

# Introduction

“The structure of communication  
is the infrastructure of human reality”

**M**ARTIN BUBER, IN HIS ENORMOUS compendium of retellings of Hasidic legends, *Tales of the Hasidim*, recounts a characteristically spare, enigmatic tale entitled “Those Who Are to Hear, Hear.” The story reads in its entirety as follows: “Once a great throng of people collected about the rabbi of Apt to hear his teachings. ‘That won’t help you,’ he cried to them. ‘Those who are to hear, will hear even at a distance; those who are not to hear, will not hear no matter how near they come.’”<sup>1</sup> Notably, the tale is stringently silent on what the teachings of the illustrious rabbi of Apt, which so many wish so zealously to hear, actually contain: a strategic withholding that directs us toward questions about the communicative act itself. In this way, the tale mirrors Franz Kafka’s “An Imperial Message,” a far more famous tale in which, similarly, nothing at all is revealed about the contents of an all-important message dispatched from a source on high, and accordingly the focus falls on the operations themselves of communicative transmission. In Kafka’s short parable, a messenger, tasked by a dying emperor with delivering “a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun,”<sup>2</sup> strives to reach his destination and yet faces mysterious difficulties, the space he is attempting to cross appearing to grow ever more vast the more he proceeds.<sup>3</sup> In a comparison of the two texts, it is difficult to say which is more pessimistic, or alternatively optimistic, about the

possibilities of communication. In Buber, reception is assured, or so it is claimed, for “those who are to hear,” for those who perhaps, to borrow a key Buberian concept that we’ll discuss in the pages that follow, are “turned”—generously and attentively attuned, as it were—to the rabbi, regardless of—or more accurately, critically primordial to—considerations of proximity, of farness or nearness relative to the position of the speaker. Yet what about “those who are not to hear”? Are they not, according to the sagacious rabbi, as fated to be foiled in relation to the reception of the message as “the humble subject” in Kafka? Certainly, one expects bleakness from Kafka. And yet, at the end of “An Imperial Message,” as the intended receiver sits by the window in the twilight and continues waiting for the message to arrive, she or he at least possesses the capacity to “dream”<sup>4</sup> the message to her- or himself. As it turns out, both tales make hermeneutic certainty just as elusive as the critical messages whose contents they never disclose, thus throwing us back, once more, on the naked operability of communication, and more specifically on the notion that, in the human predicament being described, it is the (im)possibilities of communication that constitute the decisive factor.

Just as “Those Who Are to Hear, Hear” and “An Imperial Message” resonate with one another, so they both resonate with—and could be said to offer intimations of—the remarkable media philosophy of Vilém Flusser (1920–1991). A Prague Jew who escaped Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, lived in Brazil for the next thirty years, returned to Europe in the early 1970s, and gained a measure of international renown in the 1980s for his writings on electronic media (today sometimes regarded as “prophetic” texts in the field of digital culture), Flusser announces what had become, and remained, his core methodological tenet in a lecture series, “The Surprising Phenomenon of Human Communication,” given in Aix-en-Provence in 1975–1976. Reflecting on the earlier installments of the series in the final lecture, he remarks: “I believe that a hypothesis is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ according to the extent that it allows to be worked with. A hypothesis is a tool, not a revelation. And what I attempted to do during the course of these lectures was to show you how our situation presents itself if we assume, hypothetically, that the structure of communication is the infrastructure of human reality.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a hypothesis represents an evolution from an earlier phase in Flusser’s intellectual trajectory in which he is preoccupied with the

