

WHERE THE BOYS ARE

CINEMAS OF MASCULINITY AND YOUTH



EDITED BY

MURRAY POMERANCE

AND FRANCES GATEWARD

"By exploring screen representations of boys, this ambitious collection addresses a little-researched area in gender studies. Given cinema's fascination with boyhood, what does the coming-of-age narrative reveal about the process of becoming a man? The anthology approaches this question in an admirably multifaceted way, analyzing films from different historical eras and nations with attention to the issues of race, ethnicity, and sexuality that make portraits of boyhood so complex and so important to studies of masculinity."

—**Barbara Klinger**, Indiana University

"This sprawling collection of essays does well to focus our attention on the range of tough guys, fat boys, and chronic masturbators that populate the contemporary teen film. What makes *Where the Boys Are* so worthwhile is the picture it gives us of the global male teenager—boys from the South Bronx to Scotland revealed in all their heartless, heartbreaking glory."

—**Jon Lewis**, Oregon State University,
author of *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*

"As the originality, richness, and diversity of the films treated and the perspectives elaborated testify, *Where the Boys Are* makes an important contribution, applying recent advances in cultural studies and feminist methodology to a corpus that has not received systematic scrutiny."

—**Thomas Waugh**, Concordia University, Montreal,
author of *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Sexualities, Moving Images, Nations*

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pleaded. He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand, and fled outside. (Genesis 39: 6-14)

Looking away from Joseph preserves his integrity, for a longer look might evoke the boy's sexual desire. Potiphar's wife sees Joseph, and the reader sees her looking at Joseph, but one never sees Joseph looking at Potiphar's wife. In "The Story of Isaac," Leonard Cohen brilliantly reverses the perspective of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Astonishingly, the song dares to suggest that Isaac might have some degree of consciousness as his father is about to sacrifice him.

You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children,
you must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision

(Leonard Cohen, "The Story of Isaac")

The moment is a rare instance in which one does not look away from the Jewish boy. Rather, the Jewish boy stares back, and sees plenty of modern-day Abrahams eager to sacrifice their children, with or without temptation from "a demon or a god."

Two recent American independent films, Michael Cuesta's *L.I.E.* and Henry Bean's *The Believer* (both 2001), prominently feature the sexuality of their Jewish boy protagonists. For a number of reasons both films have prompted a great deal of controversy. *The Believer* has yet to get a full-fledged theatrical or video release in the United States, purportedly after its narrative of a Jewish neo-Nazi received a chilly reception from Rabbi Abraham Cooper and a special screening at Cooper's institution, the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. Cooper, an expert on extremist hate groups, has become a powerful voice within the film industry. Media executives, fearful of alienating audiences, extensively rely on Cooper's imprimatur, as well as the imprimatur of the Wiesenthal Center, which remains active in areas related to anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Israel. On *L.I.E.*, meanwhile, although its video release now sports a so-called R rating, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) initially bestowed an NC-17 rating, usually reserved for highly explicit representations of violence, sex, or "aberrational

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L.I.E., THE BELIEVER, AND THE SEXUALITY OF THE JEWISH BOY

Steven Alan Carr

When one looks at a Jewish boy, one traditionally looks away. Abraham looks away from Isaac before he is about to slit his own son's throat, an averted glance that saves the boy's life:

God's angel called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham! Abraham!"
"Yes."

"Do not harm the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God. You have not withheld your only son from Him." Abraham then looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He went and got the ram, sacrificing it as an all-burned offering in his son's place. Abraham named the place "God will See" (*Adonoy Yir'eh*). (Genesis 22: 10-14)

God will see Isaac, but Abraham and other humans will not. Potiphar's wife desirously looks at Joseph, well-built and handsome, and he runs from her gaze:

"Sleep with me," she said.

He adamantly refused. He reasoned with his master's wife. "My master does not even know what I do in the house. He has entrusted me with everything he owns. No one in this house has more power than I have. He has not kept back anything at all from me, except for you—his wife. How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!"

She spoke to Joseph every day, but he would not pay attention to her. He would not even lie next to her or spend time with her.

One such day, [Joseph] came to the house to do his work. None of the household staff was inside.

