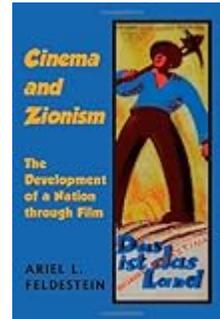




Ariel L. Feldestein. *Cinema and Zionism: The Development of a Nation through Film.* Translated by Merav Pagis. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012. Illustrations. 200 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85303-895-5.



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Revisiting the Seventh Art's Contribution to the Birth of the Israeli Nation

Invented in the late nineteenth century, the seventh art (cinema) was soon to be adopted for ideological/propaganda purposes. The young USSR used it, creating its now classical oeuvre, the most well-known film being Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). It retraces the story of a mutiny on the battleship Potemkin that led its sailors to incite the revolution in their home port, Odessa. A decade later, the Nazi regime came up with the same ideological strategy, as Adolf Hitler ordered Leni Riefenstahl to create *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a legendary propaganda documentary on the Third Reich's 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally. Between these two events, and with lesser impact on posterity, Zionist pre-State Israeli cinema took its first steps into the world of propaganda documentary, in an attempt to recruit potential immigrants to what was to become the State of Israel. In his recent book, *Cinema and Zionism*, historian Ariel L. Feldestein, however, contends that "the comparison between the way the Zionist national institutions and the Soviet and Nazi institutions operated is unfounded," since "the cinematic production in Palestine

was influenced more by the available production conditions than by ideological affiliation and commitment, unlike the films produced in the USSR or Nazi Germany, which were the fruit of identification with the ruling doctrine and the attempt to translate it into visual images" (pp. 187, 186). In fact, Feldestein's book does not explore the manipulative propaganda that was created in these films, but rather presents a rich source of documentation regarding the production of a small number of pre-State Israeli films that were to be decisive in the creation of the Jewish renewal images in Israel and elsewhere in the world. The book's title, therefore, is somewhat misleading: its first part, "Cinema and Zionism," could apply to many film texts, some of them anti-Israeli, while others are critical of ideology as a whole, and the title's second part, "The Development of a Nation through Film," directly addresses the two major ideological developments of cinema quoted in the introduction. Moreover, one might claim that all the nations born in the course of the twentieth century have been to some extent shaped, or at least influenced, by films. In other words, a mention of

the word “Palestine” could have helped in clarifying the title.

The book’s content, however, is much more explicit, enlightening, and, at times, even provocative. It deals with the complex and still relevant issue of Zionist leaders’ relationship between the American-Jewish institutions and the latter’s approach to what was to become the State of Israel, including their attempts to shape the destiny of the nation-in-waiting through the first Jewish films produced in Palestine. The book’s introduction asks the relevant questions, such as “to what extent were the heads of the institutions—the Jewish Agency, Keren Kayemet LeIsrael (The Jewish National Fund, JNF), and Keren Hayesod (United Israel Appeal, UIA)—involved in the production of these films? Did they intervene in the filming, or offer their input concerning the characterization of the protagonists and the landscapes exhibited? Should these motion pictures be perceived merely as propaganda and documentary films whose main goal was to attract potential immigrants from Europe and promote financial and political support?” (p. xv). Partial answers to these questions are scattered throughout the book, through the various case studies of dominant filmmakers working in Palestine of the time, and therefore remain vague. From these answers it transpires that American Jewry was decisive in investing efforts in the development of a national film industry that would reveal to the world “the Brave New World” that was being built in the land of Palestine.

The author relies on a large number of documents, some of them canonical, others more personal (even letters that were never sent and whose relevance can be considered as more questionable! [p. 187!]) in order to reconstruct the trajectory of well-intentioned producers who believed in the power of cinema to design the New Jew’s national consciousness in his homeland—but did not know much about filmmaking. As a result, apart from its general introduction and its epilogue, the book recounts the production adventures of six leading filmmakers: those who were to become Israelis—Yaacov Ben-Dov and Baruch Agadati, as well as Natan Axelrod and Chaim Halachmi, who together had already established a production company in the late 1920s, producing *In the Days of (Vayehi Biymeï)*, 1932) and the now canonical film *Oded the Wanderer (Oded HaNoded)*, 1933); and those who in retrospect can be considered as visiting artists enjoying an international reputation—Alexander Ford and Helmar Lerski, as well as Leo Hermann and Yehuda Leman, who together produced the now classic film *Land of Promise (LeChaim Hadashim)*, 1935).

Feldestein is not only concerned with the film plots and the artistic decisions regarding their shooting but also shows a particular interest in the behind the stage debates, as one can learn from the circumstances that led to the creation of the now canonical *Land of Promise*. Regarding the choice of the inexperienced filmmaker Leman, “a Jewish man of Polish descent,” legendary film producer Margot Klausner declared: “[Leman was] someone who was unfamiliar with this land and in my opinion, knew nothing about film directing—either before, during or after the production of the film” (p. 162). The book also quotes the reaction of Henry Monter, director of public relations of the Magbit Foundation (which solicits financial aid for the Land of Israel) after watching the first segments of the film: “I had a feeling I was watching a sequence of postcards shot in the country in the past 15 years. There are no new accomplishments here and no new themes” (p. 163). However, it also tells how, as opposed to Monter’s impression, *Land of Promise* was a success. It opened in Berlin in May 1935 and was followed by numerous screenings in the United States, Great Britain, and Palestine, where in the latter the British Mandate’s representatives decided to delete some scenes depicting the lives of the Arabs. Described by the *New York Times* as “‘another proof that film can record history more effectively than words on paper’” (p. 173), the film showed the two aspects of the promised land: a shorter one focusing on the old city of Jerusalem, sacred to the three monotheistic religions, including the *Old Yishuv* inhabited by Jews for hundred of years; and a second aspect depicting at length the modern accomplishments of the Zionist project, including its unique ability to combine agriculture and urban development. This narrative structure enabled the filmmaker to symbolically reconstruct on screen the bridge between the biblical scriptures and the new Zionist revival.[1] Indeed, *Land of Promise* was to become a milestone in the history of pre-State Israeli cinema.

The book’s epilogue opens with what Feldestein considers to be a traditional contention regarding pre-State cinema, according to which, in spite of its influence on the generations to come, it cannot be considered as cinematic art: “According to some scholars,” he claims, “since the directors of this period were required to adapt to unfavorable conditions and lacked artistic freedom, their movies were devoid of intrinsic artistic value” (p. 186). This contention, which seems to be the book’s overall *raison d’être*, appears only in the epilogue. Moreover, if the author had wanted to demonstrate the opposite, he should perhaps have seriously addressed the cinematic

language—its visual choices and its syntax—in the analyzed films. The absence of this dimension reminds us that the writer is primarily a historian rather than a film scholar. Despite this perhaps constituting a certain drawback for serious film scholars, it does not affect the overall interest of the book, which reconstructs a forgotten chapter of what Hillel Tryster has named “Israel before Israel.”[2]

Notes

[1]. See Yael Zerubavel, “Trans-historical Encounters in the Land of Israel: National Memory, Symbolic Bridges, and the Literary Imagination,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2005): 115-140.

[2]. I refer here to the pioneering book by Hillel Tryster, *Israel before Israel: Silent Cinema in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Central Zionist Archives, 1995).

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