find a voluminous body of amateur videos with Yiddish content (e.g. individuals singing Yiddish songs) posted on public sites such as YouTube. New developments in social media have further facilitated the production and promotion of new Yiddish films on sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

**Yiddish Film after 2005: Stream 1**

The first of an eclectic variety of Yiddish-language films to have appeared since 2005 is an action film, A Gesheft/The Deal (90 mins, 2005) produced by members of the Yiddish-speaking Haredi (Ultra Orthodox) community for internal consumption. A Gesheft was produced fully in what might be termed a “vernacular mode”: its directors, actors and viewers were all members of a Yiddish-speaking Hasidic community that produces and consumes media in Yiddish. Director Yakov Kirsh and producer Mendel Kirsh, two brothers from Monsey, New York who were raised as Vishnitzer Hasidim, established Kosher Entertainment Productions after identifying a potential niche market: Hasidic communities spanning the United States, Israel, and Europe whose shared language is Yiddish, which also serves as a boundary between themselves and the mainstream. A majority of the many sects that comprise the Hasidic world reject mainstream culture in favor of Jewish tradition, have a complicated relationship with modern technology, and shun film and television. However, as Yakov Kirsch stated, “I

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figured without any competition, this would be a great place to start in the film industry.” The Kirsch brothers set out to create a “kosher” film: “No foul language, no sexual content, and no females.”²⁰ The film, which follows the story of a corrupt Hasidic character who ultimately finds redemption, abides by Haredi norms of behavior and morality. For example, Haredi gender separation is respected by not featuring any women at all; according to the press release, even a woman under a sheet on a hospital stretcher was played by a man. Likewise, the moral conflicts of the film are resolved when the anti-hero achieves the forgiveness of the man whom he has wronged bydevoting himself to the study of sacred Jewish texts until the end of his life. With a budget of $30,000, the directors filmed extensive footage and hired film editor Roland Millman (producer of Shvits: My Yiddisheh Workout and No Shmaltz! My Yiddisheh Cooking Video). With amateur actors, improvised dialogue, and a widely meandering plot that requires a total suspension of disbelief, A Gesheft is far from a critically acclaimed film. At the same time, the film captures the linguistic variation within the community and exhibits the simultaneous use of language systems that linguists term “Hasidic Yiddish” and “Hasidic English,” complete with mutual borrowings. For example, the amateur actors employ a Polish or Galician Yiddish, pronounce English words with a Yiddish accent, and speak with the characteristic “rise-fall contour” and other patterns of inflection particular to the Yiddish language.²¹ The relative moral turpitude of a character can be ascertained by how much English—a symbol of American integration—he incorporates into his Yiddish; the only character to die on screen uses extensive English slang.

A Gesheft stands alone in the genre of Haredi action feature film. Although the film initially sold 1,500 copies on DVD, anonymous advertisements placed in two New York Haredi newspapers condemned the film as did publicly posted flyers and posters in Hasidic neighbourhoods: “We must fight this with all our might, because if we are quiet now, we will all see each other in the theater, God forbid.”²² The resistance to A Gesheft amounted to a slippery slope argument: the film could lead the community to view other action films, for men to sit with women, in the dark, which could lead to other forbidden behaviors. The film was not the only object of a crackdown on new technology: a year later, a mass rabbinic gathering in Monsey issued a ban on private use of the internet.²³ A Gesheft remains the only full-length Yiddish language film produced since 1950 by and for Yiddish speakers, outside of the transvernacular mode. In this way, it is more akin to the “classic” Yiddish films of seventy years ago than the other Yiddish films that have appeared since 2005.

In contrast to a film made by and for speakers of the language such as *A Gesheft*, the rest of the body of new Yiddish film employs a transvernacular mode that appears to be bound up with questions of authenticity. Why else enter into the labor-intensive process of writing a script in one’s own language only to have it translated into a language one does not understand; having the actors, most of whom do not speak the language, coached in order to pronounce that dialogue; and arranging for subtitles—which are generally unpopular among film audiences—for an audience who does not understand the language, more often than not back into the language of the original script? It appears logical to assume that vehicular matching strives for dialogue that is inherently authentic, and sometimes it does. Media reviews of the new Yiddish films tend to highlight this connection. For example, a 2011 review by film critic Eric A. Goldman posits, “But a new trend toward authenticity and realism is returning Yiddish, like other foreign languages, to the screen.” However, as Carol O’Sullivan asserts, “the temptation to read vehicular matching solely in ethical terms, as a type of linguistic ‘authenticity,’ must be resisted.” The relationships between the filmmakers and issues of authenticity are complex. In an article titled “Cinema and Authenticity: Anxieties in the Making of Historical Film”—one among several in *The Journal of Media Practice* on the subject—Dominic Lees views authenticity as a construct that filmmakers consider as part of a wider creative process fraught with dilemmas around how to balance accuracy with one’s artistic vision. As Lees states from the perspective of a filmmaker: “The practice of making historical film is replete with conflicting approaches to authenticity.” Filmmakers choose between—or sometimes combine—the “fidelity model,” in which they go to extreme lengths to achieve an accurate representation of the past to build credibility with viewers; and the “verisimilitude” approach, in which filmmakers portray the past in a way that is probable according to popular assumptions by employing “authenticity effects” such as specific items of costume in order to appear authentic to spectators. Lees compares this latter approach to heritage tourism, where visitors visit a historical site with expectations of perceived authenticity based on nostalgia or an imagined past. One can argue that language functions as one among many elements of a complex negotiation around the issues of authenticity with which filmmakers may engage, and which audiences may experience while watching. In sum, in addition to goals of authenticity via vehicular matching, there are multiple reasons why a filmmaker might produce Yiddish dialogue through a transvernacular process, with his or her artistic vision chief among them.

A first category of new Yiddish film is heterolingual with Yiddish dialogue spoken by Haredi characters in a vehicular matching that sets them apart from non-Hasidim, who speak other languages. Eve Annenberg’s 2010 full-length feature film, *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish*, occupies an intermediary space between *A Gesheft* and the other new Yiddish films. Set in contemporary Hasidic Brooklyn, it features young actors who are former Satmar Hasidim reciting Shakespeare translated into Hasidic Yiddish. It tells the

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whimsical story of a graduate student, played by Annenberg, who has lost her Yiddish and must translate *Romeo and Juliet* into Yiddish to maintain her funding. There are multiple other examples of heterolingual movies and television that include intermittent dialogue in Yiddish to depict the Haredi community. Among these are the Israeli film *Ushpizin* (Gidi Dar, 2004) and the hit Israeli television soap opera *Shtisel* (Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, 2013-). The Quebec feature film *Félix et Meira* (Maxime Giroux, 2014) portrays a Hasidic woman who falls in love with a French Canadian man. Haredi Yiddish for the purposes of vehicular matching appears to represent an ongoing trend, both within and outside of mainstream film. These films are inevitably connected to questions of authenticity, both by their filmmakers and by responses in the popular media. The term “authenticity” recurs in the media reviews of these works, in particular in relation to the ways in which the actors generated the Yiddish dialogue: as former Hasidim in *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish*; actors who studied their lines phonetically in *Shtisel*, or a combination of both in *Félix et Meira.*

A second category of Yiddish film consists of subtitled Yiddish-language opening scenes to commercial Hollywood movies and mainstream television: the black comedy and drama *A Serious Man* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2009), Adam Sandler’s comedy *The Cobbler* (Tom McCarthy, 2015), and the musical comedy television series, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (USA, Rachel Bloom, 2015). All three of these subtitled Yiddish prologues are set in a mythical past and contain a mysterious or supernatural element linked to the present-day reality depicted in the remainder of the film or episode. *A Serious Man* depicts a couple in an Old World shtetl who are visited by Reb Groshkover, whom the wife claims is dead and therefore a “dybbuk” (ghost), and stabs in the chest. The scene ends with him lurching into the snowy night and the wife uttering a blessing. According to an interview with the Coen Brothers, the deliberately vague opening scene was intended to cause unease among viewers to carry them through the film.28 Film critics have suggested that the cursed couple be read as the ancestors of the film’s protagonist, Michael Stuhlbarg, a Jewish man in 1960s suburban Minnesota whose life falls apart around him.29 A scholarly analysis by Shai Ginsburg applies theories from quantum Mechanics (Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and Schrödinger’s cat) to position the Yiddish prologue as an integral part of the film.30 The prologue to *The Cobbler* is set in 1964 and tells the story of a shoemaker who acquires a magical sewing machine from Elijah the Prophet. This magical machine reappears in the present-day Lower East Side

