

## More Than Movies: Cinema Petra in Amman During the Mandatory Period

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The movie theatre can be considered as one of various modernizing forces that dramatically transformed Middle Eastern societies in the 20th century. Cinema Petra was the biggest and most important movie theatre in Transjordan throughout the 1930s and 1940s and had a multi-purpose function. It not only screened movies but also served as a place of cultural communication and space for interaction. It was a major place of public gathering and entertainment during the 1930s and early 1940s and became part of the public space needed by Amman's urban elite for their cultural and political activities. Thus the cinema contributed to the emergence of a critical public sphere in the growing young Transjordanian capital.

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The movie theatre can be considered as one of various modernizing forces that dramatically transformed Middle Eastern societies since the turn of the last century. Transjordan was part of this transformation with the advent of modern schooling, local newspapers, broadcasting, instant communication through telegraphs and telephones, and cultural innovations like the gramophone and moving pictures. Cinema Petra was the biggest and most important movie theatre in Transjordan throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Located in Amman, capital of Transjordan, it had a multi-purpose function. It not only

screened movies but also served as a place of cultural communication and space for interaction, with room to host several thousand guests.

The following study of Cinema Petra and its influence on Amman's society focuses on the years of the British Mandate until 1946.<sup>1</sup> Consolidation of Hashemite power in the country along with the emergence of ambitious social groups characterized political, economic and cultural developments during the 1930s and 1940s in Transjordan. The mandate ended shortly before the first Arab-Israeli war and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In the wake of these events, the state not only changed by name—from the Emirate of Transjordan to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—but also expanded its territory and increased in population. The years 1946-48 therefore marked a clear historical caesura for the (Trans-) Jordanian society, as a massive influx of Palestinian refugees and migrants radically altered the social composition (Hanania). Since the 1990s, research interest on Transjordan has increasingly drawn attention to questions of social and socio-economic history, but research on Amman proper is still scarce (Amawi, *State and Class*; Fischbach; Hannoyer and Shami; Rogan and Tell). This study will shed some light on the development of Amman's society through

the lens of Cinema Petra's history and its effects on social and cultural change. This is interesting from several points of view: Firstly, the attendance of movie shows was a sign of emerging mass consumption in the Middle East during this period. Secondly, the cinema showed Arab, European and American films and thus exposed the inhabitants of Amman to different lifestyles and cultural norms. Thirdly, the hall of Cinema Petra served as a central point of public gathering throughout the period described. It witnessed not only movie screenings but served in many instances as a meeting point for political, philanthropic and cultural purposes. The most valuable sources for a study of the different cinematic enterprises in Transjordan are contemporary Arab newspapers, mainly *Filastīn* ("Palestine"), *al-Difā'* ("Defense") and *al-Urdunn* ("Jordan"), in its early days called *al-Urdunn al-Jadīd* ("The New Jordan"). Some studies on the history and social development of Amman also mention those cinemas or quote from conversations with eyewitnesses from those days. The very few memoirs about Amman in the 1930s and 1940s add to these details. These sources tell much about the setting of the movie theatres, the various ways in which the inhabitants of Amman used the cinema, the kind of entertainment of

ferred, and for which other purposes the theatre houses were used.

The evolution of Amman as capital of the new nation state was exceptional, not only seen against the background of semi-colonial state formation by European powers through the treaty of San Remo in 1920, but also due to the fact that the city had been depopulated for several hundred years until the end of the 19th century. Both the Hashemite state and Amman's urban society constituted new elements in the social setting of Transjordan.

nationalists and tribal forces attacking him in raids from the south (Wilson 60-84; Dann 84, 88). By the end of the 1920s, Abdullah had succeeded—though only with strong British support—to neutralize opponents and to consolidate Hashemite reign in Transjordan. A political and economic elite in the country was still to emerge. This process began in the 1930s and accelerated in the 1940s. At the beginning of the 1920s, Transjordan comprised of 300,000 inhabitants, half of which were nomads, while the other half were mainly small-scale cultivators. Illiteracy was widespread and schools did not exist outside the few towns. Amman,

in contrast, hosted merchants, of whom many had emigrated from Palestine and Syria. It was the center of political action in Transjordan and also the place of central power as represented by the Hashemite court and the British residency.

Amman has a long, though not continuous, tradition of settlement starting in prehistoric times. It flourished under different rulers and varying names throughout the centuries, but after the disastrous Mongolian conquest in the 13th century, Amman lost more and more of its importance and was eventually completely abandoned. Natural disasters, mainly earthquakes, decisively contributed to the decay. It remained uninhabited for centuries, though

its lands and springs were used by Bedouin tribes for pasture and cattle raising. The Ottoman power started to pacify the area in the middle of the 19th century. Part of this pacification was the settlement of Caucasian refugees in Amman and other Transjordanian villages beginning in 1878. Thus, Circassians, and from 1907 onwards, Chechens, became the re-founders of the city when they established themselves in the ruins of ancient Amman.