philosophy of language, and more specifically with the Wittgenstein-inspired view that language constructs human reality.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the lecture series signals Flusser's shift into a full-fledged media philosopher who brings a distinctly phenomenological approach (implicit in the emphasis on "the infrastructure of *human* reality") to an analysis of the extensive gamut of social and technological communicative structures within which we find ourselves embedded. In reaching this point, however, Flusser hardly displays an "agnostic" or "value-free" position. For him, the most favorable communicative arrangement is one that facilitates "dialogue": a view that bears the unmistakable imprint of Buber, one of his central influences whom, in the Prague of his late teens, he once indelibly heard speak.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Buber's concept of the "I-Thou" relation, of an intersubjective, noninstrumentalizing, immanent yet divinely suffused relation between people,<sup>8</sup> colors Flusser's thinking all over the place. We find it in his writing on Jewishness (i.e., "To be a Jew is not just to be a Jew for oneself, but also for the others."<sup>9</sup>), on the figure of "the migrant" (whose potential for challenging the hardened norms of society he encourages openness toward), on the basic forms of communication structures (which he broadly sorts into the "dialogic" and the "discursive"), and far beyond.

This book seeks to offer a new, hopefully revivifying, exploration of Yiddish cinema, taking Flusser as its main theoretical guide, alongside several of the thinkers that directly inspired his "communicology." Among this latter group, we thus draw considerably on Buber, whose profound importance for Flusser we just mentioned; on Edmund Husserl, from whom he developed his phenomenological orientation; and on Hannah Arendt, whose claim, "Communication is not an 'expression' of thoughts or feelings, which then could only be secondary to them; truth itself is communicative and disappears outside of communication,"<sup>10</sup> strongly echoes his guiding "hypothesis." If our project might be conceived as the staging of a novel encounter between Yiddish cinema and Flusser, these two regrettably too-little-known entities, however, we wish to pursue such a "dialogue" with a sense of equal footing. For our aim is not simply to apply Flusserian concepts to Yiddish cinema, but rather to reveal Yiddish cinema as a kind of media theory in itself—a media theory that, like Flusser's, bears a distinctive Jewish character, and at the same time, unlike his, emerges strikingly "from below," from up out of the lowbrow realm of

popular culture. (We should also point out that apart from Flusser and some of his key influences we also engage with several other thinkers whose concerns intersect with those of the films, including Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans Kohn, Joseph Roth, Erving Goffman, Shoshana Felman, Judith Butler, Jacqueline Rose, and Zygmunt Bauman.)

In more specific terms, our central argument is that Yiddish cinema also propounds the idea that “the structure of communication is the infrastructure of human reality,” and that it does so through an insistent focus on *troubled* communication. Consequently, we contend, the films offer exemplary testimony to what is often said about the revelatory powers of dysfunction: namely, that it is in their faltering and breaking down that we become most cognizant of the systems that sustain us, that we vitally rely on for our existence. Again and again, with archetypal frequency, in a manner reflective of the turbulent period of Jewish history in which they arise, Yiddish films revolve around characters who become treacherously cut off, disconnected, “excommunicated” (to use the term in a broad sense), and as a result are thrown into full-blown existential crisis, whose only means of resolution or mitigation appears to derive from a type of reentry into the world of communication. However, to describe these characters as grappling with “troubled communication,” we realize, might court skepticism, if not resistance, within some corners of media theory. Along these lines, in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, an influential, wide-ranging study that critiques the notion of so-called “perfect” communication, John Durham Peters argues that all communication is, at heart, troubled communication. For Peters, “perfect” communication, which he treats as synonymous with “the dream of communication as the mutual communion of souls,”<sup>11</sup> embodies a glaring contradiction, an impossibility, since communion obviates both the need and the potential for communication itself (in fact, for reasons that will become clear in our final chapter dealing with mystical modes of communication, what Peters describes as “communion” might better be described as “union”). Such a point dovetails with the interrelated media theory axioms that no communication is unmediated, and that no medium is transparent, a mere neutral container for information. Although we concur with Peters’s sense of the inherently troubled nature of communication, what we would like to stress is that not all communicative troubles

are the same. Once we leave the realm of abstract first principles and enter into specific contexts, certain forms of communication begin to look more or less troubled than, and differently troubled from, others. Accordingly, in Yiddish cinema, one finds a highly unique, highly emphatic iteration of troubled communication that stems from the particular social-historical predicaments that the films set out to capture—predicaments that, as mentioned, belong to one of the most turbulent periods in all of Jewish history (certainly European Jewish history). Mass immigration, the erosion of religious and familial traditions and the concomitant disorientations of modernity, labor struggle, the rise of political antisemitism that would lead to the Holocaust: all of these preoccupations, and more, inflect and ramify what Peters calls “the gaps of which communication is made,” lending a distinctive cast to his conviction that “communication is a trouble we are stuck with.”<sup>12</sup>

