

# Steven Berkoff the “Jew”: Self-Construction Through Cultural Appropriation

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From high tragedy to absurd comedy, Jewish writers in Britain have had to invent the Jewish self.

Michael Woolf, ‘Negotiating the Self: Jewish Fiction in Britain since 1945’

Whatever became of Whitechapel? Teeming with people, so gay, so alive . . . where are they? Where are the old men with the long white beards, where are the women selling beignets?

Bernard Kops, *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*

## Introduction

The contemporary British playwright, actor, director and writer Steven Berkoff has consistently demonstrated a concern with establishing or creating links between his work and his life: “The evolution of my life goes through my plays”, he states in one interview (Berkoff 1991). This tendency is also manifest in Berkoff’s production diaries, *I am Hamlet* (1989), *Coriolanus In Deutschland* (1992) and *Meditations on Metamorphosis* (1995), his travelogues, *Steven Berkoff’s America* (1988) and *A Prisoner in Rio* (1989), numerous interviews containing a great deal of autobiographical material, his career-survey *Overview* (1994), and most notably in his autobiography, *Free Association* (1996).<sup>1</sup> In particular, Berkoff has taken great trouble to show how the experiences of his early years in the Jewish quarter of London’s East End have shaped his career and his art. This has been most evident, as we

shall see, in his self-identification with the life and works of the Jewish novelist Franz Kafka. My purpose in what follows is to examine a key discursive practice used by Berkoff in his public self-construction and self-projection both on- and off-stage, namely what appears to have been his appropriation and exploitation of the Jewish East End culture. Specifically, I shall argue that Berkoff has used and manipulated the discourse of this Jewish background towards his own self-construction as an artist in the public domain. This is not to say that I shall engage in identifying and judging possible inconsistencies in Berkoff's accounts, but rather in examining the *constructedness* of Berkoff's self-writing. In this paper I employ primarily a social constructionist approach, although I also refer briefly to aspects of Derridean deconstructionist theory and the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Pierre Bourdieu.

In her introductory work on social constructionism Vivien Burr, supported by such works as Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards and Potter (1992), presents the view that:

... our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people. People's identities are achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different 'threads'.

(Burr 1995: 51)

These threads, Burr goes on to suggest, include such aspects as the age, social class, ethnicity and gender of an individual. Given that an almost infinite array of discursive possibilities are available to any individual, there arises the question of choice and agency on the part of the subject. Berkoff as agent of his own self-construction, I shall argue, has actively chosen two key

‘threads’—his Jewishness and his membership of the working class—with which to create a substantial part of the fabric of his public persona. In this paper I limit myself solely to a consideration of Berkoff’s “Jewishness”. It should be briefly pointed out here that the terms “Jew”, “Jewish” and their cognates as I use them here (i. e. in quotation marks), are understood not as religious or ethnic designations but as cultural constructs by Berkoff, in other words as he appears to perceive himself, or apparently wishes to be perceived by others, as a Jew.

### **Berkoff's Early Years**

It is important to begin by considering what appears to have been Berkoff’s ambivalence to his early Jewish background, since, as we shall see, it problematises this subject position and throws light on its constructedness. Born on 3rd August, 1937, Berkoff grew up in Stepney, a borough in the working-class East End district of London. His grandparents were Jewish émigrés from Russia who had come to Britain in the 1890s at the height of the mass exodus of mostly proletarian Ashkenazi Jews who were fleeing the pogroms in eastern Europe (*FA*: 131; 210-11). Like so many of their co-religionists, they settled down close to the docks where they had first set foot on English soil in what rapidly became a Jewish ghetto.<sup>2</sup> Berkoff lived in this quarter as a child. His stay there was discontinuous and short, however, since he was evacuated to Luton during 1942 to escape the Blitz (*FA*: 73-80), and stayed one year with his extended family in New York in 1947 (*FA*: 81-94). In 1950 his family was moved out of the East End to a London County Council housing estate in Stamford Hill, north London (*FA*: 30-46). Socially and culturally, however, this new environment was an ‘extended East End’—indeed, an ‘extended Jewish quarter’ (*FA*: 12)—since all the residents there

had been rehoused from East End boroughs as part of the LCC's slum clearance policy (Wilmott/Young 1990: 121-99).