[The woman] grabbed him by his cloak. "Sleep with me!" she

behavior." While *L.I.E.* depicts a relationship between a pedophile and a fifteen-year-old boy, it hardly depicts this relationship or, for that matter, any of the film's dysfunctional relationships, in hard-core fashion. For all of the controversy that both films have prompted, their distribution woes and subsequent status as causes célèbres in the press obscure a closer examination of the kind of representations of Jewish boyhood that both films convey. In some respects a radical departure from depictions that deny the Jewish boy as a sexual being, these representations ultimately activate concerns and assumptions regarding boyhood sexuality and masculinity arching back to antiquity. That both *L.I.E.* and *The Believer* make the sexuality of the Jewish boy inscrutable marks both films as unique. Yet neither film invents the ambiguity of their respective representations; rather, both films follow the practice of looking at, and then looking away from, the Jewish boy. The averted gaze—and the ultimate inscrutability of Jewish boys' sexuality—is as present in these films as it is in the stories of Abraham and Isaac or Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

The representations of Jewish boyhood sexuality in these films—which have much in common with each other—operate within a broad historical, cultural, and political context. In discussing these representations, one cannot and should not lay claim to a number of related though not mutually exclusive concerns. For example, I do not seek to find some essential or biological truth about the nature of Jewish boyhood sexuality. To the contrary, the emphasis on representation seeks a more nuanced view of Jewish sexuality that accounts for the cultural perceptions of ethnic sexuality that work in tandem with whatever other signs of conscious or unconscious motivation surge forth from the ethnic boy's body. These cultural perceptions may or may not elucidate some essential aspect of the sexual identity of Jewish boys; but as perceptions, they certainly have their own reality and thus bring to bear a particular set of consequences that impinge not only upon the bodies of Jewish boys but also upon a wider cultural consciousness that perceives and defines these bodies, perceives and defines Jewish sexuality, and perceives and defines a number of other aspects of ethnic identity and sexual norms.

In addition, I cannot and should not lay claim to the strengths or failings of a censorship apparatus and how this apparatus denies or enables Jewish stereotypes present in Hollywood films—or more precisely, Jewish stereotypes present in the New American Cinema

and American independent film. While the de facto prior restraint exerted on both *L.I.E.* and *The Believer*—a proscriptive rating in one case; an ad hoc ban on theatrical exhibition in the other—does have some relevance to the larger issue of the representation of Jewish boyhood sexuality, the fact that this implicit censorship has turned these films into causes célèbres has clouded rather than clarified their importance as representations. Finally, while both films are indeed important as representations of Jewish boyhood sexuality, a rare enough subject in mainstream film, closer examination suggests that these representations are not exactly liberatory. So while there is definite value to viewing, analyzing, and discussing these particular representations, one must bear in mind that the most remarkable aspect of both *L.I.E.* and *The Believer* is not so much to what extremes they go, as how radical the ambiguity they display—an ambiguity present from the time of Genesis—now seems at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The crucial linkage between *L.I.E.* and *The Believer* is one that connects the subjectivities of the two young male leads. Existing only to be seen, these twin subjectivities function as little more than ciphers. Yet the films are linked in how they similarly position their ciphers to be both looked at and seen through. As a cipher neither boy acts; rather, each is acted upon. Even in the case of *The Believer*, which represents the protagonist as possessing seeming autonomy, the film obscures the passivity involved in Danny's motivation for becoming a neo-Nazi, as opposed to becoming a garden-variety so-called self-hating Jew.

The act of looking, and perceiving subjectivities are two facets of any filmgoing experience. Both point to the complexity of filmgoing, since both involve not just the looks exchanged between characters within the world of a film but also the master look constructed through staging the action, positioning the camera, establishing the lighting, designing the set, and accomplishing the editing and other components of film craft. The viewer is always engaged with both the convergence and divergence between this master look of the camera and the permutations of looks that are motivated by the subjectivities that help form the narrative.