Harboring much hopeful, even utopian energy, Yiddish films feature a wide range of strategies and devices for dealing with the predicament of troubled communication. These include special, “metasemantic” modes of communication like music and silence; an ethics of “responsibility to the Other”; a certain approach to time that facilitates both memory and (possible) redemption; a sense of the portability of “home,” à la Heinrich Heine’s famous formulation regarding the Bible as a textual homeland; and an entertaining of the democratizing promise of mass media (which coexists with a series of misgivings about mass media), to name only a few. Nevertheless, the predicament recurrently proves stubborn, frequently failing to resolve entirely or with sturdiness at the conclusion (“negotiation” will be the watchword of our discussions of endings), and throughout manifesting in terms of what we call, in the only conceptual neologism that we’ve allowed ourselves, “hypercommunication.” What we mean by this term is a mode of heightened activity infused with communicative yearning that acts not as a counterforce to troubled communication, in the sense of an enhanced or improved connectivity, but rather as a feverish symptom of unresolved blockage. This exaggerated form of communicative striving may lead to a measure of meaningful compensation, to a beating back against the instigating dilemma of excommunication, in the short or long term, but such a dialectical upshot is in no way guaranteed. Relatedly, the term “hypercommunication” also attracts us for the way it taps into the quality of excessiveness

that is often attributed to Yiddish cinema. As J. Hoberman remarks, comparing Yiddish American melodramas to their Hollywood counterparts: “There is a stark, aggressively unmodulated quality to their [the former’s] tear-jerking that suggests an entirely different tradition than that of the more genteel Hollywood weepies.”<sup>13</sup> Along similar lines, Nahma Sandrow writes of the Yiddish theater, Yiddish cinema’s most important aesthetic forerunner and frequent supplier of acting talent: “The popular style in Yiddish acting was unsubtle, broad, and electric. Yiddish actors to this day explain proudly that if there is one quality that sets them apart from their non-Yiddish fellows, it is the intensity and abundance of their temperament, which they also call energy, or presence.”<sup>14</sup>

Given such observations, it is hardly surprising that the easily most prevalent genre in Yiddish cinema is melodrama, famously characterized as a “mode of excess”<sup>15</sup> by Peter Brooks in his landmark, championing 1976 study of the genre. Brooks serves as an important critical voice in what follows, especially regarding the recurrence of pathological states of “muteness” in melodrama. And yet, while we owe him a debt, we wish to point out up front that our consideration of specifically Yiddish melodrama compels us to adopt an important modification of his characterization of melodrama as a quintessentially Romantic and by extension “expressionistic genre.”<sup>16</sup> As we argue, excess in Yiddish cinema functions not only in terms of a “pervasive concern with expression,”<sup>17</sup> but also, and even more importantly, given the recurrence of predicaments of disconnection, in terms of a pervasive concern with relation. Indeed, it would feel perilously incomplete to characterize a cinema all about reconnecting with others, reestablishing ties, and resuming a place within an accommodating communicative order, strictly under the banner of a movement—namely, Romanticism—that privileges the self and holds self-expression as a means in itself and the highest ideal.