The choice of Amman as the new capital in 1928 was due to several factors: The first was the Hejaz Railway, which had reached the town in 1903 and connected Amman in northern and southern directions. In the early 20th century, the railway station near Amman became the central point for travelling pilgrims on their way to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The construction of the railway led to a first—though still very modest—impetus for the development of the city where merchants and moneylenders from Syria and Palestine settled. Secondly, there was a small airport in Marka, close to Amman, already operating during World War I (Rogan 93). The airdrome was of use for the British striving to control their mandatory area. Equally important was the existence of water: springs in the surrounding mountains and a small river in the city centre supplied the inhabitants of Am-

man with water and allowed for agricultural use of the land (Rifai 137).

Though Amman was a small village during the 1920s, with 2,000 inhabitants in 1921, it grew slowly but steadily during the following years and comprised approximately 20,000 citizens in 1939 (Hacker 56–59).<sup>2</sup> From its early beginnings, Amman's society was composed of different groups of inhabitants with varying national, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Because the city had scarcely been populated before the state formation, its inhabitants were necessarily migrants, either from other parts of the country or from abroad. For this reason, Amman proper did not know a tradition of urban notables comparable to urban centers of Bilad al-Sham. Nevertheless, members of influential families and tribes soon gained important positions in the new state or played a significant role in anti-Hashemite opposition.<sup>3</sup> Even though the social composition of Amman's population was more complex than that of other Transjordanian towns, the influence of conservative tribal values and norms was significant (Alon, "The Tribal System" 216–19).

Parallel to the population growth, new and modern institutions gradually emerged that contributed to the social transformation of the city in particular and the process of nation building in the nascent state

in general. One such institution was the cinema. It was in principle open to everyone and permitted autonomous access to information and entertainment even for those who were illiterate.<sup>4</sup> As a place of public gathering, it became one of the central meeting points for an emerging urban elite. What Vanessa Schwartz has described as the "interlocking relations between the boulevard and the press" in late 19th century Paris also holds true for the example of the cinema in Amman: "[It] created a culture in which individuals from different classes and of both sexes were expected to derive pleasure from the same sights and experiences" (16). This was new for Transjordan, where such elements of a mass consumer culture were still to emerge.

In general, Palestinian and Syrian immigrants dominated the local economy until the 1930s, while farming remained a Circassian domain. This Palestinian and Syrian economic dominance can be seen on the numerous leasing documents from the period showing that many of the shops, storerooms, restaurants and also movie theatres in the commercial centre in old downtown were run by Arab immigrants from Greater Syria and Palestine (Rafi' 65–86). Smaller groups of migrants came from the Hijaz, Iran or Uzbekistan. In addition, there was internal migration of native

Transjordanians to the city. In particular, families from Salt, the former provincial centre, chose to establish themselves in the city, a trend that continued well into the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1930s, landless migrants from Palestine settled in Amman, as did merchants from Najd on the Arabian Peninsula after the pacification of the Transjordanian-Saudi border (Hacker 35). The 1930s and 1940s witnessed increasing building activities that produced new housing types. The houses were built for wealthy middle-class residents and their nuclear families, and marked a turning-away from traditional housing designed for extended families. Thus, the gradual social change of the urban population was also reflected in a new building trend (Wood 18-21).

During the mandate period, Amman's social fabric underwent a deep transformation, with the emergence of an urban constituency (Droz-Vincent 13). Under the influence of modernizing institutions, Amman's citizens were not exclusively confined to ancient identities, as the predominant tribal population structure of Transjordan would have suggested, but were able to redefine their interests and organize themselves along different and overlapping identities (Robins 44). Such developments included the establishment

of religious and ethnic clubs, sports clubs, welfare societies, and the running of cafés and restaurants where men—but not women—could meet and converse. In addition, immigrants from Palestine operated a printing press and edited a local newspaper, *al-Urdunn* ("Jordan"). The education system, which had hitherto mainly relied on traditional Islamic *kuttāb* schools teaching only basic reading and writing, now improved. Government as well as private engagement enabled gifted Transjordanian students to pursue their studies in Palestine, Syria or Lebanon (*Filastīn* 26 July 1926, 18 June 1938, 8 Mar. 1941; *al-Difā'* 15 Aug. 1935; *al-Urdunn* 1 Dec. 1940).