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of New York in the hands of shoemaker, Max Simkin, played by Adam Sandler. The film was maligned by critics, the Yiddish scene undiscussed: a single review refers to the “brief, enigmatic Yiddish-language prelude” to a film permeated by “the strange sense of unreality and wall-to-wall klezmer-inspired score giving it the feel of some long-lost Yiddish fairy tale.”\(^3^1\) The television musical comedy series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* opened its 2015 Christmas episode with a one-minute Yiddish-language prologue set on a ship sailing from Europe to America in 1901. The scene shows a mother and daughter who are the ancestors of the show’s main character and sets the stage for the present day, as she continues to struggle for her own mother’s approval as well as an elusive family heirloom ring. All three of these prologues bring Yiddish into mainstream popular American culture and they do so without integrating it: the Yiddish scenes remain separate from the rest of the film or episode, left for viewers to interpret. Yiddish is a language of the past, and antecedent for modern Jewish life as depicted on screen. This is the category of film where extended dialogue wholly in Yiddish—as opposed to individual words or lines embedded in multilingual dialogue—is most likely to be encountered by a viewer who is not specifically seeking it out.

A third group of films portrays Yiddish-speaking characters in critically acclaimed Holocaust-themed dramas: *Homeland* (Israel, Dani Rosenberg, 2009), *In Darkness* (Poland, 2011, Agnieszka Holland), *The Pin* (Canada, Naomi Jaye, 2014), and *Son of Saul* (Hungary 2015, László Nemes). These films feature Yiddish as spoken dialogue as opposed to as lyrics to background music, as found in the heterolingual film *Divided We Fall* (Czechoslovakia, Jan Hrebejk, 2000).\(^3^2\) *In Darkness* and *Son of Saul* (winner of the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 2015) are heterolingual films with Yiddish dialogue employed alongside multiple other languages (Hungarian, German, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian) for purposes of vehicular matching. Based on historic events, both films have generated discourse in the popular media about authentic representations of the Holocaust.\(^3^3\) In contrast, both *Homeland* and *The Pin* are feature films with dialogue almost entirely in Yiddish for reasons that include, but are not limited to, vehicular matching.

A forty-minute drama, *Homeland* portrays the encounter between two characters in an isolated military outpost in the desert during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence: a young recently-arrived Holocaust survivor named Lolek (Itay Itran) in search of his pre-War girlfriend in Haifa, and the tanned and muscular Army Commander (Miki Leon). The Commander—also a Holocaust survivor—exerts physical and mental pressure to transform the pale and skinny Lolek into a real Israeli Sabra who is able to forget his past. The Commander barks commands at Lolek in Hebrew and

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\(^3^2\) These films feature Yiddish as spoken dialogue as opposed to as lyrics to background music, as found in the heterolingual film *Divided We Fall* (Czechoslovakia, Jan Hrebejk, 2000).

soon turns to Yiddish when it becomes clear that Lolek does not understand. The film offers a revisionist account of the early history of the State of Israel, where individuals were required to submerge their identities and languages in favour of a unified Israeli Hebrew culture as part of the Zionist nation-building project of the new state. Born in Tel Aviv in 1979 and a graduate of the Sam Spiegel Film School in Jerusalem, Dani Rosenberg is at the fore of a new generation of Israeli filmmakers who are revisiting their national legacies in new ways. As critic Shai Ginsburg suggests, “Homeland offers not only a revisionist account of Israeli history, but of Israeli cinema as well. More than any other Israeli director, Dani Rosenberg explores the price paid by the individual for the demands put on them by the Zionist endeavor.”

Yiddish was core to director Dani Rosenberg’s vision for the film: “I wanted to show how Israel in general denigrated everything that the Holocaust survivors represented, and how important it is for us to learn their history in order to understand who we are today. That’s why I felt the film had to be in Yiddish. By Yiddish, I don’t just mean the language, but also the culture which the Israeli government and society tried to erase.” Shai Ginsburg points to the Yiddish dialogue as “the most conspicuous aspect of the film,” and reads Lolek’s continued use of Yiddish as a way of resisting Hebrew and its militaristic character. The use of Yiddish in the film also subverts the widely-held stereotype of Yiddish as funny: Lolek sabotages the Commander’s gruff demands—and his efforts to form him into a true Israeli soldier—by singing a Yiddish song and employing Yiddish humour, but the effect is grotesque rather than comical. As Rosenberg recounts in an interview, “In Israel, when you hear Yiddish in a film, you assume it’s a comedy, because Yiddish feels like something faraway and irrelevant to them. So at every screening I attended, when [Itay] Tiran, in the first scene, answered the commander with the word ‘Vus?’ (“What?”), everyone laughed. But after the first five minutes, they weren’t laughing anymore.” The film offers a profoundly disorienting and unsettling experience of the Yiddish language and, in the process, the early history of the State of Israel.

Rosenberg strove to depict Yiddish as it would have been spoken by the characters in the film in a vehicular matching that includes both dialectical variation and intonation. Neither Itay Tiran and Miki Leon, both well-known film stars in Israel, were Yiddish speakers, and they were coached by Łódź-born Yiddish translator Moshe Sachar. Under Rosenberg’s direction, Sachar deliberately trained the actors in his own Yiddish accent from Łódź rather than the Standard or literary Yiddish that is widely taught in university classrooms. Rosenberg explained his choice in an interview with the Yiddish Daily Forward: “I wanted the characters to speak like [Sachar] because the Łódźian Yiddish spoken by millions in Eastern Europe is dying out, and it sounds so much juicier to me than the literary Yiddish.” Here authenticity is bound up with the

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36 Shai Ginsburg, “The Self-Destructive Logic of Millitarism.”
37 Rukhl Shaechter, “My Father’s House, My Mother Tongue.”
38 Rukhl Shaechter, “My Father’s House, My Mother Tongue,” Forward.
aesthetics of Yiddish dialect, which is perceived as inherently richer than Standard Yiddish. The Łódź accent serves as a testimony to a vanishing linguistic tradition that, as revealed in a subsequent oral history conducted with Sachar, was becoming increasingly tenuous.\(^{39}\)

Naomi Jaye’s ninety-minute Yiddish-language feature film, *The Pin*, recounts a love story against the backdrop of the Holocaust. It tells the tale of an elderly *shomer* (a guardian who ritually watches over dead bodies until burial) who finds himself reunited with the body of his wartime lover, Leah. In a series of flashbacks, the film depicts their hiding together in a barn in wartime Eastern Europe and falling in love. In Yiddish, they share stories about their past and make plans for the future until they are tragically separated. The film ends when the *shomer* is finally able to fulfill a promise to Leah that he would prick her in the hand with a pin to ensure she is actually dead so that she cannot be buried alive.

