

**Deborah A. Starr.** *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema*. Stanford, Calif.: University of California Press, 2020. 252 pp.

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In *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema*, Deborah Starr explores the biography and a selection of films by Joseph Elie (Togo) Mizrahi, the pioneering Egyptian cineaste of the 1930s and 1940s. Starr's access to Mizrahi's archive as well as his filmed body of work allows Starr to intervene in and expand understandings of what precisely constituted Egyptian cinema in its early years through reading Mizrahi's films as well as his positionality as an Alexandrian, Jewish, noncitizen Egyptian.

In reclaiming Egyptian cinema's Alexandrian roots, Starr decenters the dominant perception of Cairo as the birthplace and capital of Egyptian cinema. In its first few chapters, *Togo Mizrahi* neatly explains the biographical and institutional histories of Mizrahi's studio and its place within Egyptian cinema history; Starr also discusses the demise of Studio Mizrahi that began in the late 1940s (Mizrahi directed his last Egyptian film in 1946) and ended completely when Mizrahi lost the rights to his films in the 1960s during the Egyptian era of nationalization. The remaining chapters of *Togo Mizrahi* discuss the key films made by Mizrahi over the course of his career, including *al-Manduban* (*The Two Delegates*, 1934) and *Khafir al-Darak* (*The Neighborhood Watchman*, 1936); *Al-Duktur Farhat* (*Dr. Farhat*, 1935) and *Al-'Izz Bahdala* (*Mistreated by Affluence*, 1937); *Layla Mumtira* (*Rainy Night*, 1939) and *Al-Tariq al-mustaqim* (*The Straight Road*, 1943); and, finally, *Layla* (1942) and *Sallama* (1945). Starr uses the paired films in each chapter to explore a specific theme that characterizes Mizrahi's work, such as queerness, national anxiety, and the place of women in society.

Starr's book recuperates this cinematic history through its welcome account of the pluralistic, hugely entertaining, and popular cinema of Mizrahi and, by extension, by making a case for why Mizrahi and other Alexandrians—Jewish, Greek, Italian, or otherwise—of his era were every bit as Egyptian as their citizen compatriots. Starr mobilizes the notion of Levantine to describe Mizrahi and his films, which she distinguishes from the national and the cosmopolitan. Starr argues that the term *cosmopolitan*, which formed the conceptual pivot of her first book, does not effectively capture the kind of pluralistic, playful, urban, yet socially conscious heterogeneity of Mizrahi and his films. Yet, she deploys—and celebrates—alternative concepts such as Levantine or queerness throughout her book without diving into their own complicated histories and ambivalent valences in the present. For example, the term *Levantine* is one that is indeed a recuperative historical critique of the dominant nation-state/sectarian ideology for thinking of the Middle East's entangled histories and a term that has had a particularly resonant history within Israeli academia in terms of destabilizing a dominant Ashkenazi cultural narrative, but it is also, as Rana Issa and Einar Wigen point out, a term that itself bears unpacking as a repository of nostalgia and one that “has yet to be fleshed out and distinguished from the settler colonial contract and its practices of erasing and silencing Arab identity,” which Starr's work elides.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* will undoubtedly be a valuable resource for film scholars and students of early cinema in Egypt and for its contribution to thinking of cinema outside national histories.

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1. Rana Issa and Einar Wigen, “Levantine Chronotopes: Prisms for Entangled Histories,” *Contemporary Levant* 5, no. 1 (2020): 8.