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Images of Soviet Colonization in Archival Cinema: “Jews on the Earth” by Abram Room: The 1920s–30s

Abstract

At the turn of the 1930s, the Soviet film industry actively released documentary films about life of remote regions of the country, giving its audience an opportunity to make virtual trips across

the “sixth part of the Earth.” This phenomenon had a political background: unification of leading creative and scientific forces for creation of the screen image of a multi-structured, multinational, and successfully developing socialist country within the frameworks of state project “Cinema Atlas of the USSR.” The article is to introduce into scientific use an archival documentary “Jews on the Earth” (1927) directed by Abram Room, a film telling about the state program for Jewish settlement of the northern Circum-Pontic region. The socio-political, cultural, and ideological context of its creation is analyzed. The study draws on little-known visual and textual archives, as well as on data of the Soviet periodicals and excerpts from the screenwriter V.B. Shklovsky’s theoretical heritage. Due to specifics of silent cinema, the film “Jews on the Earth” is a kind of cinematic text, consisting of approximately equal number of alternating film frames and text credits written by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lily Brick. The film story is a sequence of episodes describing agrarization of the Jewish population, its “exodus” from the destroyed miasteczkos to the fertile southern lands. In the course of the research, it becomes obvious that this film is an example of the propaganda films describing the success of early Soviet colonization projects. The method used by Abram Room when working on the “Jews on the Earth” was a creative combination of the documentary and feature film techniques, allowing the film not just to convey dry information, but also to highlight socio-cultural context of the events. The film’s significance was in its contribution to the visual chronicle of the Soviet colonization and to the development of the myth of existence of the Jewish community in the USSR. It is concluded that this film, even overcoming the frameworks of purely propagandistic narration and becoming an outstanding phenomenon of cinematographic art, remains a significant example of the visual anthropology of the Soviet period, as well as a multilayered historical source that has not lost its relevance for modern scientific study.

Keywords

Archival cinema, Soviet cinema industry, visual anthropology, Abram Room, Cinema-Atlas of the USSR, Jewish settlement of the northern Circum-Pontic region.

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