*The Pin* underwent a similarly involved process to *Homeland* in order to create a feature film in Yiddish. Jaye’s script was written in English and translated by Yiddish translator and former York University professor Gloria Brumer. The two young stars, Milda Gecaite and Grisha Pasternak, studied the Yiddish script phonetically with teacher Anna Berman and worked on set with dialogue coach Chaimie Muncher. Knowing she would likely not find young actors fluent in Yiddish, director Naomi Jaye had decided to cast Gecaite and Pasternak, both of them recent immigrants to Canada from Eastern Europe, because of the connections between Yiddish and Slavic languages: “I figured they would be able to get their mouths around the Yiddish words.”\(^{40}\) Although Jaye does not speak Yiddish and the language does not form part of her family heritage, her vision for the film required Yiddish, despite the additional challenges she faced fundraising for, and producing, a Yiddish-language feature film.\(^{41}\) As she stated during a Q & A following a screening, after planning to make the film in a Slavic language, she realized that the film had to be in Yiddish: “This film is a Yiddish film! . . . they would be speaking to each other, once each figured out the other was Jewish, in Yiddish.”\(^{42}\)

The term “authentic” appears in virtually every media review of the film, suggesting an assumption that the film’s Yiddish dialogue is inherently accurate for this Holocaust film. However, the film’s use of Yiddish prioritizes universality above the specificity of accurately depicting a specific time and place. *The Pin* is delivered in Standard (“klal”) Yiddish. However, the film takes place somewhere in Lithuania and the characters in the film speak Russian in a few scenes, which would have made their historical dialect Northeastern (“Litvish”) Yiddish, whose most pronounced difference

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39 Moshe Sachar Oral History Interview, interviewed by Christa Whitney, Yiddish Book Center’s Wexler Oral History Project, Kalisher 48, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 11, 2014. http://archive.org/details/MosheSachar1june2014YiddishBookCenter (retrieved October 5, 2016). Sachar reveals that he rarely has the opportunity to speak Yiddish any more. Interestingly, the Yiddish Sachar uses in the interview is Literary Yiddish rather than his native Łódź dialect.


41 Ghert-Zand, Renee, “First Canadian Drama in Yiddish Debuts in NY.”

from Standard Yiddish is a single vowel shift.\textsuperscript{43} The translation team debated whether to employ this dialect, and decided against it. According to a review of the film, not only would a dialect have added difficulty to an already challenging project, but it would not have expressed Naomi Jaye’s artistic vision: dialogue in an idealized Yiddish to match the fact that the film never states where it takes place in order to augment the overall sense of displacement.\textsuperscript{44} As translator Gloria Brumer explains, “Young love in a terrible time is a universal theme. Having the young pair speak Litvish Yiddish would have immediately ‘located’ the film. That would have been contrary to Naomi’s vision and intent. Because klal Yiddish is nobody’s Yiddish, it is everybody’s Yiddish.”\textsuperscript{45} In contrast to Homeland, the Yiddish dialect (or lack thereof) employed in The Pin serves to de-situate the film rather than anchor it in a specific time and place.

Both Homeland and The Pin contain relatively little dialogue and feature repeated and extended camera panning and stills of immense, unpeopled landscapes and vast skies. This feature is not coincidental. As O’Sullivan points out, in some subtitled films—in particular those made in lesser-used or non-spoken languages—one finds “the management of vehicular matching through the reduction of dialogue to a narrative minimum.” Because dialogue in these languages is laborious to produce as well as for audiences to absorb, the quantity of dialogue is minimized and transcended with “visual storytelling.”\textsuperscript{46} As one reviewer of The Pin states, “Although the Yiddish sounds very natural, the experience of watching The Pin is much closer to watching any subtitled foreign-language art film than it is to immersing yourself in Yiddish or Jewish culture. Jaye’s camera establishes a languid, sensual rhythm, punctuated by moments of high tension, and the images do most of the storytelling.”\textsuperscript{47}

In both films, rugged natural settings take on the role of a virtual character in the film, offering the possibilities of both nourishment and death. In Homeland, the desolate desert setting with its infinite blues skies and unrelenting sun contribute to the tragic ending of the film. When the Commander sends him alone into a destroyed Arab village to fetch water from the well, Lolek encounters and kills an abandoned baby bird shelterless from the hot sun; inside one of the ruins, he encounters the ghost of a dead boy he finds under a bed. The film ends in violence followed by a final scene where Lolek wanders alone in the desert before he finally returns home. The Pin is set in a barn located within a vast forested landscape and breathtaking sunrises and sunsets. A tree provides apples and a stream provides water but nature also brings violent thunderstorms. The train, a symbol of civilization in the natural landscape and the means of the lovers’ escape, becomes the instrument of their tragic separation. The

\textsuperscript{43} Words with an “ı” vowel that are pronounced “oy” in the Central and Southeastern (“Poylish”) dialect as well as in Standard Yiddish are pronounced “ey” in Northeastern Yiddish. Thus, the dialogue pronounces the term for fear, אוי, “moyre” rather than “meyre.” On the history and features of Standard Yiddish, see Ane Kleine, “Standard Yiddish,” Journal of the International Phonetic Association 33, no. 2 (2003): 261-65.
\textsuperscript{44} Jordan Kutzik, “How to Make a New Yiddish Film,” Forward.
\textsuperscript{45} E-mail from Gloria Brumer to the author, November 13, 2016.
\textsuperscript{46} O’Sullivan, Translating Popular Film, 126-129.
silent, sanitized room where the shomer fulfills his promise to his former lover offers a counterpoint to the lush green landscapes of their time in hiding together. These pivotal scenes, which move the films towards their tragic conclusions, take place with virtually no dialogue. In a sense, the Yiddish language itself becomes a kind of “acoustic landscape” (to quote O’Sullivan) and backdrop against which to express the artistic visions of the two filmmakers. While the Yiddish dialogue functions as a form of vehicular matching, it is deliberately crafted in the translation process. The transvernacular mode thus stands in sharp contrast to the spontaneous Yiddish dialogue one finds in A Gesheft, where the Yiddish appears as a communicative rather than translated language.

All of these new Yiddish films in the transvernacular mode purposely build subtitles into the moviegoing experience in a form of audiovisual translation that allows Yiddish to move from occasional interjections into broader linguistic spaces. Unlike postvernacular Yiddish, in which the language is most often employed in the form of individual phrases or words, transvernacular Yiddish entails a translated script consisting of full sentences spoken with fluency. While the postvernacular mode carries an underlying assumption that Yiddish will be encountered in pieces, the transvernacular presents a full, communicative language, albeit in specially delineated swaths mitigated by a process of translation. If postvernacular Yiddish is like salvaging robot parts for display on a shelf or for occasional use, the transvernacular is akin to assembling the robot parts into a moving creature in the creation of an entirely new kind of Yiddish vernacular. While both robots are instrumentalized, the transvernacular is able to create a world where Yiddish is spoken fluently in an imagined past. The process entails multiple steps: an original script is written in another language (most often English), rendered into Yiddish by a Yiddish translator or translators, and presented to the non-Yiddish speaking actors to deliver. The exception is the prologue to A Serious Man, which, while originally written in English as part of the film script, features Yiddish-speaking actors that include longtime star of the Yiddish theatre, Fyvush Finkel. In all cases, the Yiddish is heard overwhelmingly by audiences who are not fluent in the language and rely on the subtitles. It is assumed that viewers will experience a comprehension gap that requires diagonal translation—“source-language speech to target-language writing”—to overcome.48

As so many critics and scholars in the fields of Film, Translation, and Audiovisual Studies have pointed out, subtitles have a profoundly negative impact on the commercial success of a film, at least for Hollywood markets. American cinema has been overwhelmingly monolingual and subtitled movies rarely yield a blockbuster; at the turn of the twenty-first century, subtitled films accounted for less than 1% of the American domestic box office.49 The reasons are manifold: subtitles are deemed unfaithful or incompetent, in particular when it comes to conveying cultural references; they are too much work to read; they detract from the film experience. As film scholar Louis

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Giannett famously stated, “No one likes to ‘read a movie.’” The conventions for subtitling have not changed since the 1930s Hollywood Studio System—an average of 750 subtitles in 90-minute feature film, 8 subtitles per minute, 32 characters per line—and these rules place rigid constraints on translators. Some scholars go deeper to explain the resistance to subtitles: B. Ruby Rich suggests, “My guess is that foreign films function as a rebuke for some viewers, offering up evidence of something that watching television or Hollywood movies cannot yield, namely, evidence that the world is not made in ‘our’ image, and that neither our society nor our language is universal.”

