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Revolutionary Visions: Jewish and Politics in Latin American Film

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Book Review

Stephanie Pridgeon, *Revolutionary Visions*

Jewish Life and Politics in Latin American Film

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, 194 pages,
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Stephanie Pridgeon's *Revolutionary Visions*, a book that deals with the intersection of Jews and revolutionary politics in films from Latin America, is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Latin American Jewish studies. As the author herself notes, the cinematic depiction of Jewish experiences with revolutionary movements in Latin America has not received, until now, the scholarly attention it deserves, a neglect that Pridgeon has set out to remedy in her volume. The book brings to our attention the significance of the Latin American revolutionary culture of the 1960s and 1970s not only to Jewish life in the region but also to Latin American cinema from the 1990s onwards. Grounded on the detailed analyses of eight films (both documentary and fictional) released between 1993 and 2013, the author convincingly makes the argument that participation in revolutionary politics is depicted as vital but, at the same time, as an incomplete process for Jews in 20th-century Latin America. Pridgeon expands on this point when she explains that, on the one hand, "Jewish identification with leftist revolutionary movements in Latin America is represented as being, to some extent, a natural progression of the political affinities long understood to be part and parcel of Jewishness, such as responses to Zionism, the Russian Revolution, and the Holocaust" (153). On the other hand, she holds that "the extreme nature of many of these activist groups (particularly the armed movements), the embrace of Palestine, and the heavily Catholic concepts of martyrdom and the New Man created a conflict for some Jews and thus a barrier to their full identification with revolutionary politics" (153).

Organised into four chapters, the book begins with a comprehensive introduction that provides a critical contextualisation of the approach used to study the cinematic representation of Jews in Latin American revolutionary movements. Emmanuel Levinas's essay "Being Jewish",¹ the concepts of assimilation and hegemony, and critical studies on memory all serve to frame the analyses of the films. In the introduction, the author stresses her interest in examining Jewish filmmakers' own representations of their experiences with revolutionary politics. However, chapter one, "Saintly Politics: Christianity, Revolution, and Jews", takes a different approach by discussing the role of religion in Argentina's Third Cinema, Brazil's Cinema Novo, and Cuba's revolutionary cinema during the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, the introduction of these film movements coupled with the analyses of more recent works, such as *WHITE ELEPHANT* (*ELEFANTE BLANCO*, Pablo Trapero, AR 2012), *MACHUCA* (Andrés Wood, CL 2004), and *SAN ERNESTO NACE EN LA HIGUERA* (Isabel Santos / Rafael Solís, CU/BO 2007), leads Pridgeon to demonstrate that while religion informs revolutionary politics in Latin America, its paradoxical role both impedes and facilitates Jewish identification with revolutionary culture in the region. Of great significance here is her discussion of how Christian beliefs and culture are linked to Judaism. As Pridgeon astutely notes, "the points of contact between Jewish, Christian, and the secular are constantly in flux and come to bear on political practices in different ways" (35). As such, the first chapter serves as a starting point to ignite her discussion on how Jewish self-representations in Latin American cinema can convey the Jews' place in the revolutionary politics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter two, "Here We Are to Build a Nation: Jewish Immigrants to Early Twentieth-Century Latin America", explores Jewish self-representations through three documentaries, *TO BUILD A HOMELAND* (*HACER PATRIA*, David Blaustein, AR 2007), *HERE WE ARE* (*DANKEN GOT / ESTAMOS AQUI*, Cintia Chamnecki, BR 2013), and *THE JEWISH NEIGHBOURHOOD* (*EL BARRIO DE LOS JUDÍOS*, Gonzalo Rodríguez Fábregas, UY 2011), as well as a surrealist film, *THE DANCE OF REALITY* (*LA DANZA DE LA REALIDAD*, Alejandro Jodorowsky, CL 2013). Pridgeon contends that these films both facilitate Jews' participation in national projects and negotiate their belonging to their respective nations. In analysing Blaustein's documentary, a film that features mainly interviews with the filmmaker's family members, Pridgeon stresses two elements that shape