### The Arab Cinema

In 1895, the Lumière brothers introduced a new and exciting medium to the public: the cinematograph, a machine that was both a camera and a projector. This marked the birth of moving pictures, which have fascinated a worldwide audience ever since. The success of movies was from its beginning not confined to the Western world. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that the Arab world was almost from the very beginning part of the worldwide audience of moving pictures. The first public movie screenings in the Arab world took place in 1896 and 1897 in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. In 1900, the

world of moving pictures reached Palestine through the screening of films at the Europa Hotel in Jerusalem (Shafik 10). In the Middle East, the cinema contributed to the acceleration of social change in the 20th century, as did the railway, the telegraph, the press and the radio.<sup>5</sup> The screening of movies introduced hitherto unknown subjects, lifestyles and social norms to the spectators. This does not, of course, only apply to the audience in the Arab world but to all cultural surroundings. However, movies as "urban spectacle" (Schwartz 3) supported a process of individualization and diversity accompanying the shaping of modernity in the Arab world. This process had already been triggered before, but the interwar period witnessed new kinds of entertainment and mass consumption, and a different notion of leisure time.

As an unprecedented crossroads of key elements associated with modern life, cinema combined a technological attempt to transform reality into spectacle with an audience of spectators gathered as an undifferentiated and constantly changing mass audience (Schwartz 200).

Ever since, the compatibility of cinematic entertainment with Arab and Muslim norms and values has been a subject of debate: "Arab cinema is frequently criticized as evidence of Westernization and

acculturation. [...] [It] raises questions about authenticity and acculturation, tradition, and alienation, and the roots of these relations and ideas" (Shafik 4). However, the Arab world gradually adopted the new medium, picking up on timeless subjects such as romance but also contributing to the ongoing anti-colonial debates and the shaping of political opinion, thereby producing new images of itself (Shafik 11-18).

#### **Public Space and National Representation in the Capital**

Since the 19th century, Middle Eastern urban centers such as Cairo, Damascus and Rabat had experienced the outcomes of Western town planning. European architects implemented their ideas of modern towns away from the traditional old cities, thereby decisively transforming the economic and social lives of their inhabitants. Amman, in contrast, did not become such a "colonial city" because it was so scarcely populated when the British arrived. Therefore, the mandatory power saw no need to 'organize' an oriental city or to redirect town development towards more 'modern', i.e. Western, forms of town planning. However, there was a clear tendency in Amman to install elements of the modern nation state. National symbols underlining the aspired new common identity of the people became visible on many occa-

sions. Both the Hashemite court and the British residency supported this process. This creation—or construction—of a uniting national identity went hand in hand with the emergence of public places. There were, however, no public buildings or officially designated indoor places for public events. Therefore, venues for public gathering in Amman were mostly private premises, like cinemas, hotels, schools or simply private houses, which, for example, hosted literary circles.

Despite this, the rulers used the streets and squares of the city to present themselves and to represent the new nation. Amman witnessed organized military parades, public receptions of high-ranking official guests, and celebrated historical events that were important to Arab nationalism<sup>6</sup> and to Transjordan's identity as a nation state. On such occasions, the inhabitants of the city decorated their houses, went out to greet the official foreign guests, or just enjoyed themselves at the various entertainments, which were organized by the municipality or by the Hashemite court. Other examples were the street parades that were regularly held to commemorate religious festivities like *'Id al-Adhā*, the Muslim feast of immolation.<sup>7</sup> The frequent pro-Palestinian protest demonstrations and strikes of the 1930s were

another sign of a new use of space by the population creating a new sense of collectivity among the people. The growth of Amman, combined with new means of entertainment, the emergence of mass consumption, and growing political sentiments of Arab nationalism contributed to the gradual emergence of a public sphere where citizens came together for collective leisure activities, discussion and social activities. In this respect, Amman did not substantially differ from Arab urban centers like Beirut or Damascus even though its number of inhabitants was much smaller (Skovgaard-Petersen 12-15).

#### **The Cinema in Transjordan**

The owners of Cinema Petra were both Christians, as was the editor of *al-Urdunn*, the local newspaper. The latter had moved to Amman from Palestine, while the owners of Cinema Petra were Syrians by origin. The causes for the Christian dominance in the Palestinian press can be traced back to developments in the Ottoman Empire and Western missionary activities in the 19th century. Political, cultural and religious resentments had for a long time deterred Ottoman rulers from the establishment of the printing press (Shomali 225-28). Books in Arabic were imports from Western countries brought to the East. In 1846, French missionaries brought the first print-

ing press to Jerusalem. The Palestinian press began to flourish after the Ottoman reforms of 1908 and stayed mainly in the hands of Greek Orthodox Christians for many years to come (Ayalon 57-59). The running of cinemas, in contrast, was not confined to the Christian minority, while religious restrictions were behind the fact that bars and alcohol-serving restaurants in Transjordan were always owned by Christians.<sup>8</sup> The running of the entertainment business in the city was therefore a Christian affair, but Cinema Petra was frequented by all inhabitants of the city regardless of their creed, as will be shown below.