All of the films under discussion here beg the question: why make a film in the twenty-first century with dialogue in Yiddish? A Gesheft offers an easy answer: Yiddish dialogue for Yiddish-speaking audiences. However, all of the other films rely on subtitles to convey the meaning of the dialogue to their viewers. The reason for the subtitled Yiddish in the films that deal with the Haredi reality from an outsider’s perspective (i.e. not A Gesheft) can be explained through an expanding interest in, and tolerance of, limited vehicular matching for the sake of “authenticity”: Yiddish is the language that a Haredi character would be speaking in reality, and therefore should be the language used in a fictional depiction on screen. The use of subtitled Yiddish may have an additional desired effect of estranging the viewer from a Haredi speaker who exists within an insular, religiously-oriented community. The films that are set in the Jewish past also employ Yiddish for purposes of vehicular matching. The prologues to A Serious Man and The Cobbler are set in a mythical shtetl or historical Lower East Side; Homeland and The Pin are respectively set somewhere in the Israeli desert in 1948 and somewhere in the Lithuanian woods during World War II. Vehicular matching demands the use of Yiddish to depict the dialogue of the characters while Yiddish dialogue also serves as a mechanism to create a sense of distance, unease or unreality.

The greater the amount of Yiddish dialogue, the greater the level of challenge inherent for both the creators and audiences. It is one thing to translate, pronounce, and read subtitles for a few lines of dialogue or a single scene, and this category of film is generally accepted by audiences; it is quite another matter for a full-length film. The compelling reasons for these films pursuing full-scale vehicular matching point to its ethical dimension. O’Sullivan connects broader shifts towards heterolingualism in film to new interests among filmmakers in themes such as cultural encounters and the “authentic” use of languages that is possible in film but not in other forms of media such as print. Further, she suggests that heterolingualism can address the inequality of film languages, where historically dominant languages such as English have been used to represent marginal or disempowered languages: “The restoration of foreign languages to characters from national or ethnic groups which have been denied a voice in fiction film is a compelling justification for foreign-language dialogue with subtitles.” Here O’Sullivan echoes an oft-cited study by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “The Cinema after Babel: Language, Difference, Power,” which discusses the cinematic domination of

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51 B. Ruby Rich, “To Read or Not to Read: Subtitles, Trailers and Monolingualism,” in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film, 166.
52 O’Sullivan, Translating Popular Film, 112-115.
hegemonic languages.\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Homeland} and \textit{The Pin} have opted for a language that has been historically submerged to deal with complex issues of individual and collective memory.

The use of a “lesser-used language” such as Yiddish forms part of a wider twenty-first century cinematic trend. As O’Sullivan points out, feature films with subtitled dialogue are dominated by non-spoken or lesser-spoken languages and “clearly draw to different degrees on the prestige of subtitles, on the uncanny effects they make possible and on the authenticity they represent.”\textsuperscript{54} In this vein, Mel Gibson’s \textit{Passion of the Christ} (2004), which features subtitled Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew dialogue in a graphic depiction of the last hours of Jesus, represents one of a very few blockbuster subtitled films. In what Jeffrey Shandler has termed “the trope of Yiddish as moribund,” \textsuperscript{55} the Yiddish language is widely considered to be lesser-spoken or “dying”; this is borne out by UNESCO, which lists Yiddish (Europe) and Yiddish (Israel) as “definitely endangered,” due both to the percentages of the population that speak the language and the marked gaps in intergenerational transmission.\textsuperscript{56} At the same time, Yiddish is spoken daily by hundreds of thousands of Haredi Jews in North America, Europe, and Israel. Linguist Netta Avineri suggest that the very idea of Yiddish as threatened has come to form an integral part of the dominant discourse of secular Yiddish culture in what she terms “a phenomenological reality and a discursive strategy.” Adherents of contemporary secular Yiddish form a “metalinguistic community” where discourse is \textit{about} (versus \textit{in}) Yiddish as part of “nostalgia socialization.” Thus, Yiddish can form a core component of secular Jewish group identity without being learned or spoken.\textsuperscript{57} This nostalgic or symbolic relationship to the language can contribute to the success of a Yiddish-language film as audiences seek out opportunities to hear spoken Yiddish. As \textit{The Pin}’s filmmaker Naomi Jay observed, “It was, of course, a big risk to make my first feature-film in Yiddish. But crazy can also be wonderful! And in the end the fact that the film was made in Yiddish has created more interest in it than it probably would have otherwise had.”\textsuperscript{58}

It is notable that the two Yiddish feature films, \textit{Homeland} and \textit{The Pin}, were conceived of and produced in Israel and Canada respectively, two countries where the Jewish communities contain a high proportion of second and third generation Holocaust survivors who maintain a degree of passive knowledge of the language. Filmmakers in either country could expect their Jewish audiences to understand words or common phrases. Further, neither of these projects represents a commercial film, with each one shown primarily to film festival audiences who may hold a special interest in Yiddish and be are more tolerant of subtitles in general.

\textsuperscript{54} O’Sullivan, \textit{Translating Popular Film}, 126.
\textsuperscript{55} Shandler, \textit{Adventures in Yiddishland}, 183.
Both *Homeland* and *The Pin* fall squarely into a category that Carol O’Sullivan identifies as “pseudosubtitles,” or “subtitles which accompany an ostensive act of vehicular matching in which representational adequacy constitutes (a) a marked strategy and (b) the primary motivation for the inclusion of heterolingual dialogue in a film.” The subtitles in these films represent a source text used to deliberately create dialogue in the language that the characters would be speaking in the story. *Homeland* and *The Pin* reflect two salient features of pseudosubtitles: (1) the script tends to be a collaborative effort where the presence of subtitles is integral to the project from the outset; Both Rosenberg and Jaye deliberately opted for Yiddish dialogue as essential to their artistic visions for their films and followed a similar trajectory to achieve it. (2) The dialogue is delivered by non-native speakers, which is subtly evident in both films. While the two stars of *Homeland* deliver their Yiddish in a believable Polish accent, the actress who plays Lolek’s mother (Natasha Manor) slurs her words together in such a way that reveals that the language is foreign to her. In *The Pin*, the fact that the characters spend much of the film speaking in murmurs and whispers exacerbates the lack of the telltale rise-fall contour of spoken Yiddish. However, for a vast majority of audiences, each film maintains its illusion of linguistic authenticity.

The shared rationale behind the Yiddish dialogue in the first stream of Yiddish films is vehicular matching, whether to depict contemporary Haredi communities (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet, Félix et Meira*) or an imagined past (e.g. *Homeland, The Pin, A Serious Man, the Cobbler*). A second stream treats Yiddish dialogue in an entirely different manner.

**Yiddish Film after 2005: Stream 2**

*YidLife Crisis* offers an alternative stream of new Yiddish film: it employs transvernacular Yiddish as a new and subversive expression of Jewish culture. *YidLife Crisis* is a sitcom that centers on conversations between two young Jews who use the language to talk freely about religion, politics, and sex. Like *Homeland* and *The Pin*, *YidLife Crisis* relies on a collaborative process of translation to derive its Yiddish dialogue. However, *YidLife Crisis* does not seek authenticity in the portrayals of Haredim, or the Holocaust or post-Holocaust realities depicted in *The Pin or Homeland*. It is not geared toward Yiddish-speaking audiences like *A Gesheft*. Rather, the Yiddish in *YidLife Crisis* is employed to explore contemporary issues of Jewish identity in new ways. As one of the creators commented in an interview early in the show’s first season, “People rightly associate Yiddish with being an old and dead or dying language and we wanted to bring it into the twenty-first century. People wouldn’t expect to see us breaking the Jewish laws and doing it in Yiddish.

In contrast to “the management of vehicular matching through the reduction of dialogue to a narrative minimum” found in *Homeland or The Pin*, the first two seasons of *YidLife Crisis* are comprised almost entirely of talking, with very few quiet moments.

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61 Carol O’Sullivan, *Translating Popular Film*, 126-129.
and very minimal action. Each 5-minute sitcom episode in the first season features two individuals, Chaimie and Leizer, sitting in a local restaurant, eating and dialoguing; the second season adds actors and some English, but Chaimie and Leizer’s Yiddish dialogue remains the core of each episode. It is a show dominated by jokes, anecdotes, opinions, observations and other forms of speech, all delivered at a fast-moving pace and in Yiddish. It is irreverent, edgy, modern and in Yiddish. This standard was set from the first moments of the inaugural episode, “Breaking the Fast” (Season 1, episode 1).