A recurring theme in Berkoff's recollections of these early years is the desire he felt to escape from this proletarian Jewish world. He recalls, for example, that as

. . . a youngster living in a two-roomed East End slum I wrote myself a letter about all the things I hoped I might be, so I did feel that there was a destiny somewhere over the horizon. It can't all be like this I thought.

(*FA*: 195)

Such sentiments apparently intensified during his later teenage years, as he became increasingly aware, through spells of work as a salesman in Germany (*FA*: 164-73) and as a shop assistant and waiter in the West End of London (*FA*: 135-6, 162-74), of the possibilities that existed outside his immediate environment for overcoming what he saw as his doubly disadvantaged position in British society as a working-class Jew.

When Berkoff first began to entertain the idea of becoming an actor it was primarily with a view to escaping from his background (Berkoff 1978: 7). He recalls that:

I flirted with the possibility of becoming an actor, but had no idea how or where and felt that there was something else I had to do first. I put it off, but still developed the yearning. I was drawing away from the simple Stamford Hill mob with their useless and usual obsessions.

(*FA*: 161)

Finally, Berkoff embarked upon drama studies, first on a part-time basis at the City Literary Institute in 1957-58, and then as a full-time student at the Webber Douglas Academy in 1958-59. As a result of his contact with this new environment, Berkoff recalls that he transformed himself completely:

I changed my life when I studied to become an actor and altered everything about myself until I was no longer what I had been; my metamorphosis between old and new Berkoff was no less a change than that which separates Jekyll and Hyde.

(*FA*: 21)

During this earliest stage of his theatrical career, Berkoff sloughed off the skin of his Jewish working-class background, a tendency most evident in the attempt he made to expunge his Cockney accent: "True, I did not have the pearly vowels of my heroes Ian Richardson or Alec McCowen, but I did not speak like Alf Garnett<sup>3</sup> either" (*FA*: 21). Interestingly, Berkoff's strategy was in direct contrast to that of the East End working-class actor Terence Stamp, who was a contemporary of Berkoff's at Webber Douglas. Stamp recalls in his autobiography that *not* covering up his Cockney accent caused him no trouble at all (Stamp 1988: 80). Indeed, Stamp's complete lack of shame regarding his background enabled him to turn his humble origins into a positive asset in a similar manner to such contemporaries as Albert Finney and Michael Caine.<sup>4</sup> Berkoff's distancing of himself from his Jewish and proletarian upbringing (his "metamorphosis between old and new Berkoff"), on the other hand, points to the hatred he felt for his origins. Apparently, Berkoff saw cutting himself off from his working-class Jewish roots as the best means

towards advancing himself socially, economically and professionally. It was a strategy that he would discard later in his career, however.

Beginning in 1968, the year in which he launched his independent theatrical career, it is possible to see an entirely opposite tendency in evidence in Berkoff's relationship with his Jewish background. I shall attempt to demonstrate below that Berkoff has not merely drawn upon his social and cultural roots but has fully appropriated them in order to warrant voice<sup>5</sup> for himself as a "Jew". I shall also offer what I believe to be the most plausible reasons for his having done so.

### **Berkoff the "Jew"**

Berkoff's public construction and projection of himself as a "Jew" may be traced to the years 1968-70, when he staged his first independent theatrical productions, his adaptations of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (Arts Lab, 1968), *Metamorphosis* (Round House, 1969) and *The Trial* (Oval House, 1970). This aspect of his self-construction and self-projection was expressed through an explicit self-identification with Kafka and with such Kafka-*alter egos* as Gregor Samsa and Joseph K. In his introduction to the text of *The Trial*, for example, Berkoff asserts his psychological kinship to Kafka's protagonist: "Joseph K's mediocrity was mine and his ordinariness was mine too: the 'under-hero' struggling to find the ego that would lead him to salvation" (Berkoff 1988: 5). Berkoff's sense of himself as an "under-hero" derived from what he perceived to be his marginalised position in British theatre (Cross 1996: 96-7). A recurring theme in Berkoff's autobiography and interviews is his belief that over the course of the past three decades he has been wilfully rejected by the directors and critics of the theatre establishment.<sup>6</sup> With his "Jewish" self-projection (particularly in what I shall term its "Jewish outsider/

victim” aspect), Berkoff was able to suggest much about himself, his work and his location—or rather his *perception* of his location—within British theatre. Furthermore, his self-projection as a “Jew” warranted voice for him as the ‘true’ interpreter (in Britain, at least) of Kafka.<sup>4</sup> In his autobiography he asserts boldly that:

. . . the Brits cannot and have not had a writer like Kafka and our mainstream theatre cannot and does not present his works on stage as Barrault, Welles, Jan Grossman in Poland, Andrzej Wajda and I do since the Brits seldom have the kind of imagination to enter the interior of man’s soul . . .

(FA: 243)

Of great significance here is the distance that Berkoff places between himself and the unimaginative “Brits” and the theatre ‘they’ produce. With the exception of Orson Welles (himself a Europhile), Berkoff’s entire self-identification here is with continental Europe, specifically France—the home, for Berkoff, of physical theatre (Cross 1993; Cross 1998: 13-5)—and eastern Europe. Berkoff has thereby used Kafka to validate himself, his theatre, and his perceived position as a social and cultural outsider: “Kafka expressed me as I expressed Kafka” (Berkoff 1988: 5). Thus Berkoff’s claims authority through his own “Jewishness”, and his public self-construction and his dramatic works may be seen mutually to reinforce each other in a dialogic relationship.

### **Berkoff the “Cultural Jew”**

Berkoff’s accounts of his “Jewishness” are based for the most part on the everyday life and individuals he recalls from his childhood. His romanticised

descriptions of the folk of the Jewish quarter focus often on their exotic and eccentric theatricality. He recalls, for example, the extravagant voices, accents and gestures of the people:

Hessel Street [in Stepney] was like a tributary of Yiddish life, a stream, everybody speaking Yiddish, shouting, screaming, howling and selling bagels in the street. It fascinated me, this tributary, this foreign tributary like a ghetto. I could be inside the Warsaw Ghetto. It was powerful, awesome, this babble of voices shrieking and crying Yiddish sounds.

(Berkoff 1992)

A similarly theatricality was displayed, he recalls, by the members of his large extended family:

When we were young there were always people—a room of relatives—playing cards and all talking at once, wonderful voices with accents and intonations that were like singing, pitched in a tone of ecstasy, a rising tone—a joyful opera of voices.

(Lambert 1989)

Such recollections underpin Berkoff's own social and theatrical performance style, and warrant his voice as a "Jew". The following description of his self-consciously histrionic social performance style may be taken as typical:

Like his plays, Steven Berkoff is super-charged with energy. He is a self-confessed enthusiast whose conversation tumbles and cascades in a great torrent of fact, opinion, and anecdote, tender and tendentious,

abusive and abrasive, delivered in a bewildering number of voices. Now he’s fraffly, fraffly well spoken; now he’s hyping in a slurred, slanging Americaneze; now offering a bit of bovver, with an argot handed out at birth from the crypts of Bow church; now immersed in the nit-picking pseud Hampstead Heath theatre crit, . . . All the while his face alive with its own excitement and enthusiasm for the subject, his broad mouth describing a myriad of shapes as he pouts, looks down his nose and enunciates with distaste, smiles at his own sardonic wit, grimaces with mock horror at the thought of one more bad review.

(Elder 1978: 37-8)

One interviewer has observed with perhaps more perspicacity that:

[Berkoff] speaks with such a passionate and vivid vocabulary, yet there is a constant shift of accent from Jewish Cockney to mid-Atlantic twang to something very *actorrish* with lots of rs where he rolls out his tongue like a carpet. People with chameleon accents are always trying to find somewhere to fit.