The movie theatres of Amman symbolized the advent of a modern institution in a rather conservative surrounding. Various reports of enthusiastic approval of the cinema by the public suggest that this new institution gained wide acceptance. This enthusiasm stood partly in contrast to the quality of the shows, which were at times described as somewhat pathetic. In addition, we can read complaints about the high entrance fees, which were twice as much as those at the cinema in Haifa (Malkawi 153). While Palestinian cinemas like the one in Haifa translated foreign films for the audience, the Transjordanians had to watch them in their original language. This did not prevent them from flocking to the

pictures, however. "The story of Amman's early cinemas is a story of a city entering modernity with new emerging public spaces of sociability and entertainment" (Daher 31). The first movie theatre in Amman, owned by Rushdi al-Şafadi and called *al-Sharq al-'Arabī* ("Arab East"),<sup>9</sup> was set up in 1925, screening films in open-air performances (*al-Urdunn* 27 Mar. 1926, 8 May 1926). The first movie theatre building was realized in 1929 by the Syrian Abu Sayah al-Qabbani, owner of Cinema Nasr.<sup>10</sup> It was amazingly spacious and could host up to 1000 people. Cinema Nasr screened silent movies, both Arab and foreign (Rashid 245-46; Abu Ghanima 86; Ayoub). Among those films were the early works of Charlie Chaplin and Hollywood productions with cowboy subjects, which drew the attention of the inhabitants of Amman. This was parallel to developments in the Levant where these American-style films also attracted the masses (Thompson 91). The silent movies were accompanied—as in Europe—by live music, performed by a three-man band. The show took place every evening, with night shows on weekends.

One of the very few memoirs of Amman written by a woman is the one by Najmiyya Hikmat, who tells about her visit to Cinema Nasr when she was a child. She recounts the wide space inside the house giving

room for many people, the band playing from behind the screen, and that a Charlie Chaplin film was screened that day (27). Due to the shortage of electricity supply, Cinema Nasr had its own generator to secure the functioning of the necessary technical devices (Ayoub).<sup>11</sup> The end of this first cinema project came in 1934 when Cinema Petra opened its doors to the public. A third movie theatre, Cinema al-Imara, was opened in the early 1940s, also run by a Syrian (Rashid 246; Abu Ghanima 90). It screened open-air shows during summer time. The novelist 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, who has described his childhood in Amman in the 1930s and 1940s, recalls such open-air-sessions during the summer attracting crowds of people. Some of them paid the entrance fee while others preferred to watch the films for free from outside, sitting on the pavement (175-76). The owners of Cinema al-Imara finally placed a thick curtain in order to hide the screen from outside spectators.

### Cinema Petra

The 1930s were crucial for the constitution of a public discourse on political and social issues in Transjordan. The central power in Amman now controlled all parts of the country and was able to contain the power of rebelling tribal sheikhs (Alon, "Tribal Shaykhs" 77). But the colonial expe-

rience in the Arab world and developments in Palestine, especially after the beginning of the revolt in 1936, had a strong influence on the political atmosphere in the country. Strikes, demonstrations and political statements in favor of the Palestinian cause were frequent.<sup>12</sup> The inhabitants of Amman and other towns in Transjordan engaged in charity work and the collection of donations to support the victims in Palestine (*al-Urdunn* 29 June 1936; *Filastin* 25 June 1935, 1 and 11 July 1936). The circulation of the Palestinian press in Transjordan contributed to a growing political consciousness among the citizens. Another source of discontent was the difficult economic condition in the 1930s sparked by consecutive years of drought (Amdouny 134-37).

It was during those troubled times that Cinema Petra, deriving its name from the famous Nabataean city of Petra in the south of (Trans-) Jordan, was set up on Basman Street by Wadi As'ad and Tawfiq Qattan.<sup>13</sup> The theatre soon got ahead of its competitor and became the most popular movie theatre in town. But its success was not only due to the film business but also to its function as a public venue. The inhabitants of Amman used it not only for entertainment, but assembled in its premises for social, cultural and political purposes. Throughout the 1930s and early

1940s, it became a major place of public gathering and amusement and one of the central places of public space in Amman.

#### Cultural, Political and Philanthropic Activities

The hall of Cinema Petra was used for various events of public interest. People from different ethnic or religious backgrounds regularly gathered in the cinema, guided by common interest and thus partly overcoming traditional bindings of religion, family or tribe that dominated society in Transjordan. The Christian minority, which comprised approximately eight percent of Amman's population, used the hall of Cinema Petra repeatedly for festivities of their religious schools. However, these events were by no means confined to members of their own creed, but also open to the Muslim inhabitants of the city (*al-Urdunn* 23 July 1939, 11 July 1943).