The creators and actors of this pioneering Yiddish web series—Montreal-based writer, composer and producer Eli Batalion (Leizer) and Los Angeles-based actor Jamie Elman (Chaimie)—did not come to the project as fluent Yiddish speakers. Native Montrealers, they were exposed to the language in Yiddish classes at Bialik High School, by hearing it from their grandparents and others while growing up, and through their involvement with the local Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre. Childhood friends, they sought a way to collaborate and decided on a project with a Yiddish component. With local Jewish community grants, the duo wrote, translated and filmed four 5-minute Yiddish-language episodes in local restaurants and posted them to the YidLife Crisis website via YouTube. The Yiddish dialogue was derived in a multi-tiered transvernacular process, with the scripts written in English, then collaboratively translated by Batalion, his father, a teenage former Hasid, and a professor friend, and subsequently memorized by Batalion and Elman. The result is an idiosyncratic version of the language that Batalion aptly referred to as “Frankenstein Yiddish”: an amalgamation of linguistic parts.

The innovative use of Yiddish in Yidlife Crisis is not constrained by any expectations of authenticity. The parameters set by the show in its first two seasons did not include any requirement for the Yiddish dialogue to be true to a real or imagined past. Rather than attempt to mimic the Yiddish spoken by native speakers—be it secular or Haredi—Chaimie and Leizer speak their own, idiosyncratic Yiddish. Despite Batalion and Elman’s lack of fluency, they created a version of the language for their alter-egos that is replete with new vocabulary and English slang. For example, in “The Schmaltz” (Season 1, episode two), Leizer sits down in front of his smoked-meat alter-ego and asks, “Mmm. Vos far a fak is dos? (Subtitle: What the F- is this?).” That episode also featured the neologism coined by the show’s creators, “Nakete selbie” (naked selfie). The subtitles—or “pseudosubtitles”—do not serve to convey the simple meaning of the Yiddish. Rather, they are used in ways that are highly creative. Replicating the Yiddish of another time or place was not the goal: “It’s like putting on your dad’s jacket. It allows us to pay tribute and be like our elders, but doesn’t fit exactly the same way . . . We did it on purpose; we’re not speaking the Yiddish from Second Avenue during the 1920s, or from Tevye the dairyman.”

62 The term was shared with the author by Leyzer Burko, who interviewed the duo in summer of 2014, and corroborated by Batalion in an e-mail to the author, February 3, 2016.
63 “The Big Falafel with Molly Livingstone,” Voice of Israel, April 2, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9jivzTgGO.
language appeared in a review by a fluent secular Yiddish speaker, Leyzer Burko, in the *Forverts* (Yiddish Daily Forward):

If I have one complaint about “YidLife Crisis” it’s about the Yiddish. Batalion and Elman are talented enough to master pronunciation and intonation, but to a fluent Yiddish speaker the dialogue sounds a bit unnatural. The actors said that they consulted with several native Yiddish speakers in Montreal before producing the scripts, but perhaps next time they could find someone who could help make them more idiomatic.\(^65\)

In its first two seasons, the extensive media coverage of *YidLife Crisis* was dominated by the question of “why Yiddish,” the answers to which had little or nothing to do with authenticity. Rather, one finds that the pervasive tropes associated with the postvernacular mode—Yiddish as funny, Yiddish as tribute or memorial, Yiddish as dying—are so deeply entrenched that they permeate virtually all of the discourse surrounding the show’s first two seasons.

The most consistently cited reason for the show’s use of Yiddish was comedy. An illustrious American Jewish comedy tradition was cited in almost every interview, with *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* mentioned as major inspirations. According to Elman, “When you’re doing comedy, Yiddish just sounds better. Jewish comedy stems from a Yiddish sensibility.”\(^66\) The media coverage connected Yiddish with funny: as one announcer for an interview on Israeli television gleefully opened, “Get ready for some funny, funny Yiddish jokes!”\(^67\) Leyzer Burko’s Yiddish-language review stated, “Naturally, a large part of the comedy comes from Yiddish itself. There is a fair amount of vulgarity, and the sound of Yiddish adds a comic aspect to the dialogue.”\(^68\) According to the show’s creators, when the pilot episode was performed first in English and then in Yiddish, the French-Canadian staff onsite laughed most at the Yiddish episode because it sounded “like *Seinfeld*.”\(^69\) This “sounding funny” is largely due to the Yiddish inflection employed by Chaimie and Leizer, notably the tell-tale “rise-fall contour” that has transferred to the post-Yiddish speech of North American Jews and has been so pervasive in English-language comedy, notably *Seinfeld*.\(^70\) Reviews of the show pointed


\(^{70}\) Joshua Lambert, “Hello, Jews Calling?: Telephone Comedy and the Jewish Voice,” Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference, 2015.
to a comic discordance between the language of the dialogue and the content of the show, for example: “Their Yiddish seems natural, even colloquial. But Chaimie and Leizer are modern-day Jews. They take photos of their food with their phones.” The fact that the show is in Yiddish was remarked upon in every media review of *YidLife Crisis*. These reviews underline the show’s transvernacularity: a provocative, irreverent web comedy situated in present-day Montreal whose dialogue was delivered entirely in a language with no obvious audience and by actors who worked with a team to translate the original script from English and then memorize the Yiddish.

Seasons 1 and 2 of *YidLife Crisis* employ “partial subtitling,” or subtitles that are an integral part of the film rather than simply utilitarian. Rather than offer a neutral rendition of the Yiddish, the partial (as opposed to impartial) subtitles serve to add commentary or humorous subtext. In effect, the show comprises two parallel tracks: the spoken Yiddish dialogue and the English subtitles. The subtitles do not purport to be a faithful translation of the Yiddish dialogue; instead, they are the original script to which the Yiddish is tailored in order to fit the artistic vision of the show’s writers. Deliberate in their linguistic choices, Batalion and Elman developed a set of criteria to suit the needs of the show to be funny as well as accessible: Yiddish phrases had to be roughly the length it would take to read the accompanying subtitles, and the creators often opted for cognates or terms that were most likely to be recognized by viewers. For example, in the opening episode (Season 1, episode 1) Chaimie uses the term “*masturbatirn*” with a crude accompanying hand gesture rather than the accepted Yiddish term. After the translation process, “we then experiment with how the technical translations roll off the tongue and provide what we might call a comedy/dramatic pass to figure out what we think would be appropriate for our characters. In some cases, we feel like it’s necessary to sometimes throw in English words, as done in a Yiddish accent.” The English script was tailored to the future Yiddish version and the Yiddish translation tailored to the English subtitles in a translation method specific to the show. Looking back at the end of the first season, Batalion commented, “We are slowly improving our Yiddish but still believe this is the best process. We are also getting better at writing our English knowing that the Yiddish is going to make it change, particularly since subtitling is a key component and we have to be very careful about being brief so that it is easier on the reader to experience.”

Here subtitles represent an integral part of the show rather than a necessary evil to overcome viewers’ linguistic limitations.

This deliberate and positive approach to subtitling as part of the show’s transvernacular process is evident from the very first dialogue. The first episode, “Breaking the Fast” (mentioned above) opens with Chaimie, a man in his thirties wearing casual clothes, eating french fries smothered in gravy and cheese (a dish known as poutine) with great gusto in a restaurant on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement when fasting is required. Leizer, of the same age but wearing a black suit, sits across from him, shaking his head.

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72 Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, e-mail interview with the author, November 9, 2015.
Leizer: *Es lozt zikh nisht gloybn az du kenst esn itst.*
Subtitle: I can’t believe you’re eating right now.

Chaimie: *Es lozt zikh nisht gloybn az du est nisht.*
Subtitle: I can’t believe you’re not.

Leizer: *Shvayg man, s’iz farkaktn yonkiper!*
Subtitle: Chaimie, it’s f-ing Yom Kippur!