(Berkoff 1993)

It is the theatricality of ordinary Jewish people, therefore, that engages Berkoff’s attention rather than macro-issues such as religion or politics. This becomes clear when one compares his writings and pronouncements with the works of other East End Jewish writers such as Emanuel Litvinoff, Simon Blumenfeld, Bernard Kops and Arnold Wesker who betray a more problematic and thoughtful relationship with their background.<sup>7</sup> With such writers in mind,

Michael Woolf observes that:

Revisiting these roots is a profoundly painful matter . . . Present meets past in uneasy ways. Comfort and security in the present, for example, contradict historical marginality and suffering in the past. In some degree, material success correlates to an uneasy sense of moral failure.

(Lee (ed.) 1995: 128)

When Berkoff writes of his own marginality as a Jew in British society, however, it is to emphasise how he, as an individual, as a “Jew”, has overcome all social and cultural obstacles to achieve his success rather than to question seriously the nature and ramifications of this exclusion; thus when Berkoff returns to his roots it is with the nostalgia of the deracinated rather than the anxiety of the spiritually or politically troubled.

In a 1989 interview he states explicitly that: “My Jewishness—*such as it is*—is cultural. I’ve absconded from religious affiliation because I’d rather be a humanist and take the best from all ideologies and religions” [my emphasis] (Lambert 1989). Indeed, nowhere does Berkoff write of practising or having practised Judaism in any form. One finds in his recollections no mention whatsoever of Jewish festivals, even the *bar mitzvah*, that fundamental rite of passage for Jewish boys. Conversely, Berkoff neither expresses any abhorrence of Judaism, nor does he discuss what it is to be a Jew *without* Judaism. This silence is all the more noticeable if one considers the work of Arnold Wesker, who, though a secularised Jew and a socialist, has continued to examine his relationship to the Jewish faith in his plays and other writings (Dornan 1994: 90-112).<sup>8</sup>

Berkoff is equally silent when it comes to the question of politics and the

Jews. The one exception is the brief mention he makes in his autobiography of the Six Day War: “In 1967 we [*sic*] were all in trepidation, fearing the possible end of Israel” (*FA*: 292). Significantly, this is the first sentence of a section entitled “*In the Penal Settlement—1967*”. Apparently, therefore, Berkoff is seeking retrospectively to draw a parallel between Israel’s fight for survival and independence and his first independent theatrical production (his own struggle for survival and independence in a hostile theatre environment). The title of this section is in itself telling, since the play was actually entitled *In the Penal Colony*. The link to Israel is further reinforced by his conspicuous use of the word ‘settlement’ rather than ‘colony’ and by bringing the time forward by one year (*Penal Colony* was in fact first performed in April 1968). As we have seen in the case of religion, there is no questioning on the part of Berkoff of this defining moment in modern Jewish (Israeli) history but rather the suggestion of what it signified for him in the context of his own self-construction and self-empowerment. Thus one witnesses Berkoff the “Jew” preparing to fight for his theatrical survival by means of his adaptation of a story by one of the most iconic of Jewish authors and against the evocative backcloth of Israel’s struggle to retain its own territories: “How we [*sic*] cheered, how we exulted in the idea of Israel’s deliverance from the jaws of death” (*FA*: 127). Both Berkoff and Israel not only ‘survived’ but also increased their territories against all the odds by asserting their independence through aggressively defiant performances of Jewishness.

Berkoff, it should be noted, has written two dramas with historical Jewish themes. *Hep, Hep, Hep*,<sup>9</sup> Berkoff’s first original play, was written in 1965 during periods of unemployment and deals with the persecution in 1290 of the Jews of Lincoln. He abandoned this early creation, however, since, as he explains, “‘Jewy’ themes are difficult to set down without falling into the trap

of making all the Jews holy, good, decent and the gentiles villains and cold-blooded tyrants" (FA: 278). This demonstrates how, publicly at least, Berkoff has avoided a confrontation with Judaism that moves beyond rather crude stereotypes into something more personal and challenging. If Berkoff fell into the trap he speaks of, it may be due to the fact that he has been unwilling or unable to view the Jewish themes in a more subtle light. Similarly, Berkoff has not staged or published *The Murder of Jesus Christ*, a play he wrote in 1978 in Israel while directing a Hebrew production of *Metamorphosis* (FA: 369), presumably for similar reasons.