The cinema also connected the Transjordanians to cultural developments in the Arab region through films and singers, mainly from Egypt and Syria. Many of the very successful films of the time, mostly directed by Egyptian producers, found an audience at Cinema Petra. Until the 1950s, when the majority of Arab states had become independent from former colonial or mandate rule, Egypt was the only Arab country with nameable film

producing companies and film directors (Shafik 9). Like other Arab countries, Transjordan did not have local film production until the late 1950s. This fact is reflected in the selection of films screened at Cinema Petra, which were either Egyptian or US productions.

In addition, theatre companies came to town to perform in front of enthusiastic audiences, and music shows entertained the public. A film with the music of the famous Egyptian singer and actor Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab attracted the masses in 1934. This film, called *Al-Warda al-Bayḍā'* ("The White Rose," Egypt 1933), was directed by the Egyptian Muhammad Karim and tells the story of an unfulfilled love between a servant and the daughter of his wealthy employer. The white rose here is a symbol for the pureness and decency of this love. The use of such symbols, as Violà Shafik has pointed out, was a new and innovative element of cultural expression in Arabic arts (60-61).

*Qays wa Laylā* ("Qays and Layla," Egypt 1934), screened in 1941, is another example of a film depicting a passionate but sad love story. The plot refers to an age-old famous Arabic love story that has inspired countless storytellers, authors and filmmakers throughout the Arab world and beyond.

While the Egyptian film *Intiṣār al-Shabāb* ("Triumph of the Youth"), produced in 1940 and screened the same year in Amman (*al-Urdunn* 1 Dec. 1940), also touched on the pitfalls of love and desire, it is more revealing to look at the role of the female singer and dancer in this musical, embodied by Asmahan al-Atrash,<sup>14</sup> sister of famous Druze singer Farid al-Atrash. The two siblings, Druzes and originally from Syria but living in Egypt since the failed Druze revolt in Syria in the mid-1920s, acted and sang in this musical film, representing themselves as artists in Cairo. The positive depiction of the artist's life in bars and night-clubs marked a breach with long-established moral resentments against this kind of profession, especially for women (Moubayed 522-23). Cinema Petra also served as a music hall. In 1940, the Palestinian Broadcasting Band performed in Amman, accompanied by the band of the Arab Legion in addition to Arab singers—including a woman—and local schoolboys. This concert was broadcasted by the Palestinian radio station and was the first transmission from Transjordan (*al-Urdunn* 1 Apr. 1940). The Palestinian Broadcasting Band in cooperation with the Transjordanian ministry of culture also organized a children's party at the cinema (Abu Ghanima 90). In 1943, the popular musician Farid

al-Atrash performed live at Cinema Petra (*Filastīn* 27 Nov. 1943).

Actors and actresses from Egypt and Syria arrived in town to stage their plays. They introduced another modern form of cultural expression, owing their success in large parts to the fact that they were far beyond any local production (Landau 94). Ramsis, one of Egypt's most famous theatre companies and led by Yusuf Wahbi (81-83), arrived in Amman in 1938 for a three-day visit at Cinema Petra, and again in 1942 (*Filastīn* 24 Apr. 1938; *al-Difā'* 2 Apr. 1942). Like in other countries, the fact of females acting on stage was impressive because this kind of profession was usually regarded as immoral (Landau 76). Local performances carried more of the characteristics of amateur theatre (Rashid 246).<sup>15</sup> Transjordanian schoolboys and boy scouts presented their own theatre plays. In 1941, young men from Amman performed the Arab play *Fatḥ al-Andalus* ("The Conquest of al-Andalus," 1931) written by Fu'ad al-Khatib. Among the actors was Sulayman al-Nabulsi, who became Jordan's Prime Minister in the 1950s (Abu Ghanima 89). The author, al-Khatib, was a prominent figure of the pre-war nationalist movement and had been close to the Hashemites ever since. He lived at the court of the Amir, who himself loved Arab literature and poetry and had a literary sa-

lon (Hannoyer 32-33). The Amir's literary salon was another place where cultural activities unfolded; however, it was private, in contrast to public places like Cinema Petra or Hotel Philadelphia, which was another important venue for public events. In addition, the Amir's salon was directly linked to the state and not an institution driven by citizens' involvement and engagement, as was Cinema Petra.