While the first two lines of dialogue match the subtitles, the third one comprises two separate streams, each of which consists of profanity particular to its language. Although Yiddish has no equivalent of “f-ing” as a four-letter word, the Yiddish is equally vulgar, with “farkakt” meaning “to be shit on.” Rather than adhere to the tendency among subtitlers to decrease profanity because of the stronger effect of seeing it in writing, 73 *YidLife Crisis* revels in the deliberate use of expletives and vulgarity in both the Yiddish dialogue and the subtitles. While the word is rendered “f-ing” rather than spelled out in full, the meaning is clear, as is the subversive effect of using it within the first thirty seconds of the show’s inaugural episode. At the same time, the characters’ transgressiveness is mitigated by the very use of subtitled Yiddish dialogue, which allows Batalion and Elman’s characters to question core elements of Jewish practice, swear, and speak in graphic terms about sex while remaining within the Jewish fold. Their live performances have included headlining for the launch of the Edmonton Jewish community’s 2015 official fundraising campaign where, according to the event’s organizers, “the highlight of the evening was the comedic antics of *YidLife Crisis* who with their Yiddish humour, reminded us of our cultural roots and our raunchy sensibility.”74

The subtitles in *YidLife Crisis* fall into a category that scholars term “abusive,” a concept in translation that stems from an essay by Jacques Derrida, “The Retrait of Metaphor” (1978), which states that “Une ‘bonne’ traduction doit toujours abuser.” In his oft-cited essay on the problematic of translation, “The Measure of Translation Effects,” Philip E. Lewis translates Derrida’s phrase as “a ‘good’ translation must always commit abuses,” or, perhaps more accurately, “A ‘good’ translation must always play tricks.”75 Scholar Abé Mark Nornes distinguishes between two kinds of subtitles: “corrupt” and “abusive,” where “corrupt subtitlers disavow the violence of the subtitle while abusive translators revel in it.” In the traditional method of subtitling set into place during the Hollywood studio system, “corrupt” translators ultimately endeavor to hide their work from the audience by conforming to the expected cultural norms of the target language: “Facing the violent reduction demanded by the apparatus, subtitlers

73 O’Sullivan, *Translating Popular Film*, 121.
have developed a method of translation that conspires to hide its work—along with its ideological assumptions—from its own reader-spectators.” In the process, they smooth over the foreignness of the dialogue in favour of easy intelligibility and transparency. In contrast, “abusive” subtitles are self-conscious and “always direct spectators back to the original text.”

Batalion and Elman revel in their subtitles and employ them deliberately and to humourous effect.

Occasionally, the subtitles in YidLife Crisis take on a life of their own. “Bastards” (Season 1, episode 4) offers a commentary on Chaimie and Leizer’s relationship as modern Jews to the traditionalist Hasidim of Montreal’s Mile End district. Once the Jewish immigrant neighborhood and the site of a diverse Yiddish culture, in 2014 Mile End is home to the country’s largest population of Hasidim, most of them daily Yiddish speakers. It is also a site of mainstream “hipster” culture and the longtime location of the city’s two rival bagel shops. The scene features two young Hasidim speaking quietly as Chaimie and Leizer walk closely behind them, commenting in Yiddish on the warmth of their clothing in the hot weather and then wondering what would have happened if their own ancestors had not joined the secular world: “mir hobn gevolt zayn . . . zey, neyn?” (Subtitle: We would be . . . these guys, no?)” When Chaimie asks what they would talk about, Leizer answers, “Di narishste kleynikaytn fun talmudishn gezets, yedn tog un yede nakht (Subtitle: Talmudic nonsense, all day and night).” Chaimie and Leizer then lapse into a mock Talmudic debate as the screen fills with English text in a visual format evocative of a page of Talmud, with a box in the center that reads, “(Passover-influenced gibberish).” While they conclude, “Oy, mishige” (Subtitle: ridiiiculous), they then use the same Talmudic logic—complete with traditional sing-song intonation—to order their bagels as the screen fills up with more “Talmudic” text. The duo mocks the vast chasm that separates them from the Hasidim while paying a visual and auditory tribute to their shared tradition of Jewish debate. Tellingly, the two Hasidim, who are never heard speaking Yiddish, are actually the director and the editor of YidLife Crisis—both secular Jews—who dressed for the part. The scene serves to underline the extent to which YidLife Crisis self-consciously situated itself outside of the Hasidic milieu: “We are reclaiming Yiddish for secular, multicultural, democratic people.”

The assumption underlying this proclamation is that while the Hasidim are carriers of Yiddish today, the language can be “claimed” by Batalion and Elman, or anyone who chooses to speak it.

The show’s first two seasons do not employ Yiddish for purposes of vehicular matching, nor are they concerned with authentic depictions of Yiddish dialogue. Chaimie and Leizer do not consistently employ one dialect: sometimes they pronounce their Yiddish in Polish dialect (for example: mishige versus meshuge in Standard/Literary Yiddish). Rather, part of the joke is the fact that two young Montrealers are sitting in local eateries speaking Yiddish. One lone reviewer questioned

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why: “Perhaps they lived in some alternate universe where everyone speaks Yiddish.”  
In a 2015 media interview, Elman and Batalion remarked, “It was part of our mandate  
going in that we were reappropriating Yiddish to an extent into this absurdist version of  
the world that we created which is where two secular, in my case, atheist, Jews are  
speaking conversational Yiddish to each other in downtown Montreal. Which doesn’t  
really exist”; “We meant it to be absurd. Imagine the world exactly like it is, except  
everyone speaks Yiddish and no one explains why. That, to us, was the joke.”  
The show self-consciously drags Yiddish into the realm of contemporary secular mainstream  
culture. As part of the process, it draws a sharp line between the Yiddish of the creators’  
grandparents’ generation—historically the speakers of Yiddish—and their own, as  
underlined by the opening advisory for the second episode: “Grandchildren: do not  
watch with your grandparents. Grandparents: do not watch with your grandchildren.  
Trust us.”  

Season Two further subverts the postvernacular mode by situating Chaimie and  
Leizer in bilingual Yiddish-English situations and having them continue to speak in  
fluent Yiddish rather than Yiddish-inflected or Yiddish-peppered English. This use of  
Yiddish undermines the stereotypes of Yiddish as inherently funny or Yiddish as vulgar.  
The special episode, “YidLife vs. Howie Mandel” (Season 2) subverts the comic  
sterotype of Yiddish as an expressive, emotional language that is used in highly charged  
situations that was famously depicted by Mike Myer’s Yiddish-inflected “Coffee Talk”  
skits on the popular American television show, Saturday Night Live. When Chaimie and  
Leizer go to meet their hero, real-life comic Howie Mandel, they speak to all the other  
characters in English and use Yiddish among themselves to make disparaging comments  
about a female assistant or when Chaimie instructs Leizer on how to behave. Mandel,  
who overhears their conversation in Yiddish, comments, “Yiddish!” When asked if he  
knows the language, Mandel responds in an intelligible but grammatically incorrect, “I  
farshteyst a bisl” (literally: I understands a little). Their hilarious exchange with Mandel  
switches fully from English to Yiddish when Leizer sneezes on him, and a germophobic  
Mandel spouts a string of Yiddish insults while Chaimie and Leizer jabber helplessly:  
“Oh shmdendrik (Subtitle: moron), you putz (Subtitle: dick), yots (Subtitle: idiot), a  
shlemiel (Subtitle: dumbass), a shlemazel (Subtitle: numbnuts), shmekl (Subtitle: little  
prick), gey kakh afn yam (Subtitle: GO SHIT IN THE SEA), the gala’s off, I gotta be  
hosed down, thank you.” These fragmented and subtitled terms represent some of the  
most widely familiar Yiddish words: slang, profanity and curses. They offer what a  
viewer might expect from Yiddish in a North American secular context in 2016: isolated  
terms rather than a fully expressive, communicative language that comprise what one  
linguist characterized as the “Yiddish borrowings that continue to be used by young  
speakers of Canadian English and so will be carried into the twenty-first century.”  
However, the scene is framed by the fluently spoken Yiddish of Chaimie and Leizer, who

78 Renee Ghert-Zand, “Irreverent Yiddish Comedic Web Series Back for Season ‘tsvey’,” The Times of  
Israel, September 25, 2015,  
79 Esther D. Kustanowitz, “Talking Tachlis with ‘YidLife Crisis’.”  
80 Elaine Gold, “Yiddish Words in Canadian English: Spread and Change,” in Yiddish After the Holocaust,  
conclude after receiving a “Gezundheit (bless you in German)” from Mandel, “Dos iz a mentsh” (Subtitle: That is a gentleman), “An emeser mentsh! (Subtitle: I know, right?!). Season Two addresses the question of “why Yiddish” by complicating the stereotype of Yiddish as a secret language, historically spoken by many Jewish immigrant parents in North America so that their children would not understand. In the first full episode, “Off the Top,” Yiddish is dealt with specifically as a topic for the first time. Set in a private home amidst the conversion and circumcision of their adult friend, Samir, the episode features a full cast of characters, both Yiddish and non-Yiddish speakers. In one scene, Leizer is approached by a young woman who has overheard him speaking with Chaimie:

Evelyn: I have to ask. Was that Yiddish?
Leizer: Ya.
E: That’s amazing! I thought it was a dead language.
L: I’m resurrecting it.
E: Ah. My grandparents used to speak it to tell secrets in front of me.
L: Mine too. That’s why I learned it. Now they only insult me in English.
E: [Laughs] Is that what you guys were doing: telling secrets?