### **Berkoff the "Jewish outsider/victim"**

As with the state of Israel, one aspect of the history of the Jewish quarter in the East End that is crucial to this discussion, since it throws light on Berkoff's projection of himself as an embattled Jew, is the hostility that threatened its existence from the very beginning. Following a centuries-old pattern throughout Europe (Goldberg/Rayner 1989), East End Jews became scapegoats for economic woes, and were despised by sections of the English working-class population. The newcomers were perceived as a threat to jobs and homes (Palmer 1989: 105), as "foreigners" guilty of invading England (Bourke 1994: 198-211). The negative perception of Jews was exacerbated by the fact that their self-support and industry soon brought many of them greater prosperity, arousing the jealousy of the anti-Semites among the Gentile population. From their impoverished beginnings a large number of Jews had elevated themselves within the relatively short period of three or four decades to the point where they were becoming socially and economically superior to the indigenous working-class population. With the spread of anti-Semitism during the early 1930s, the Jewish quarter, with its anarchists and socialists, became the target

of racists such as Oswald Mosley. The bloody climax was reached with the so-called “Battle of Cable Street” in 1936, a year before Berkoff’s birth.<sup>10</sup> Hostility towards Jews during the last one and a half centuries, in particular the pogroms in eastern Europe, the Nazi Holocaust, and, closer to hand, the anti-Semitism in the East End of London (FA: 74), has thus provided Berkoff with a considerable inheritance of suffering which he has invested in the construction of himself as a “Jewish outsider/victim”. Noticeable once again, though, is the absence of any significant examination by Berkoff of this darker side of Jewish history; rather he appears to invoke this history of persecution as a metaphor for his own marginalisation in the theatre world.

In his autobiography, Berkoff draws attention to his separateness from what he calls “the other side” of the East End community, “the Gentiles, for whom the Jews had such a fascination” (FA: 41). He recalls the first time that he became aware personally of the Jew-Gentile divide when, as a result of being evacuated to Luton in 1942 to escape Luftwaffe air-raids, he was forced to step outside his own familiar Jewish environment. Having learned something of the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis, he recalls that he was appalled to hear from a mischievous schoolmate that if the Germans ever succeeded in invading Britain they would exterminate all the Jews (FA: 74). The result of this, Berkoff states, was that “from being a fairly normal, venturesome child, I changed gradually into a ball of apprehension and doubt” (FA: 75). After his return to east London later that year he was persecuted and bullied at school. He recalls that:

I became a victim. Perhaps I always felt this and I was being bullied rather appallingly, though for what reason I could never quite work out. Perhaps the potential victim gives out signals of insecurity or

need, and this reinforces the other boys' sense of power. Frankly, I was desperately lonely at school.

(FA: 12)

The experience of being bullied, he writes, left him shy, reclusive and taciturn, and he recalls being afflicted by “a dread loneliness which affected me so much that it became a psychological trait” (FA: 15). In addition, anti-Semitism was prevalent in the religious instruction classes, where “there was still time to teach in school the old canard . . . the Jew killed Jesus” (FA: 80). As a result, he recalls that: “I always had the horrors of school, where I was beginning to feel like an exile or potential devil incarnate” (FA: 80). The effect of these descriptions of his persecution is to authenticate Berkoff's construction and projection of himself as a “Jewish outsider/victim”.

Berkoff's positioning of himself as a marginalised “Jewish” artist served him well when he staged his three Kafka adaptations, since the protagonists of each play—the Officer in *Penal Colony*, Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*, and Joseph K. in *The Trial*—all die as sacrificial victims. By identifying himself with these figures, he was able to warrant voice for himself as a marginalised “Jew”, which in turn sanctioned his interpretation of Kafka. This is particularly so with the link that Berkoff manufactured between himself and Gregor Samsa (Cross 1996: 103-4). Not only has Berkoff portrayed Gregor on the stage, he has also drawn an explicit parallel between the relationship he had with his parents and the relationship that Gregor Samsa had with his own family in the novella. Through a conscious mingling of fact and fiction Berkoff has thus apparently set about weaving a personal ‘Kafka-mythology’ from the threads of his own family. Berkoff's mother, Pauline (Polly), was, he writes, “like Mrs Samsa, emotionally warm, concerned and devoted to her one son” (Berkoff

1992: 81). She displayed an artistic nature, and was an accomplished amateur pianist. His relationship with his father, Abraham (Al), on the other hand, was frosty:

My own father reminded me of Mr Samsa. He was the archetype of the East End dad . . . who appeared not to have the slightest taste for music or for books—his own recreation was playing cards and seeing how much money he could lose at the greyhounds.