The charity organization *al-Jam'iyya al-Khayriyya*, founded in 1941 by Shukri Bek Sha'sha'a, the Transjordanian Minister of Defense and Interior, also convened at Cinema Petra. The organization was active in supporting the destitute part of the population in Amman (*Filastīn* 20 Dec. 1940, 2 Mar. 1941). Among other activities, it paid the hospital bills for those who could not afford medical treatment, supported students from Transjordan at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, and maintained an asylum for the poor (*al-Urdunn* 2 Mar. 1942). On the occasion of 'Īd al-Adhā 1940, it announced the collection of donations for its activities, thus connecting the traditional Muslim religious duty of *zakāt* with modern forms of charity work (*al-Urdunn* 27 Jan. 1940). A festivity organized by the organization in March 1941 brought together the elite of Amman, merchants, students and officials from the government.

They listened to music played by the Palestinian Broadcasting Band, the music corps of the Arab Legion. Later, Fakhri al-Barudi, a well-known nationalist from Syria, spoke to the public (*al-Urdunn* 10 Mar. 1941). From then on, the charity organization planned such a festivity on a yearly basis and always convened at Cinema Petra (e.g. *al-Urdunn* 15 Dec. 1942).

When the theatre company with the well-known actress Nadia arrived in town together with fifty actors and actresses to stage a nationalist play at Cinema Petra, the charity organized a singing and dancing party for the public accompanying the performance. The proceeds went to the poor of Amman (*al-Urdunn* 6 Nov. 1941), while the company itself donated its takings from the ticket sales.<sup>16</sup> The play had an educational tenor, telling the people about the virtues of democracy and the fight of an oppressed country against a tyrannous force. A film about Mecca and the Hajj, screened in 1942, is another example of the educational function that the cinema fulfilled (*al-Urdunn* 3 May 1942). In 1946, the charity demonstrated its commitment to the Palestinian national cause by participating in a festivity, organized by the municipality of Amman and a Palestinian committee from Haifa, for the support of orphans in Palestine. The organizers collected donations from the inhabitants

of Amman, the Arab Legion played, and a lottery under the auspice of Amir Abdullah took place in the hall of Cinema Petra (*al-Difā'* 14 and 15 Apr. 1946).<sup>17</sup> In 1944, the Islamic College in Amman held a celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday at Cinema Petra. The guests who filled the seats of the cinema were all members of the political and economic elite of the country. Their generous donations to the amount of 5000 Palestinian pounds were designed for a new school building (*al-Urdunn* 14 Mar. 1944).

Other events held at Cinema Petra were literary competitions or remembrances of the deceased. Some of these obsequies, like the ones for King Ali and King Husain in 1935 (*Filastīn* 27 Mar. 1935; *al-Difā'* 2 June 1935), were reminiscent of the Hashemite efforts to establish a Greater Arab state. They were part of the Hashemite aspiration to legitimate their rule in the emirate and their pan-Arab endeavors. The festivities in 1942 for the remembrance of the revolt may serve as an example of such attempts to construct a national Transjordanian identity in connection with Hashemite rulership in Transjordan. Amman, capital of the emirate, was decorated with flowers and flags on this occasion, the Amir spoke to the crowds lining the streets, and the mayor of Amman invited more than 3,000 official guests to a cele-

bration that was held at the hall of Cinema Petra. This huge number indicates how spacious Cinema Petra in fact was. The band of the Arab Legion played and poets recited from their work stressing the national overtone of the event (*al-Urdunn* 24 Aug. 1942). Thus, such commemorations contributed to the construction of a national identity in Transjordan, and they largely benefited from Cinema Petra as the central public space in town.

Another political event was the reception of Sultan al-Atrash, leader of the Druze revolt in Syria in 1937. He was greeted by rejoicing masses on the streets. A festivity to honor the guest with 1500 participants was organized in the hall of Cinema Petra (*al-Difā'* 16 and 19 May 1937). In 1940, all students of the country were invited to gather for a festivity at Cinema Petra in order to support the Palestinian national cause. The Arab Legion played and the director of the education department held a speech (*al-Difā'* 7 Apr. 1940).

Shortly after the Second World War, Said Ramadan<sup>18</sup> came to Amman to attract the Transjordanians to the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. He lectured on the religious and political ideas of the movement at Cinema Petra. 'Abd al-Rahman Munif recalls the event as follows:

When he [Sa'id Ramadan] gave one of his scheduled speeches, the Petra

Cinema would be thronged by young and old. Even those who avoided the cinema because they considered it to be corrupt pushed and shoved others to get in so that they could listen to the orator who knew how to excite people and appeal to their emotions. (251-52)

This speech, as Munif remembers, gave a boost to the efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood in Transjordan, who had set up their first office in the emirate in 1945.

#### Morals, Gender and the Cinema

Romantic love and forbidden relationships have always been among the prominent subjects of the film industry from the very beginning, regardless of the creator's origin. Such love stories sometimes met the moral resistance of more conservative parts of society and the religiously learned, as had been reported from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria (Shafik 49). 'Abd al-Rahman Munif mentions such resentments that parts of society showed towards the cinema in Transjordan (Munif 252). Nevertheless, with the exception of Wahhabi '*'ulamā'* in Saudi Arabia, there was no fundamental rejection of movies grounded on Islamic aniconism by Muslim scholars and the issue of exposing people did not arouse religious resentment.