When later in the episode, at the buffet table, Chaimie hears a woman from the older generation speak in Yiddish to the rabbi, Yiddish functions as an insider language that allows her to say things she does not want others to understand: she openly complains about the lack of proper Jewish food and questions whether “a little snip” (the circumcision they just witnessed) can make “a yidishe neshome” (Jewish soul). Chaimie interjects in Yiddish, to which the Rabbi responds:

Rabbi: Er redt yidish! (Subtitle: Oh, a Yiddish speaker!)

Here the joke is that Chavah critiques Chaimie’s Yiddish with a grammatical mistake of her own. When Samir enters the room everyone switches to English; later, at the episode’s shocking climax, Samir utters a phrase of atomized Yiddish: “On my brisday! A shande!” This characterization of Yiddish as a secret code situates their dialogue in that language within the realm of the plausible rather than the absurd. They are also now able to pinpoint the intended register for the duo’s Yiddish: “The flavor of the car salesman at the deli that we are trying to tap into and trying to express in the Yiddish that that car salesman was speaking to his buddies at that time.”

The dialogue in the second season reflects concerted attention to a creative process of stretching the limits of the language while drawing on a rich tradition of spoken Yiddish. The season’s new translator, Rivka Augenfeld, a native speaker involved in Montreal’s Yiddish cultural life for decades, has worked closely with the duo to dramatically enrich the show’s spoken dialogue. This change is evident in the opening

81 “YidLife Crisis Takes on Year 2,” CTV News, October 9, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZX7AwY UW4k
moments of “Off the Top” (Season 2, episode 1), when Chaimie offers Leizer a marijuana cigarette on the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashana, licking it with a smile and chanting, “Bapisht! [Baptized!]” Augenfeld describes the process behind this expression that embodies her approach to the show. When she reviewed the script, where Elman had used the term, “to baptize a joint,” she made the connection to a joke from her Yiddish summer camp experience at Camp Hemskhekh in the Catskill Mountains, where the campers coming from Montreal brought a humorous local pun that conflated Saint John the Baptist, a prominent figure in Quebec’s Catholic heritage, with “bapishn” “to urinate on.” As she says, “Yiddish IS funny . . . The more you know, the more you can twist it.” For example, in certain situations she has encouraged Batalion and Elman to use high language, for example “penis” instead of the popular “shmuk” in erudite discussions about circumcision. She identifies Chaimie and Leizer as “two intelligent shmendriks” speaking Yiddish at the level they speak English—in full sentences, with word plays, puns and inside jokes—at a time when so much of the language has been, and continues to be, lost. To Augenfeld, YidLife Crisis is nothing less than revolutionary for Yiddish as it places the language in a modern, secular context replete with humor and cultural references that appeal to younger people. In the process, it brings the language to a public that may never have considered these possibilities: “Wow, Yiddish is not just some funny words, it’s a language, you can say anything in it.” YidLife Crisis employs Yiddish in a variety of contemporary settings rather than a few well-placed words or phrases situated in a distant past. The potential exposure of Yiddish to new audiences is not to be underestimated: “Double Date” (Season 2, episode 3) which featured comic actress Mayim Bialik (Blossom, Big Bang Theory) playing the Yiddish-speaking “Chaya,” attracted over 400,000 hits on YouTube in its first week and has over 700,000 to date. An observant Jew with a Yiddish background who also studied the language in university, Bialik not only agreed to participate but also helped to script the episode.

YidLife Crisis embodies new trends in audiovisual translation where scholars have been calling for a new kind of openness. Asked in an interview one year into the project whether the show is part of a wider Yiddish revival, Batalion and Elman responded, “Yes, it feels like it’s part of a movement of some sort,” part of a small community of “hip’ events associated with things Yiddish” in what they term the “nouveau Yiddish world.” Batalion and Elman likewise situated YidLife Crisis within the independent television and video movement, where “authentic voices” are being distributed on web-based platforms such as YouTube. YidLife Crisis thus sits at the intersection between new modes for Yiddish and new technologies. With no central authoritative body to govern Yiddish usage or its commercial output, this new Yiddish movement is open and flexible. The transvernacular mode, with its creative and

82 Rivka Augenfeld, phone interview with the author, November 15, 2015.
85 Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, e-mail interview with the author, November 9, 2015.
collaborative translation process, allows for non-fluent speakers to embrace Yiddish with infinite possibilities for creative exploration and expression.

_YidLife Crisis_ remains groundbreaking in its format and approach to creating Yiddish-language film. For its first two seasons, the show functioned as a singular, independent, experimental site for new Yiddish film. The show was not formally affiliated with any organization or movement and operated on a minimal budget. Since that time, _YidLife Crisis_ has become the first case of Yiddish-language television or film to be formally associated with a major Jewish cultural organization. The show’s newly revamped website (as of December 5, 2016) lists the “fiscal sponsor” of the show as Yiddishkayt (Yiddishkayt.org), a major non-profit organization based in Los-Angeles founded in 1995 that supports Yiddish culture with a variety of innovative educational programming, much of it oriented towards youth. The Yiddishkayt website lists _YidLife Crisis_ as one of its four projects, with a tongue-in-cheek statement: “Yiddishkayt is proud to be the Hollywood home of _YidLife Crisis_ , the groundbreaking web series that wallows in the tradition of great Yiddish comedy.” Rob Adler Peckerar, who has been closely involved with the project from the beginning as part of the translation team and in making connections between _YidLife Crisis_ and the Jewish world, also designed the new website. This new model speaks to the future viability of innovative Yiddish film projects that could emerge from, or connect with, any number of American organizations that promote Yiddish or modern Jewish culture. The new website also reflects a crystallization of the show’s orientation and goals by defining _YidLife Crisis_ as “the identity crisis one has reconciling their old world inheritance with their new world lifestyle,” and formalizing “Three Pillars of YidLife Crisis” to correspond to the first letters of the title: “Yiddish language and culture,” “Liberal Judaism,” and “Cross-cultural bridge-building.”

This is a far cry from the offbeat irreverence of the show’s first website, which contained the tagine, “_YidLife Crisis: Sex, drugs, milk & meat. In Yiddish_ ,” and a synopsis of the show that read: “Drinking in the very best that Montreal’s multicultural Mile End has to offer, Chaimie and Leizer, best friends and debating adversaries, tackle life, love, and lactose intolerance in this foodie-centric web series done entirely in their grandparents’ Yiddish.” Batalion characterizes the change as follows: “the new website is meant to reflect the fact that we are striving to grow from a fictional web series to a larger Jewish cultural brand positioned around our three pillars, all accomplished through a combination of online content and live engagement. ... In essence, we’ve grown from a purely two-man-dialog-driven web series to a larger full-time team at the convergence of yiddishkayt, comedy, and dare I say, diplomacy (i.e. finding common ground between all kinds of people).” The show has recently also taken a new musical direction with the “YidLife Crisis Guide to Holiday Classics,” which includes a tongue-in-cheek selection of “Chrsimukkah Classics” in the form Christmas songs translated into, and sung in, Yiddish. Future plans include a return to the all-Yiddish

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87 Eli Batalion, e-mail interview with the author, December 12, 2016.
90 Eli Batalion, e-mail interview with the author, December 12, 2016.
dialogue model due to popular demand for more Yiddish, combined with a popular show in English that addresses issues of religious and cultural identity with “the same unmistakable Yiddish flavor.”