(Berkoff 1995a: 80)

Working as a tailor, Mr Berkoff fitted the stereotypical employment pattern of the Jewish quarter,<sup>11</sup> and Berkoff recalls (*FA*: 28) that for his father, as for Gregor's (Kafka 1974: 16), work was paramount. Berkoff, just like Kafka and his creation Gregor Samsa, was constantly criticised by his father (*FA*: 58). He recalls his father's “raging hatred for anything not in his own image” (*FA*: 48). At best, it appears, Berkoff's father was indifferent to him (*FA*: 139). As one interviewer has suggested, beneath all the rejections that would follow later in his theatrical career there was “the festering wound of the rejection by his Jewish father” (Berkoff 1996c). Paula de Burgh, Berkoff's former assistant, describes him as always “searching for father figures” (Appleyard 1989). This may be seen as paradigmatic for all the unsatisfactory relationships he has had with ‘paternal’ authorities, such as drama school teachers, theatre directors and critics, and the theatre Establishment as a whole. Thus Berkoff's positioning of himself as a “Jewish outsider/victim” gave him—and continues to give him—the opportunity to project himself as someone beyond the pale of British mainstream society and culture. He has, moreover, been able to depict his marginalisation as a virtue and, as in the case of Kafka, the very well-spring

of his art. In his *The Language of Autobiography* John Sturrock argues that:

The autobiographer can stand up in court and vindicate himself [*sic*] against whoever may have harmed or defamed him in the course of his life, as well as against the impersonal hindrances that might have kept someone less pertinacious than himself from achieving prominence. He is a narrator who has won through and has correspondingly much to gain from showing how hardly his reputation has been gained, in the spite both of a grudging fortune and of human contrareity.

(Sturrock 1994: 49-50)

The suggestion here is that, far from being merely an objective account of a given individual's own life and achievements (if, indeed, such a thing is possible), autobiography may take on a *performative* role, that it may, in other words, *do* something, for example, serve as a discourse of self-justification. A key principle underlying Berkoff's 'autobiographical' accounts of his "Jewishness", I suggest therefore, is the need for him to show how, despite all the slings and arrows of a less than friendly fate, he has won through. Berkoff has, in this sense, called Kafka as a 'star witness' in his own defence.

### **Berkoff's "Jewish East End"**

In spite or rather perhaps *because* of Berkoff's ambivalent feelings towards his Jewish East End background, he has consistently demonstrated a need to 'authenticate' his "Jewish" subject position. In recent years, this tendency may be seen in his attempt to 'reclaim' his roots both through the lens of his camera and by his resumed residence in east London. Both strategies, I suggest,

are implicit acts of cultural colonisation that reveal a great deal about the processes and nature of Berkoff’s public self-construction.

In 1992 Berkoff staged a photographic exhibition at the Slaughterhouse Art Gallery in Spitalfields, east London. Entitled ‘Images of the East End’, it was described by one commentator as a “record of [Berkoff’s] once-local market on Brick Lane, in the late Sixties and early Seventies” (Hall 1992). Berkoff’s photographic re-creation of a Jewish East End that was all but extinct by the time the exhibition took place, however, is a far more telling projection of *himself* as an “East End Jew”. A newspaper article by Berkoff describing the exhibition carries the significantly possessive title ‘Berkoff’s East Enders’ (Berkoff 1992). The inhabitants of the Jewish East End that have been captured, in the fullest sense of the word, by Berkoff’s camera thus now *belong* to him. They have become commodities, part of Berkoff’s ‘cultural capital’, to use Bourdieu’s term (Bourdieu/Passeron 1996), which he has invested in his self-positioning as an “East End Jew”.

