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Alison J. Murray Levine, *Framing the Nation: Documentary Film in Interwar France*. London and New York: Continuum Books, 2010. xiii+ 223 pp. \$130.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8264-3187-5.

Review by Kate Ince, University of Birmingham.

Documentary cinema is an area of France's cultural production to which Anglophone scholarship is only rather belatedly paying attention. As the author of this useful study makes clear, the only other book in English on documentary of the interwar period is Peter Bloom's recent *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism*.<sup>[1]</sup> Alison J. Murray Levine treats her corpus in seven chapters, of which two are introductory and the other five devoted to specific parts of her overall thesis, which is that, contrary to received wisdom, French documentary cinema did indeed make a significant contribution to the writing of the French national narrative during the *entre-deux-guerres*, and that much can be gained from comparing the documenting of the French colonies with that of the rural regions of France. The heavily centralised structures of French administration and government meant that a bi-directional dynamic in documentary representations operated between Paris and France's regions on the one hand (the Ministry of Agriculture was one of the chief sponsors and producers of documentary film during the period, and used its films both to educate farmers and to attempt to persuade them to modernise their methods) and between Paris, certain African colonies and French Indochina on the other (very few films were made in or about France's territories in the Caribbean or elsewhere).

The first introductory chapter of Levine's study sets out her methodological framework, a consideration of how the dichotomies between "*nation* and *region*, *nation* and *colony*, *traditional* and *modern*, *authentic* and *progressive*" (author's italics, p.6) operated in French cultural production of the interwar period, and emphasizes that the corpus of films under consideration is "distinctly unremarkable" (p.7). She has chosen to focus on, not the work of the avant-garde masters Jean Epstein, Jean Painlevé and Jean Vigo, but the "lacklustre" yet "ubiquitous" documentaries that filled the standard cinema programme's contents of a newsreel, a documentary, a comic, and the feature itself. In "Truth Peddling," her second chapter, Levine deploys the notion of "advocacy cinema," which sees cinema presenting an argument for modified attitudes or behaviours to a mass audience, the institutionalization of which is usually ascribed to Britain's John Grierson, in order to explain the kind of phenomenon French documentary became as it developed, after World War One, into a fully-fledged genre. The French army's newly-created *Section Cinématographique de l'Armée* had taken the lead in investing in documentary's power to inform and persuade between 1914 and 1918, but after the Great War, the Ministry of Education began to use educational film in schools and became the second major government department involved in educational film, alongside the Ministry of Agriculture.

After the 1920 governmental Bessou report expressed faith in film's value as an agent of moral regeneration for the nation, the Ministry of Education approved a budget of 500,000 francs for the creation of a film section at the Musée Pédagogique, with the Ministry of Agriculture doing likewise in 1923. Both ministries began to work with commercial partners to build up substantial collections of educational film—2,600 at the Musée Pédagogique by 1931 and 4,500 at the Ministry of Agriculture's central film library. The lending services of both organisations, whose programmes created an additional market for documentary film outside commercial film circuits, soon could not keep up with public demand. During the 1920s the Ministries of Public Health, Technical Education, the Colonies, and Foreign Affairs joined the ranks of those government bodies interested in using documentary film as a means of regenerating the French nation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs'

*Service des oeuvres françaises à l'étranger* (SOFE) focused explicitly on the French national image and France's economic interests, in addition to promoting French cinema abroad.

The widespread involvement of public agencies in using film to discuss and attempt to improve the moral health of the nation was supplemented by a variety of non-governmental regional initiatives, such as the *offices régionaux du cinéma éducateur laïque*. The Catholic Church itself also held a national congress on educational cinema in November 1929, but after a crescendo of cultural activity around educational film between 1929 and 1931, the onset of economic depression and the coming of sound to cinema (which rendered all existing projection equipment obsolete at a stroke) began to wane. The projection of silent educational film continued throughout the 1930s across France's regions, but the prohibitive costs of replacing out-of-date equipment meant that the 1930s did not see anything like the same investment in educational documentary as the 1920s. A brief new dawn heralded by the arrival of the Popular Front in 1936 came to nought because its government did not survive long enough to implement its plans. Enthusiasm for the medium of documentary did not abate, however. The Ministry of Agriculture's film programme saw results throughout the 1930s; the French Navy began a new programme in 1936; and by 1939, the regional film offices managed a large part of the various ministerial film collections and were subsidised for doing so, albeit to a constantly decreasing level. Levine's conclusion to her summary history of the cultural institutionalization of documentary film in the interwar period is that advocacy cinema not only existed, but flourished in France well before existing histories recognize.

The third chapter of Levine's book examines how educational film circulated and operated in rural France, while the fourth looks at France's colonies. In the former, she discusses the agricultural films *La bonne méthode* (Jean-Benoit Lévy 1926) and *La révolte des betteraves* (Albert Murlan 1925), the latter a short animated film, and both ideologically Manichaean in their association of personal happiness with the adoption of modern farming methods. Levine's textual analysis is not extensive, but then, the films' ideological simplicity does not encourage sophistication. However, it is a pity she does not devote space to "special effects such as dream sequences, microcinematography, and slow- and fast-motion techniques" anywhere in her study (p. 49). Rural audiences' responses to the agricultural film programme were generally not what its organisers intended. They were certainly enthusiastic, but clearly more interested in being entertained and informed about places they had never visited, either in France or overseas, than in prescriptive lectures about French agriculture.