1 Levinas 2007.

the Blausteins' identity, namely citizenship and participation in the political sphere. It is through political participation, she explains, that the Blausteins can be seen as nation builders and claim their place in Argentina. Whereas her analysis of Chamecki's documentary centres on how Jewish immigrants made the city of Curitiba in Brazil their home through participation in politics, her reading of Rodríguez Fábregas's film points out the memories of the Jewish immigrants who settled in the Reus neighbourhood in Montevideo, Uruguay, and the interviewees' divergent views on Zionism. Pridgeon links the analyses of the documentaries by centring chiefly on the role of postmemory (the mediated transmission of memory between generations),² but her approach shifts slightly when analysing Jodorowsky's film, because she focuses on the theme of intergenerational tensions instead. Her reading of Jodorowsky's film is an illuminating discussion on Jewish citizenship in Chilean society. To conclude the chapter, Pridgeon underscores that all these films "represent Latin America's Jews as full-fledged citizens who do not live on the margins of society, but rather form part of the backbone of their nations" (85).

Chapter three, "*Poner el cuerpo femenino judío: Jewish Women's Bodies and Revolutionary Movements*", is devoted to the study of depictions of female Jews and their involvement in leftist politics in two fictional films, *LIKE A BRIDE* (*NOVIA QUE TE VEA*, Guita Schyfter, MX 1993) and *MY GERMAN FRIEND* (*EL AMIGO ALEMÁN*, Jeanine Meerapfel, AR 2012). Early in the chapter, Pridgeon makes it clear that Jewish women in these films do not place their bodies on the line for the causes in which they believe in the same way as their non-Jewish male partners do. Yet, as the author argues, cinematic representations emphasise that revolutionary and student movements were instrumental not only in negotiating these women's citizenship and belonging in the 1960s and 1970s but also in shaping their lives. Because the chapter examines only two films, more detailed discussions are provided than in the previous chapters. In Schyfter's film, Pridgeon's reading unveils issues related to Doris Sommer's foundational myth (the mixing of races and ethnicities through love relationships)³ and José Vasconcelos's concept of *raza cósmica* (cosmic race),⁴ two theories that have played a significant role in the discourse of Latin American cultural identity. In analysing Meerapfel's

2 Hirsch 2012.

3 Sommer 1993.

4 Vasconcelos 2003.

film, Pridgeon touches on the thorny issue of the coexistence of Nazis and Jews in 20th-century Argentina, showing how the Jewish female protagonist puts her body on the line for fighting against Nazism and anti-Semitism. The protagonist is in fact beaten for publishing a piece on the capture of Adolf Eichmann in the school newspaper. Pridgeon provides a convincing analysis of Meerapfel's film by mapping how the female lead at times puts and at other times avoids putting her body on the line for social and revolutionary movements that span two continents – the Latin American and the European – throughout the second half of the 20th century. The gender perspective that this chapter offers reveals the importance Jewish Latin American women are currently gaining in front of and behind the camera.

Chapter four, “Lost Embraces: Jewish Parent-Child Relationships and 1970s Politics”, explores the films of a younger generation of Jewish filmmakers whose attention is also drawn to the political conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and Israel. As in her previous chapter, Pridgeon examines two films here, *LOST EMBRACE* (*EL ABRAZO PARTIDO*, Daniel Burman, AR 2004) and *THE YEAR MY PARENTS WENT ON VACATION* (*O ANO EM QUE MEUS PAIS SAÍRAM DE FÉRIAS*, Cao Hamburger, BR 2006), both of which centre on childhood memories. Arguing that in these coming-of-age stories childhood is portrayed as an arena of political identification, the author sets out to explore “the ways in which Jewish parent-child relationships facilitate the transfer of memory and political affinities” (124). Although in Burman's film the protagonist is a young man in his twenties and in Hamburger's film the main character is a 12-year-old boy, Pridgeon skilfully demonstrates how the political involvement of the fathers – one in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the other in the fight against the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985) – has a direct impact not only on the childhood of both leads but also on the children's self-identification as a Jewish Argentine and a Jewish Brazilian, respectively.

The question of Jews' belonging and citizenship in Latin America has long preoccupied scholars of Jewish Latin American studies. By putting revolutionary politics and political identification at the centre of her study, Pridgeon opens up a new avenue to scrutinise cinematic representations of the Jews' place in Latin American societies. This well-researched volume is indeed a timely contribution that will be equally relevant for specialists and newcomers to the field.

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