The pedophilia functions as the taboo counterpart to *The Believer's* Jewish self-hatred, in which the protagonist's self-loathing reaches such intensity that he becomes a neo-Nazi. In *L.I.E.*, a sympathetic pedophile antagonist—as sympathetic as *The Believer's* self-hater is antipathetic—functions as a monster in the sense of

pathos that the term can inspire. Like Dracula, a monster that could express both deep-seated fears and condescending pity for the immigrant Other, the pedophile can arouse sympathy only through his own self-sacrifice, as he subsumes his own pathology beneath the patriarchal order of the father. Once he has served his purpose, his life is expendable and the normalcy of the relation between father and son is complete. The pedophile is the child cipher who has grown into twisted adulthood, but who nonetheless supplicates his subjectivity for both the horror and the pleasure of his audience. That audience gazes upon a subjectivity whose motivation as monster is no more apparent than that of the cipher he seduces.

Both films manifest what John Fiske and John Hartley (1978) have dubbed the "clawback" feature of modern media, a process that works to insulate a preferred or dominant reading of a narrative from more so-called deviant interpretations. Popular texts—novels, television shows, films, and other forms of entertainment—walk a fine line between offering a completely new experience and maintaining enough consistency so that they will be recognizable to an audience. At first glance the potentially destabilizing aspects of these narratives, particularly in their emphasis upon fictional personas whose motivations appear to operate outside of conventional expectations and norms, might seem to defy the clawback process. Could these films succeed, for example, as Leonard Cohen does, in reversing the father's gaze upon the Jewish boy to one in which the Jewish boy stares back at the father? To some extent, both of these films fail to provide enough clawback for the respective standards of the MPAA and the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Although it is a fictional account, *The Believer* takes as its inspiration an actual incident that took place in October 1965. Receiving reports that a local Ku Klux Klan leader and onetime head of the American Neo-Nazi Party was himself Jewish, the *New York Times* published a front-page interview exposing twenty-eight-year-old Daniel Burrous as a Jew. Upon reading the story, Burrous committed suicide. Editors A. M. Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb later recounted the incident in their 1967 book, *One More Victim*.

The Believer explores Burrous's motivation through the fictional conduit of Danny Balint, brilliantly played by Ryan Gosling. As a young boy, Danny challenges the interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac as proffered in his religious school classroom.

According to young Danny, God does not ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah as a test of faith, but as a show of God's power. "God says, 'Do you know how powerful I am?'" Danny contends. "I can make you do anything I want, no matter how stupid. Even kill your own son. Because I'm everything and you're nothing." Appearing about thirty minutes into the film, this flashback prefigures a later scene in which a freelance journalist confronts Danny with information that proves he is indeed Jewish (and therefore a boy to whom the story of Abraham and Isaac can be expected to have some special importance). The scene also anchors the paradox of a Jewish neo-Nazi within the deeply religious allegory of a father-son relationship, or, to be more precise, the betrayal of this relationship. The film briefly presents Danny's own father as impotent, though it never explains why or how he is. The father simply sits by the television, waiting for the preparation of his meal and Danny's company. Without offering any explanation for such helplessness, the film places Danny's neo-Nazism within the context of a sexualized tension, one that offers anti-Semitic aggression as a reaction to apparent Jewish passivity. Like the story of Abraham and Isaac, the film here denies subjectivity to the one who lies upon a mountain even as it presents the story of a son.

The film returns to this metaphor when Danny and his neo-Nazi friends, unaware that Danny is Jewish, must attend a court-ordered sensitivity training session with Holocaust survivors after they instigate a fight at a Jewish delicatessen. Unmoved by the story of a female survivor who tells how a concentration camp commandant forced her to perform sexual favors, the group finally empathizes with the story of a male survivor who watched helplessly as a soldier impaled his young son upon a bayonet. The story signals a reawakening of Danny's faith, as the repeated black-and-white sequences depicting the slaughter signify his growing empathy for the father. Obsessed with the idea that a father could impotently bear witness to the murder of his own son and do nothing to stop it, Danny at first casts himself as the soldier. He finds himself returning to the Torah and to rituals such as wrapping tallith—the Jewish prayer shawl—underneath his clothes, and when a newspaper story finally exposes Danny's Jewish identity he imagines himself as the enraged father of the murdered boy. A final iteration of the black-and-white sequence, in which Danny imagines himself as both soldier and father, takes place right before he sacrifices his