The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm—a world view transformed into an objective force.


Before tens of thousands of spectators on a summer evening in 1933, challenging the luminous stars with its electric beams, The Romance of a People proclaimed America and the Jewish Nation as twin pillars of democracy. A colossal, technologically spectacular pageant featuring huge stage structures and properties, elaborate costumes, amplified voices and music, and a cast of thousands, The Romance of a People represented a worldview both embedded in Western discourses and optimistically and dynamically engaged by North American Jewish nationalists. As the thrilling highlight of Jewish Day, designated as 3 July 1933 by Chicago World’s Fair organizers, The Romance was a whole “weltanschauung”—an ordering of the world and a proposal of a new Jewish place within it, “actualized in the material realm” (Debord [1967] 1994:13).

Figure 1. To accommodate an over-capacity crowd, seats were added to Soldier Field’s greensward until the distinction between performers on the playing space and spectators amassed on the field was considerably blurred. (Courtesy of Renee Matthews Engerman)

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The Romance of a People’s executive producer, Meyer Weisgal, then the Zionist Organization of America’s executive director of activities for the Midwest, understood the potential of a spectacular dramatic production to manifest a new view of Jewish destiny and in so doing, to revive a political movement. Dubbed a “Zionist impresario” by Jeffrey Shandler (2001:54), Weisgal stood up to dissenters in his own Zionist organization, claiming that pageantry had the power to resurrect an apathetic Jewish community in Chicago and a struggling North American Zionist movement as a whole. Weisgal argued in his autobiography, as he recalled his detractors’ resistance to theatrical productions, that, unlike the long speeches favored by Zionist activists, the elements of spectacular theatrical display could not only introduce Zionist ideas, but also rouse emotional support for those ideas (1971:106–15).

At the time of the pageant’s performance in 1933, however, Zionism was an unstable political movement and Weisgal’s proposal to represent Jewry as a national entity was contentiously debated among religious and social leaders, as well as journalists in the Chicago Jewish community. Weisgal noted that planning the pageant as the major representation of Jewry at the World’s Fair was delayed because of debates about the nature of Jewish identity itself. Weisgal overcame such arguments by envisioning a large-scale live performance that “would have something for everybody, Zionists, non-Zionists, the religious, the nationalists, everybody” (1971:109). As explained in descriptions of each of its episodes in the official pageant program, The Romance would interweave stories from the Bible and Jewish ritual, Hassidic revelry and Zionist jubilee (CJHS [1933] 2000a:17–19). And because its impressive choral dances, operatic voices, thundering horses, beating drums, and flower-strewing maidens would appeal so favorably to the senses while moving the narrative toward its triumphant finale, the audience would not fixate on Jewish characters, but on Jewish action. For Weisgal, those who identified themselves as “Jewish”—either by genealogy, religious belief, or ethnic nostalgia—could attach to Zionism as a thrilling Jewish-initiated project to civilize a new frontier.

The Romance of a People was the gargantuan headliner at the culmination of Jewish Day—a day designated at the Century of Progress World’s Fair just as other days had been focused on celebrating other national ethnic collectives that summer, such as Swedish Day on 19 June 1933, the first day of a week devoted to celebrating Scandinavian peoples, and Polish Day, held on 22 July 1933, which also culminated in a spectacular pageant. Jewish Day unfolded at the Fair through the energizing force of performance. Events scheduled prior to the pageant itself included athletic contests and marching drills executed by Jewish youth groups dressed in white and blue—the colors of pre-state Jewish Palestine—who formed a giant Star of David and sang newly created Hebrew folk songs as their finale. These warm-up events to the pageant presented an eye-opening view of a new sort of Jewish subject undertaking entirely unique performances of Jewish action in the world.

Like other cultural Zionists, Weisgal envisioned a new generation of Jews whose agricultural labor would re-form them physically and spiritually. This generation would serve as a living counterargument to traditional anti-Jewish criticism of Diaspora Jewry as weak and unwilling to contribute its own labor to national host communities. Jews were often characterized according to these discourses as feeding off the labor of others; Jewish men were frequently depicted as

1. The pageant program was reprinted in a limited edition by the Chicago Jewish Historical Society in 2000. It includes additional introductory material by the Society’s President William Roth, but otherwise faithfully reproduces the original program. The CJHS commemorated the pageant that year, organizing speakers that included Jewish American culture scholar Brandeis Prof. Stephen Whitfield and Chicago actress Renee Matthews, the daughter of Cantor Avrum Matthews who was a soloist in the pageant. During the commemoration, Whitfield addressed a crowd of about 400. Some of his remarks were reprinted in a CJHS newsletter also published in 2000: “How does a weak and often despised minority petition the public for a redress of grievances? Occasionally the answer is: through spectacle. For among the curios of American Jewish culture was an effort to quicken ethnic and political consciousness and to inspire moral support from the general community through the presentation of pageants” (CJHS 2000b).
effeminate in late 19th- and early 20th-century anthropological and medical reports created by both Jews and non-Jews. Jewish males’ small chest sizes, flat feet and propensity to be afflicted by illnesses such as neurasthenia and hysteria, were quantified and attributed to qualities of “weakness” most often connected with women (Hoedl 1997:3–6).