One interviewer discovered that Berkoff’s office in the East End is literally a gallery of these Jewish images:

On the walls, great framed photographs that Berkoff took in the Seventies: a wizened old pickle-packer; a furtive tailor hanging out crumpled suits in a line. They are wonderful photographs. Berkoff’s past and his memory of it is as crucial to his work as his Jewishness, his London-ness, his physicality and uneasiness with intellectual concepts.

(Berkoff 1996a)

What Coveney appears to overlook, however, is the manner in which Berkoff

has exploited the culture of the Jewish East End through his use of the images. Walter Benjamin has argued famously that:

The technique of [mechanical] reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence . . . [and it leads to] the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.

(Keat (ed.) 1994: 168)

Following this argument one sees that Berkoff has detached the objects and individuals captured in his photographs from their original context, with the result that they now serve primarily to signify his own “East End Jewishness”. This may be seen from a newspaper interview (Berkoff 1996c) that includes a full-page photograph of Berkoff sitting in an emphatically proprietorial pose before one of his blown-up images of Jewish East End street life. The result is a telling collage. John Berger, following Benjamin, observes in *Ways of Seeing* that: “The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it” (1972: 29). What had been, in the photographic exhibition, a visual narrative in its own right has now become the backdrop for the far more dominant image in the foreground, namely Berkoff.

Berkoff’s office, transformed by the photographic props and his own social performance, has become a theatre, a tiny enclave of projected yet now extinct Jewish culture in the midst of the very real Bengali community beyond its walls. Interestingly, this space and performance has much in common with Berkoff’s play *East*, in the stage directions of which he stipulates that: “A large screen upstage centre has projected on it a series of real East End images,

commenting and reminding us of the actual world just outside the stage” (Berkoff 1990: 47). Thus life and art, fact and fiction, are placed in a dialogic relationship, revealing the constructedness and self-reflexivity of Berkoff’s positioning of himself as an “East End Jew”.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Berkoff, in contrast to a fellow East End Jewish writer such as Arnold Wesker, has not predicated his “Jewish” subject positions upon any substantial questioning of, or dialogue with, his early religious or ethnic background. My purpose, I repeat, has not been to identify or judge any possible inconsistencies in Berkoff’s accounts of himself and his early life, but to demonstrate how he has constructed himself through a ludic adoption of surface projections (literally the case with his photography) that have been selected through a continuing process of *bricolage*.<sup>12</sup> Since this process has been eclectic and pragmatic, the resulting signified of Berkoff’s self-writing and performative acts is composed of multifarious and at times almost contradictory subject positions. Moreover, his consistent non-engagement with the religious or political implications of his “Jewish” self-projection is more suggestive of his actual distance from this discursive position. Following Derrida (1977: 19), one may thus speak of Berkoff, *sous rature*, as being at once both Jewish and not Jewish. The product of Berkoff’s ‘autobiographical’ discourse and social and theatrical performances—~~Berkoff~~—therefore both is and is not. In this sense one may view Berkoff as a postmodern product of his time, an archetypal ‘pop’ figure, as described by George Melly:

Pop has imposed the idea of instant success based on the promotion of

personal style rather than a search for content or meaning. Most damaging, even on its own terms, pop is in many ways an ersatz culture feeding off its own publicity and interested to an obsessive extent with its own image reflected in the looking-glass world of the mass media.

(Melly 1989: 4)

In the “looking-glass world” of his own self-construction Berkoff has apparently cast around for performance strategies with which to define himself to his public. Although, as we have seen, Berkoff’s various chosen subject positions as a “Jew” do not seem to reveal much that is substantial about his purported Jewishness, it does indeed allow two significant characteristics—which I shall refer to here as Berkoff’s ‘natural theatricality’ and his ‘will to survive’—to emerge. By repeatedly drawing attention in his autobiographical writings and interviews to these two aspects of his social and artistic activity, at the apparent expense of any substantial content, Berkoff has been engaged in explaining a great deal about he perceives himself (and apparently wishes to be perceived) and how he works as an artist.