A diasporic phenomenon produced in multiple countries—mainly Poland, the United States, Russia (with significant output after the 1917 Revolution), and Austria—Yiddish cinema began early in the second decade of the twentieth century, still early in the silent era, continued in various bursts across the divide into talking pictures, and reached a spectacular peak in the mid-to-late 1930s, before being abruptly cut off by World War II. After the war, it never fully recovered, never fully came back from its precipitous fall from what

today is recognized as its “golden age,” and for all the familiar reasons encompassed by the story of the decline of the Yiddish language more generally: the near-total destruction of the centers of Eastern European Jewish life in the Holocaust, the ascendancy of Hebrew as the official language of the fledgling Israeli state, and various forms of assimilation among Jews living around the world. In order to describe Yiddish’s effective afterlife—a life by no means necessarily moribund, and yet at the same time clearly distinct from the life that was led earlier—Jeffrey Shandler has proposed the term “postvernacular.”<sup>18</sup> From the beginning of Yiddish cinema until the onset of what we can thus describe as the postvernacular phase of the language—a phase extending into the present—around forty Yiddish features survive, the majority of which have been restored and circulate in periodic repertory or film-festival screenings and in home-video format.<sup>19</sup>

It is out of this treasured archive of survivals that our book is based, while drawing most heavily on those titles from the “golden age” phase. Our justification for this makeup stems from an intention to produce extended, in-depth close readings of the films (obviously challenging to do with lost films), and from the fact that the “golden era” phase, inevitably, possesses a high quotient of representativeness. Accordingly, among the nine films that each receive a chapter-length treatment—and that all, in some way, specially captivated us during the course of watching and rewatching our way through the corpus of (existing) Yiddish cinema—one will find *The Dybbuk* (*Der Dibek*) and *Teveye*, arguably the two most famous Yiddish films, both prestigious adaptations of Yiddish theatrical/literary classics; a substantial share of highly obscure and in our opinion undervalued films on the spectrum of what is known as *shund*, a term of denigration and sometimes twisty affection that literally means “trash,” and that covers a style of ultra-low-budget melodrama on steroids; a lonely voiced film that prophetically warns against Nazism at a startlingly early date; and a postwar film about Jewish DPs, made under extraordinary circumstances in the American-occupied zone of Germany (it is these last two films that respectively represent the earliest and latest of the films that we focus on, and that thus provide a loaded periodization, from 1933 to 1948, or from Hitler’s rise to power to the founding of the state of Israel). In addition, as a way of mitigating the inevitable exclusionary costs of our focus, we have made considerable attempts to weave in allusions to, and short digressions on, several more

Yiddish films that fall both outside and inside the fertile mid-to-late 1930s period.

A final word about method. Although we rely indispensably on the existing literature on Yiddish cinema, we depart from this body of research in a crucial way. All three monographs on Yiddish cinema—Eric A. Goldman’s *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film, Past and Present* (1983, updated 2011), Judith N. Goldberg’s *Laughter through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema* (1983), and J. Hoberman’s *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (1991, updated 2010)—move through the films, roughly speaking, “diachronically”; that is, following the chronology of the films, the books all show how Yiddish cinema developed over time; they are all, in short, histories of Yiddish cinema, which seek in their ways to encompass the entire phenomenon under investigation. Meanwhile, a number of articles published in journals and anthologies—notably among the latter, *When Joseph Met Molly: A Reader on Yiddish Film* (1999), edited by Sylvia Paskin—offer concentrated analyses of specific films or topics, and in this way necessarily dispense with any kind of encompassing optic. This book proceeds differently from, while at the same time sharing something with, both approaches. Namely, through an interlocking collection of concentrated analyses that are sensitive to historical context, we aim to provide a perspective on Yiddish cinema that is extensive, that treats Yiddish cinema as a kind of “total unit,” and yet that takes conceptual matters rather than historical development as its through line. In this way, our approach can be likened to a “synchronic,” or structural, approach, with the caveat that we retain a vantage on the whole of the material rather than on only a slice of it as it appears at a single point in time. Thus, while our chapters do not follow a consistent chronology, they refer constantly backward and forward to one another, revealing Yiddish cinema as a strikingly cohesive, Jewishly charged, dramatically embodied system of ideas about media and (ex)communication.