The success of YidLife Crisis points to the potential for realizing new expressions of Yiddish culture through new technologies. With the prevalence of digital technology, free online forums to share audio-visual creation, and possibilities for promotion through websites and social media, YidLife Crisis offers a viable model for others. Unlike commercial or independent film, web-based shows remain accessible to anyone with a vision and can potentially reach wide and diverse audiences. The enthusiastic response to a webseries centered on Yiddish dialogue points to vast possibilities for further projects. Just as Batalion and Elman give voice to one particular perspective and experience, the transvernacular process invites other voices to join.

Conclusion

The two streams of new Yiddish films that form the subject of this paper—those that employ Yiddish for purposes of vehicular matching and those that employ Yiddish as a new expression of Jewish culture—share a common transvernacular process that allows contemporary filmmakers to instrumentalize the language in diverse innovative ways. With a linguistic rupture in transmission of Yiddish as a communicative language outside of Haredi communities, the language has come to offer terra incognita, a blank canvas upon which filmmakers can lay their artistic vision. The last decade has seen the demise of much of a last generation of Yiddish speakers born before the Holocaust who experienced the language and culture as a lingua franca of mainstream Jewish life. It has also seen a decline in the ambivalence surrounding the status of Yiddish. Today, Yiddish is increasingly the purview of younger generations who are engaging with identity, ethnicity and history in new ways. Yiddish can be an expression of an ethics of authenticity or entirely transgressive. With no central academy and few arbiters, Yiddish becomes whatever a film or television show wants it to be. It can serve as a sonic background (e.g. The Pin) or a language of subversive critique (YidLife Crisis). The transvernacular mode in film and television allows for the creation of discrete self-contained and self-regulating worlds where the language is free to depart from the politics of nostalgia and authenticity that have been so integral to the discourse around Yiddish for so long. In the universes created through film, Yiddish does not function as a symbol but rather as a language of spoken dialogue; what we find is effectively a reversal of Shandler’s postvernacular Yiddish: “Contrary to established definitions of its legitimacy as the equal of other languages, Yiddish in the postvernacular mode is not necessarily thought of, or even valued, as a separate, complete language.”

What we find on screen is that Yiddish occupies a place equal to other languages precisely as a separate, complete language. It is the transvernacular mode that is facilitating this reversal, for it is not levels of Yiddish fluency that have shifted, but rather the emergence of a multi-tiered translation process: a script is written in the language of the filmmaker who does not speak Yiddish fluently (or at all), translated into Yiddish by an outside

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91 Eli Batalion, e-mail interview with the author, December 12, 2016.
92 Jeffrey Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture, 194.
party, memorized by actors who do not speak the language, and subtitled for non-Yiddish speaking audiences. This process spans multiple countries, media (film, television, web-based video) and artistic visions. It also extends to other domains such as theatre, where new productions employ a version of the transvernacular process: while they may use the scripts of a vast existing body of Yiddish plays, the actors and audiences encounter the same challenges posed by a lack of fluency in the language. Yiddish dialogue is memorized, and audiences read the dialogue via subtitles. Songwriters such as Daniel Kahn are also employing a transvernacular process, enlisting the assistance of fluent Yiddish speakers to assist in rendering English-language songs such as Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” into Yiddish. This differs fundamentally from the performance of the repertoire of the oft performed canon of Yiddish folk and theatre songs—AfN pripetshik, Tumbalalaika, Rozhinkes mit mandlen, to name just a few—in creating new spaces for Yiddish rather than revisiting sites of Yiddish memory.

This new era of Yiddish film, produced and viewed in the transvernacular mode, suggests an inverse orality, with fluently spoken, colloquial Yiddish derived from a written text via translation. In a sense, it offers a new stage in David Roskies’s concept of “Jewspeak,” or spoken Yiddish as “an essential expression of the once-living folk” within modern Yiddish literary culture. In Roskies’s analysis, a rich tradition of spoken language as the basis for an emerging modern Yiddish literature—notably in the works of Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz—gave way to a complex variety of literary expression, ending with a final phase of post-Holocaust Yiddish orality:

Once Ashkenaz was no more, Yiddish entered a fourth and final phase. Professional actors, responding to a yearning for speech among their dwindling audience, turned the written-as-spoken classics of modern Yiddish literature into performance art. [Hertz] Grossbard, foremost among them, systematically recorded his wide-ranging performances in order to memorialize the orality of Yiddish and recapture its expressive range, thereby circumventing the written strain completely.

The body of new Yiddish film offers a reversal of this final phase of “Jewspeak” in the emergence of a new fifth phase where Yiddish oral performance stems from a written text that has been translated from another language into a spoken script. Transvernacular Yiddish speech becomes instrumentalized, readily available to meet the artistic vision of the filmmaker. This new stage suggests not a revival of spoken Yiddish but an entirely new mode for the language. Yiddish is available to meet expectations of perceived authenticity or to subvert them entirely. The two streams of new Yiddish films point to vast and untapped potential for a new chapter in Yiddish cinema and the transvernacular mode more broadly. The films under discussion in this study mark the beginning of an expansion of the Yiddish audiovisual cultural production with limitless possibilities. Anyone with access to

computer technology can make, dub or subtitle a movie; anyone with a smartphone can film a Yiddish video. Digital technologies have radically redefined the playing field for making and distributing film.95 Film scholars point to the role of new technologies changing popular attitudes towards subtitling. B. Ruby Rich points out that with the widespread use of new technologies of keyboard-based communication, “surely these same people can read there in the movie theatre if they’re doing it all day at home and in the office?”96 Abé Mark Nornes proclaims, “The time is ripe for abuse, if only because we are in an age where moving image literacy includes the ability to manage complex text/image relations.”97 The ubiquity of audiovisual technology, text messaging, and social media have created a new tolerance for foreign-language films with subtitles.

These films create a community—if virtual, or imagined—of audiences of Yiddish listeners. Perhaps to a majority of non-Yiddish speaking audiences, hearing full Yiddish dialogue as opposed to the more common interjection of individual Yiddish words marks an extension of the early Hollywood era’s use of foreign languages as part of an “acoustic landscape” or “a moment of colourful exoticism.”98 And yet, while for the average viewer relying on subtitles, the Yiddish films may offer a distinctive intonation punctuated with an occasional familiar expression, this body of new cinema also offers an experience of immersion into the language. Mass audiences are encountering Yiddish that is communicative and fluent rather than symbolic or atomized. The transvernacular process may be functioning in the background, but the Yiddish fluency is real. With studies in applied linguistics pointing to the potential for subtitled films in foreign language learning,99 these films create fresh opportunities to hear spoken Yiddish. For those interested in studying the language formally or informally, this expanding body of film offers a new resource. They may inspire new Yiddish language learners or even create a new body of speakers who learn the language—or a version thereof—from watching Yiddish-language film. While Sadan’s cyber-vernacular has not been realized through the formation of virtual speech communities in cyberspace, the Yiddish cyberspace may yet come to bear vernacular fruit through transvernacular projects.100

Perhaps with more and more projects in the transvernacular that feature fluently-spoken Yiddish dialogue in diverse contexts and addressed to varied audiences, the discourse about Yiddish as “dead” or “dying” will finally give way to discussion about what Yiddish is today and can become in the future.

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97 Abé Mark Nornes, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” 32.
98 O’Sullivan, Translating Popular Film, 93-99.
99 For example, Yves Gambier et al, Subtitles and Language Learning: Principles, Strategies and Practical Experiences (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015).
100 Among these projects are Yiddish translations of scenes from English-language television shows and films using readily available dubbing and subtitling technologies, many of which are posted on video file-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo (search “Yiddish”). As a Yiddish language instructor, my own students have enthusiastically produced projects in this category.