Others criticized the owners of Cinema Petra for completely different reasons: they accused them of being "too much interested in their own profit" and "not caring about the national interest" (*al-Jazeera* 11 Jan. 1940). The reason behind such criticism was the fact that Qattan and As'ad had screened *Marie Antoinette* (USA 1938) in the building of the Arab Legion in Marka, circumventing the payment of the custom duty (*al-Jazeera* 11 Jan. 1940; Abu Ghanima 91).<sup>19</sup> This is an interesting point because it shows that the cinema business was a profitable economic undertaking closely watched by the community.

Another element of Cinema Petra's modernizing force was the fact that it was also open to the female populace. In the beginning, the movie theatre held a special show for the women of Amman once a week. Later, Cinema Petra provided for separate space for men and women, thus enabling both sexes to watch a movie at the same time, and occasionally offered special shows for women (Ayoub). This stood in contrast to the Syrian and Lebanese example of cinemas created exclusively for a female audience (Thompson 95). The much smaller potential audience in Amman can presumably explain this difference and it is argued here that the population of Am-

man was simply not big enough to make a women's cinema profitable.

Some of the films and theatre shows staged at Cinema Petra depicted a very different role for women than the traditional one. They contradicted long-established moral values about female behavior. *Intiṣār al-Shabāb* is an example of a film presenting women with "dubious professions" as singers or dancers in a positive way (Moubayed 522-23). Such films, watched by a large and enthusiastic audience, reflected a changing notion of female appearance in public and the role of women in society.

Another sign of changing role perceptions was the growing female participation in charity activities. In 1938, a group of women from Amman staged a play—in this case for an exclusive female audience—and donated the profit to the poor of the town (*al-Urdunn* 13 Apr. 1938). The English Girls' School staged a theatre show in 1943, performing for a mixed audience, made up of—among others—members of the government and other influential personalities of the town (*Filastīn* 22 July 1943).<sup>20</sup>

The Transjordanian Women's Union, founded in 1945 by Amira Zain (the wife of Amir Talal, son of Abdullah) and Emily Bisharat, in addition to the wives of many influential notables of Amman, used Cin-

ema Petra for its annual festivities (*Filastîn* 27 Feb. 1945, 4 Sept. 1945, 6 Mar. 1946). While Amira Zain was a Muslim, Emily Bisharat came from a Christian family. As the example of the Transjordanian Women's Union shows, there were no religious barriers preventing participation in such welfare activities.

Their activities reflect a growing interest of Amman's women to take part in public life. Again, this development was parallel to that in other Arab countries and had its roots in the social and political transformations of the mandate years. In addition, as Elisabeth Thompson points out, "[...] the war had mobilized women in philanthropic organizations" (98). Such philanthropic ambitions were also part of the elite formation in the city. Ellen Fleischmann describes a very similar situation for Palestine, and Amman's female populace was no different in this respect (96). It was attached to a trend measurable in the whole region during that period. Transjordan in general and Amman in particular were not distant, isolated places, but stood in close relation with regional political, economic and social developments.

### Conclusion

The political and economic transformation that Transjordan underwent during the years of the British mandate necessarily

influenced the process of social change in the country and in Amman. Cinema Petra as a site for communication is but only one example of this gradual social change in the city. Other important institutions fostering this transformation were schools such as the Bishop's School that opened its doors in 1936, the Islamic College and the Arts and Crafts School (Amadouny 155-57), the Arab Legion that provided job chances for young men and the numerous government departments and government-related establishments that implemented state authority in the whole country through modern administration. Cinema Petra served a variety of purposes. It was not only a movie theatre but also a place of public gathering. People from different backgrounds assembled in its hall for varying reasons. While some sought recreation and entertainment, others were inspired by social responsibility or were driven by political conviction. Cinema Petra played an important role for the cultural development of the city through the numerous literary events that were held there. Both guests from other Arab countries and local artists entertained with recitations from their works. Cinema Petra thus became part of the public space needed by Amman's inhabitants for their cultural and political activities and may be understood as an indicator of the devel-

opment of Amman's urban society. The manifold uses of the theatre crosscut boundaries of class and gender. On the one hand, it was a place where the urban elite could represent themselves through various cultural and philanthropic activities and where discussions of common concern could unfold. On the other hand, with its movie shows it welcomed all inhabitants of the city regardless of social origin, provided they could pay the entrance fee.

