The Coen Brothers’ film *A Serious Man* (2009) opens in the shtetl of Lublin with a metaphysical question: is the man who appears at the door possessed by a *dybbuk*, a malevolent spirit, or not?

The man is Traitle Groshkover, a local scholar of some renown, who has rescued a poor farmer from being stranded along the side of the road. When the farmer brags of his good fortune to his wife, she blanches, asserting that the scholar has recently died. Soon, Groshkover arrives at their home in search of soup and shelter for the night. The farmer’s wife accuses him of being possessed by a *dybbuk* and stabs him in the chest. At first, the ghostly visitor doesn’t bleed — evidence, according to the farmer’s wife, that he is not human. Eventually, however, his chest begins to ooze blood and he stumbles out into the snow.

As he bleeds, the scholar/dybbuk asks of the farmer (referring to his wife): “which one of us is possessed?” *A Serious Man* opens with this meditation on doubt and identity and leaves the viewer with a number of questions: how do we know if people are who they say they are? what are our ethics of responsibility to the other/the neighbor when he appears at our door? how are we defined by the bodies that house us? Perhaps most importantly, the scene asks us to think about the ways in which the past — and particularly our narrative of the past — dictates the present. The curse that Groshkover places upon the farmer’s family haunts the rest of the film in a manner reminiscent of the transnational *fukú* (curse) that Christopher Columbus’ trek to the New World places over the Antilles in Junot Diaz’ novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Later, we meet the film’s “serious man,” Larry Gopnik, a Jewish American physics professor who extends these questions even further, asking how we can determine the right way to act when we’re always acting out of a sense of...
uncertainty, always wondering if and when the dybbuk will arrive at our door.

These issues frame the film, which is itself a meditation on uncertainty and knowability. A Serious Man takes seriously the concern at the heart of contemporary Jewish American identity and aesthetics: namely, the frustrated desire to establish a genuine sense of Jewish difference without essentializing Jewish identity or tradition. Like many Jewish American artists before them, the filmmakers look to the past for this sense of Jewish distinctiveness. At the same time, they trouble any easy identification with a singular Jewish identity.

From the very first scene, the Coen Brothers, who have usually shied away from overtly Jewish material in their work, signal their participation in a longer genealogy of Jewish history and aesthetics. Although the majority of the film, set in the U.S. during 1967, is conducted in English, the “dybbuk” and his interlocutors speak Yiddish. The opening scene of A Serious Man participates in the complex cinematic heritage of Yiddish in America — from Mel Brooks’ Yiddish-speaking Native Americans in Blazing Saddles to the modern reimagining of Abraham Cahan’s Yekl in the Yiddish-inflected Hester Street. It also nods to the far-flung Yiddish stage, particularly S. Ansky’s infamous 1914 play, The Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds, which drew upon Jewish folklore to craft a narrative about how the encounter with modernity had left Jews “between two worlds.”

Not incidentally, Fyvush Finkel, the actor who plays the character who may or may not be a dybbuk, has had a storied career on the Yiddish stage and a role on Broadway reprising and staging yidishkeyt. He played a number of roles in the Broadway Fiddler on the Roof, most notably Lazar Wolf, the butcher who sees a dybbuk during an extended scene in the musical. The Coen Brothers’ use of Yiddish in A Serious Man has less to do with the language as an extant means of expression and more to do with what Jeffrey Shandler calls the language’s “post-vernacular” life — its power as a sign of authenticity around which contemporary Jewish identity can cohere.

Moreover, the fact that the Coen Brothers open their most recent film with an explicit nod to the long history of staging (American) Jewish identity in the shtetl is not accidental. The shtetl has inhabited a central role in the imagination of Jewish life since the postwar period. “The world of our fathers,” as Irving Howe famously dubbed it, might have been mostly lost during the Holocaust, but it has possessed an exaggerated afterlife in America. In the wake of World War II, many Jewish Americans experienced what can only be called a shtetl nostalgia — one that took many forms, most notably, according to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a fantasy about Eastern European Jewish life that rewrote the gritty realism of writers like Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer into the sepia-toned, halcyon landscapes of Fiddler on the Roof and Yentl. These cultural productions evinced a
growing interest in reclaiming Jewish difference through the imagined distinctiveness of the shtetl experience.

A Serious Man carries this anxiety about reclaiming Jewish difference into the contemporary moment by casting its gaze back not only to prewar Lublin, but to another time and place during which Jewish identity was in flux: America during the late 1960s. From the story of the dybbuk, we move to a Hebrew School in the Midwest. Here, Danny Gopnik, son of the film’s erstwhile “serious man,” Larry Gopnik, pretends to listen to his teacher intone Hebrew grammar while surreptitiously listening to Jefferson Airplane on his portable radio. He looks up absent-mindedly when asked a question by his old-world teacher. This transition from Europe to America, shtetl to suburb, is symbolic as well as spatial. According to Eli Lederhendler, it was precisely during the postwar period that the locus of Jewish identity moved not simply from Europe to America, but from city neighborhoods to suburban subdivisions. This move heralded another shift: from the prosaic nature of Jewish interaction in the ethnic enclave to the centrality of religious spaces, synagogue and Hebrew school, to the maintenance of Jewish identity.

As young Danny negotiates his Jewishness through and alongside American popular culture, his father encounters his own challenges: a cheating spouse, a troubled brother, and a conflict with a Korean student that threatens to undermine his career. In order to figure out these various “culture clashes,” Larry attempts to make an appointment with the Old World rabbi Marshak, whose absence is an organizing principle of the film. Like the opening scene of A Serious Man, this futile search for Marshak marks the film’s (ultimately frustrated) commitment to finding meaning in the Jewish past.
A Serious Man, like many 21st century Jewish American texts, is preoccupied with the possibility of Jewish obsolescence—a fact made abundantly clear by the film’s theme song, Dem Milner’s Tern ("The Miller’s Tears"), a Yiddish folk song that pairs speculation about the growing uselessness of the occupation of miller with a sorrowful appraisal of Jewish exile. This anxiety about obsolescence is itself married to a powerful current in contemporary Jewish American representation: looking to an imagined past to reanimate Jewish identity in the present. Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated (2003), Steve Stern’s The Frozen Rabbi (2010), Joseph Skibell’s A Curable Romantic (2010), and Joshua Cohen’s Witz (2010) all similarly mine the (European) Jewish past to speculate about Jewish extinction and identity in contemporary America. Both anxiety about obsolescence and embrace of nostalgia in these texts is part of a larger cultural project of revival in Jewish communities throughout America. This project—which encompasses the return of yidishkeyt, a search for a usable queer Jewish history, and renewal of interest in formerly Jewish urban spaces—looks to an imagined Jewish past to construct meaningful Jewish difference in contemporary America. The Coen brothers participate in this project even as their film seeks to undermine it by placing uncertainty (about Jewishness, masculinity, fatherhood, and life itself) at the very heart of Gopnik’s story.