### Notes

- 1 All references in this text to quotations from *First Association* are abbreviated to *FA*, followed by the relevant page number.
- 2 By the outbreak of the First World War, the population of the Jewish ghetto in the East End had reached more than 142,000 (Palmer 1989: 106). As the immigrants established themselves and moved out of the ghetto, so its population began to decline, with the result that the Jewish population of the East End stood at around 85,000 in the years immediately prior to Berkoff’s birth (Lipman 1954: 169).
- 3 Alf Garnett was the bigoted protagonist of the popular BBC television comedy series *Till Death Us Do Part* during the late-1960s and early-70s. Played by the East End

Jewish actor Warren Mitchell, Garnett was a caricature of a ‘Little Englander’ whose racist outpourings were expressed in a broad Cockney accent.

4 A typical example of Stamp’s ‘roguish charm’ is his portrayal of the caddish Sergeant Troy in the film adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967). Similarly, one thinks of Albert Finney’s portrayal of Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and Michael Caine’s performance in the title role of *Alfie* (1966).

5 I use the term ‘warranting voice’ in the sense created by the social constructionist K. J. Gergen to explain the mechanisms of self-elaboration and self-justification. Gergen argues that:

. . . people furnish rationales as to why a certain voice (typically their own) is to be granted superiority by offering rationales or justifications. One claims a right to be taken seriously or to be granted superiority on the grounds of specified criteria. . . In effect, in the attempt to generate warrants for voice, the world of the self is extended and elaborated—its constituents are multiplied, their capacities made known, and their vagaries elucidated.

(Gergen 1989: 74)

As Burr points out, Gergen’s concept of ‘warranting voice’ is a useful way of looking at an individual as “a user and manipulator of discourses, and not simply a product of them” (Burr 1995: 93).

6 A typical expression of this is his recollection of being ignored even after receiving very positive notices for his performance in Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* in 1965:

Nothing came in. Even after those sensational reviews I could barely get an audition for the RSC or other major theatres [*sic*]. My agent was flabbergasted that no one had the wit to pick me up or encourage my first bold fling lest my newfound bravura wilt from neglect. But nobody was interested. (FA: 275)

7 See, for example, such autobiographical novels as Emanuel Litvinoff’s *Journey Through a Small Planet* (1972), Simon Blumenfeld’s *Jew Boy* (1986) and *Phineas Kahn—Portrait of an Immigrant* (1988), Bernard Kops’s *The World is a Wedding* (1963) and *The Dissent of Dominik Shapiro* (1966), and Arnold Wesker’s short stories *Six Sundays in January* (1969) and *Said the Old Man to the Young Man* (1978). See also the television screenplay *Bar Mitzvah Boy* (1978) by Jack Rosenthal.

- 8 See, for example, *The Old Ones* (1972), *Shylock* (1977), *Caritas* (1980), and *When God Wanted a Son* (1986).
- 9 The title *Hep, Hep, Hep* refers, Berkoff explains, to the strange cry “. . . uttered by the crusading knights as they swept down on the unbelievers. The letters are an acronym for 'Hierosolym est perdita'. Jerusalem is lost" (*FA*: 278). The title was later changed to *Blood Accusation*.
- 10 For the socio-political background to the clashes that took place in the East End at that time see William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals* (London: Duckworth, 1975); R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 1972); Tony Kushner, 'Jew and Non-Jew in the East End of London: Towards an Anthropology of 'Everyday' Relations' in G. Alderman and C' Holmes (eds.), *Outsiders and Outcasts* (London: Duckworth, 1993), 32-52; and C. Husbands, 'East End racism, 1900-1980: geographical continuities in vigilantist and extreme right wing political behaviour'. *London Journal*, VIII (1983), no. 1, 3-26.
- 11 The social historian V. D. Lipman notes that: "In 1901 40% of the Russians and Poles gainfully employed in London were tailors; in 1932, the proportion of the gainfully employed Jewish male population who were tailors was about 25%—some 20,000" (Lipman 1954: 173f.).
- 12 *Bricolage*, cognate with the French verb *bricoler*, to cadge; to dodge, was a term coined by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* to describe the act of 'using the means at hand' in the creation of discourses. Derrida, in *Writing and Difference* (1966), expanded on this notion: "If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (Rice/Waugh 1996: 183).

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