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For the third consecutive year the regional Heritage Commission of Provence Midi Pyrénées participated in the European Days of Jewish Culture and Heritage in organising an event in the premises of B'nai B'rith in Marseille.

Based on the theme "The spirit of Jewish humour", Xavier Nataf, regional representative of the FSJU and responsible nationally for cinema and audio-visual performances, presented an illustrated study of film extracts on "The place of Jewish humour in the world of the cinema".

More than 70 people came to listen to this cinema professional, a specialist in Israeli cinema, but his subject passed well beyond Israel since he chose film extracts from many parts of the world. He reminded us that Jewish humour is a reflection of Jewish identity which is so difficult to define. He listed the main lines - self mockery, making fun of anti-Semites, the caricature of the minor trades traditionally carried out by Jews, and the well-known subject of the Jewish mother.

His first examples were from Woody Allen, the master of self mockery (Annie Hall, 1977). Xavier Nataf spoke of the "one man shows" of Jewish American artists who performed in American holiday camps for rich Jews, holiday camps described in "Dirty Dancing" by Emile Ardolino in 1987. He reminded us of the role played by Jews in the creation of Hollywood and of the American cinema, the story told in the documentary "From the shtetl to Broadway".

Then there were the great classics: "To be or not to be" by Ernst Lubitsch, the Marx Brothers, "The Great Dictator" of Charlie Chaplin (1940). Nataf compared Chaplin's personality to that of Woody Allen. Chaplin's humour was very "Jewish" even though he himself was not. Jewish humour is not only an apanage of Jews. This was followed by more recent and perhaps less well known film extracts: "Borat" by Larry Charles with Sacha Baron Cohen (2007), "You Don't Mess with the Zohan" by Denis Dugan, making fun of the Mossad, and "The Frisco Kid" by Robert Aldrich (1979).

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In conclusion we had the question about films about the Shoah - is humour compatible with this subject? Can one mix the themes as Benigni did in 1997 with his film "Life is beautiful"? Xavier Nataf responded by showing an extract from "The train of life", a magnificent film by Radu Mihaileanu (1998), a French, Belgian, Israeli film, which shows that one can touch on this subject, but very carefully.

He emphasised that his choice of extracts was very subjective, but clearly it was a choice greatly appreciated by his listeners, judging by the applause and by the crowds around him.