The various social events held at Cinema Petra reflected the growing collective responsibility and simultaneously the shifting identities of Amman's citizens. Amman's merchants, politicians and landowners were the key actors of national affairs. Using Cinema Petra's spacious assembly hall, they started to organize themselves politically, culturally and philanthropically. Muslims and Christians came together for rituals like obsequies, thus blurring religious boundaries. Innovative cultural experiences with educational or political undertones triggered the integration of regional trends. The inhabitants of Amman developed a public discourse on cultural, social, economic and political issues connecting them with the broader Arab public sphere and its centers in Cairo, Damascus, Beirut and Baghdad. This discourse is reflected in the

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various events held at Cinema Petra. With the introduction and incorporation of modernizing institutions both from regional Arab and Western culture and the gradual formation of collective action, the emerging urban elite became the agents of a broader social and political transformation process.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cinema Petra existed well beyond the end of the mandate but the 1930s and 1940s were clearly its golden years. Later, competing cinematic enterprises like Rainbow Cinema on Jabal Amman—which still exists today—were more attractive to audiences, and other places and options for public gathering and the dissemination of information emerged.

<sup>2</sup> All numbers, however, are estimates because no official census was conducted.

<sup>3</sup> Among those were the Circassian Al-Mufti family residing in Amman, the Al-Majali from Karak, the Al-Tall from Irbid, or the Tarawnah tribe, the latter acting as part of the small nationalist opposition with its slogan "Transjordan for the Transjordanians" (Robins 45).

<sup>4</sup> At that time, the majority of the Transjordanian population was illiterate or nearly illiterate. However, this fact did not necessarily mean that they were not informed. In fact, newspapers were read out loud in many Arab cities in cafés and other public places for those who could not read them themselves (see Ayalon 4). For an analysis of the importance of coffee houses in Jordan see al-Muslih; and Daher 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> Broadcasting in the region started rather late with Radio Cairo in 1934 and the first transmissions from Palestine in 1936.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the evolution and different notions of nationalism in the Arab world during the first half of the 20th century, see Jankowski and Gershoni (100-106).

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Urdunn* 11 Jan. 1930 (festivity of the Arab renaissance), 15 Oct. 1930 (return of Amir Talal from a trip to Cyprus), 16 Dec. 1930 (arrival of King Husayn ibn 'Ali); *Filastīn* 19 July 1934, 21 July 1934 (celebration of Amir Abdullah's return from Great Britain); *al-Difā'* 28 Oct. 1934 and *Filastīn* 25 Nov. 1934 (celebration of Amir Talal's wedding); *al-Urdunn* 7 Aug. 1935 and *Filastīn* 17 Aug. 1935 (visit of Amir Saud ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz); *Filastīn* 24 Sept. 1939 (festivity of the Arab renaissance); *al-Urdunn* 18 Oct. 1942 (festivity at the end of Ramadan); *al-Urdunn* 24 May 1942 (celebration of Arab independence). Eugene Rogan has already pointed to the fact that the new state tried to exhibit its national identity through symbolic acts on the streets of Amman (100-106).

<sup>8</sup> Alcohol consumption is forbidden by Islamic law.

<sup>9</sup> Arabic name of the new state of Transjordan.

<sup>10</sup> Later, Qabbani was joined by a Sharabji as second owner (*al-Urdunn* 6 Aug. 1930).

<sup>11</sup> Amman did not have a central power plant until the late 1930s and electrical supply came from generators run by individuals.

<sup>12</sup> For the development of Transjordan's public opinion on regional and national politics in the 1930s see Kharaysat.

<sup>13</sup> The two, who were Christians of Syrian origin, also planned to open a wine and dancing bar in downtown Amman close to Husseini Mosque (*Filastīn* 3 May 1934).

<sup>14</sup> For a biography of Asmahan, see Zuhur.

<sup>15</sup> For a list of various theatre plays that were staged in Amman during that period, see Malkawi 154-55.

<sup>16</sup> The municipality announced a sum of 140 Palestinian pounds, which went to the charity (*al-Urdunn* 28 Dec. 1941).

<sup>17</sup> While Islamic law contradicts raffles and lotteries, they were quite frequent during these days in Transjordan, which hints at the fact that religious resentment against lotteries was unknown then.

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→ <sup>18</sup> Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was Said Ramadan's father-in-law. For decades, Ramadan was an activist of the movement and its judicial adviser. Maan Abu Nowar gives an earlier date for Ramadan's visit to Amman. He dates it to 1943 (114-15). However, most of the research on the Islamist movement in (Trans-) Jordan indicates that this branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1945. Therefore, Munif's dating carries more plausibility.

<sup>19</sup> The tax exemption resulted from the military status of the Arab Legion base in Marka.

<sup>20</sup> The English Girls' School was run by the British Church Missionary Society.

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