The Ministry of Agriculture's interwar film programme was undoubtedly an "extremely successful cultural phenomenon" and "made a substantial contribution to the establishment of an infrastructure for commercial and non-commercial film distribution in rural France," but ultimately "lost the interest of its viewers" (p. 55). Levine draws similar conclusions about the infrastructural role played by educational film in setting up communication networks in French North, West and Central Africa and French Indochina, and argues that existing scholarship fails to recognize this by crediting Great Britain with the earliest use of film as propaganda in the colonies. A *Mission photographique d'Indochine* that both disseminated propaganda and collected images to be sent back to France was established as early as 1916, an operation then outsourced to a private company (the Société Indochine-Films) in 1924. Indochina which, along with Algeria, was "the region of overseas France that had the most commercial cinemas" (p. 68) became the first colony to have "a bureau of the Ministry of Colonies that was responsible for promoting the colony in France" (p. 64).

However, the assumption of the early 1920s that colonial audiences could be treated like French ones began to dissipate over the decade as commercial cinemas spread throughout Algeria and French Indochina and nationalist movements came into existence in both those colonies. The makers of instructional film learned that in order to fulfil its propagandistic aims with respect to France's overseas empire, their product "must be couched in the guise of an entertaining plot" (p. 78). Although plans for a large-scale centralized network of film distribution for France's colonies were beset by the same problems as in the Hexagon (economic difficulties in the 1930s, and the issue of replacing equipment rendered obsolete by the onset of cinema's sound era) and never materialized, there was a substantial bi-directional flow of images between the Hexagon and

overseas France that Levine sees as paralleling a similar flow between Paris and France's rural regions.

The fifth and sixth chapters of *Framing the Nation* examine how film promoted the regions and colonies within metropolitan France. Levine approaches the first of these topics via a sort of case study of the 1937 Paris Exhibition, whose Tourism Pavilion, Regional Center and Rural Center housed films exhibiting "the beauty and diversity of the French provinces and colonies" on a total of more than forty screens for the six months of the fair's duration (p. 91). The aims behind so doing were to restore national prestige and to (again) encourage a flagging tourist industry, but the strongest ideology motivating the 1937 Exhibition's political agenda was regionalism: for the first time, the regions were, rather than being considered a threat to national unity, "given pride of place on the national stage as necessary repositories of the cultural uniqueness that buttressed that unity" (p.113).

Levine's argument about this is that the new style of promotion of France's regions blurred the dichotomy between tradition and modernization, a new presentation of French Republican nationhood that continued in the French Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair (to which many of the same films were sent) and beyond. Echoes of similarly ambivalent ideology are uncovered by Levine in colonial documentary films' contribution to "nationaliz[ing] the colonial idea" to the population of metropolitan France during the interwar period. Only recently has it become possible to view and study the colonial documentary archive, since "until very recently, no inventory existed of the French National Film Archive's holdings in this area" (p. 118). In her sixth chapter, Levine draws on a range of recent scholarship in political and film history to argue that over the course of the 1930s, specificities local to particular colonies dropped out of documentary representation, to be replaced by grand national themes and a discourse of imperial mastery. She argues convincingly for a previously unexamined parallel between the French civilising mission and the medium of film found in their aspirations to universalism. Just as the Republic claimed to instil universal values, film "imposed a universal visual frame onto the disparate landscapes, peoples and projects that constituted the vast French empire" (p.119).

The French state supported imperialist film propaganda both directly (by producing and distributing it) and indirectly (through financial support for private or commercially sponsored expeditions equipped to film) throughout the interwar period, and colonial documentaries were circulated and exhibited widely, both within France and internationally. The particular films Levine examines in this chapter deal with the region of the French empire she claims has been discussed the least by film historians, French sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Togo and Guinea). Her conclusion about the reception and effects of colonial documentary is that it made a significant contribution to the acceptance of a positive view of French colonization among the general population--the nationalistic imperialism that reached its apogee in the late 1930s. It did this at the expense of "truthful" or ethnographically specific representations of France's colonies, and peddled generalized stereotypes and myths about their inhabitants that led to continuity with the imperial propaganda promoted by the Vichy government from 1940 onwards.

By examining the Vichy propaganda machine in her last chapter, Levine reinforces recent historical scholarship about this continuity, which applied to the prizing of documentary film as a propaganda tool, as well as the promotion of rural and colonial values. Many of Vichy's rhetorical ploys can be shown to have been rehearsed under the Third Republic, in addition to which, actual films were recut, re-edited and recycled in only slightly altered versions. In the last few pages of her book, Levine adopts the metaphor of the "memory box" to describe the role that the documentary film archive can play in the understanding of the development and vicissitudes of the French national narrative between the wars. Although she ends on the limp note of suggesting that contemporary documentary film production (in the twenty-first century's "post-medium" media landscape?) may play the same role for future generations, her study is, taken overall, a sound and carefully-crafted addition to French and film history of the *entre-deux-guerres*, and one that will certainly be of use to scholars and students in these fields.

NOTES

[1] Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

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