Zionism quite purposefully tried to replace these representations with images of strong, hardworking young Jewish pioneers — chalutzim and chalutzot — who would totally refigure the Jewish body individually and collectively. Zionist agricultural workers according to Zionist projections, for example, would bring forth food from the desert of Eretz Israel in diametric opposition to anti-Jewish accusations. Zionists had long argued for the regeneration of the Jewish body through participation in sports and physical labor. By the early 20th century, several Zionist youth organizations had emerged, such as Maccabi Hatza’ir (Young Maccabees), founded in Germany in 1926 with a focus on sports, and the oldest Jewish youth movement in the United States, Young Judea, founded by the Zionist Organization of America in 1909 to encourage both the spiritual and physical development of its members.

This new Jewish figuration was featured at the World’s Fair. Not only did Jewish youth exhibit new Jewish folk dances in the Hall of Science courtyard following the track and field events of Jewish Day, but Jewish pioneers were also depicted by the pageant chorus for The Romance of a People’s final episode. According to the description of this episode in the pageant synopsis, after “immense waves of the American flag pass[ed] in light effects through the chorus” the unseen Voice intoned “the renewal of the promise to Israel: ‘Be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create...For behold I create a Jerusalem rejoiceing...And the voice of weeping shall be heard no more in her...And they shall build houses and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit thereof...and long enjoy the work of their hands’” (CJHS [1933] 2000a:19). At this point the chorus repeated the words “the work of their hands” as they entered from various points of the brightly illuminated field. Singing the Zionist pioneer folksong “Anu banu artza, livnot ulehibanot” (“We have come to this land to build it and be rebuilt”), this “World Army of Universal Peace” “mov[ed] in tides toward Palestine rebuilt” (19). Thus, young Jewish pioneers circumscribed the pageant’s address to reinforce the assertion of a robust Jewish return to Zion.

On Jewish Day at the Fair, athletic contests and regiments of young Jews dressed uniformly in white and blue, marching proudly through the fairgrounds with their American and Jewish Palestinian flags, initiated a confident stride into the Jewish future. Dynamic, athletic, youthful, militaristic — how divergent these Jewish subjects were from the images of their predecessors circulating in Western imaginations: the robed cantor, the wizened rabbi, and the peddler of old clothes. Still, impressive as these demonstrations may have been, they were prologue to The Romance, which drew the most attention to a Jewish American presence at the Fair, both inside and outside the Jewish community.

On 3 July 1933 at 8:15 pm, the audience that had jammed up traffic on Lake Shore Drive starting at 5:30 pm now poured into Soldier Field to view The Romance of a People. Chicago Tribune reporter James O’Donnell Bennett, who wrote a thorough if rhetorically florid description of the event (that may have contributed to the Tribune Company’s decision to sponsor a second command performance of the pageant on 6 July 1933), watched them crowd in “closely around altars and temples, and up to the lofty parapets of the stadium’s colonnade” (1933a:1).

2. Descriptions of the pageant are culled from the reprint of the pageant program; newspaper descriptions and photographs; the reproduction of a sound recording of the entire pageant provided courtesy of Spertus Institute, Asher Library, Special Collections; descriptions offered in Citron’s dissertation; and a portion of the pageant shown on the videotape Romance of a People, The First 100 Years of Jewish Life in Chicago: 1833–1933, produced by the Chicago Jewish Historical Society.

3. On that occasion Rabbi Solomon Goldman, credited by some as the author of the pageant, told the audience: “The finest tribute to this pageant and romance of a people [...] is that it is being repeated tonight. On Monday
According to an account in a local Jewish newspaper, the *Sentinel*, before the main performance began, the crowd of some 130,000 joined together with a troop of Jewish boy scouts to recite the American Pledge of Allegiance and “even the Christians were moved by the shared experience” (Mendelsohn 1933:5). This troop of boys, also uniformed but as Americans, doubled the pageant’s address as both Jewish and American.

Collaboration between Jewish nationalist aspirations and a North American civilizing, democratic mission was also symbolized in the framing of the performance’s playing area—the enormous expanse of Soldier Field’s greensward. “The stage was flanked,” according to Bennett, “by avenues of 32 steel flagstaffs from which swayed in the moonlight the blue and white banners of Palestine and the red, white, and blue of the United States. The picture,” he added, “was heroic” (1933a:4).

The alternating flags surrounding the playing space repeated and multiplied a controversial political and territorial proposal for Jewish hegemony in Palestine at a time when such a goal could not be realized. As Margaret Werry has argued in her critical appraisal of massive spectacular performances and American political assertion in the Pacific, the pageant presented “an attempt to bring into being that which it imagined through materializing it in performance, and inviting its ratification by an audience of participating witnesses” (2005:362). That proposal was to ratify the Jewish-led emplacement of a new democracy—the pinnacle of civilized Western dominance—in a presumptively uncivilized open space.

Architect Samuel S. Oman’s set design for *The Romance* was a theatrical expression of the International Style—white and geometric, a utopian tabula rasa. Fashioned to look like stone, the set, on the one hand, suggested the use of ancient materials, substantial enough to endure for thousands of years into the future. On the other hand, solid but blank, this place’s history was waiting to be inscribed. The Star of David illuminated atop the structure representing the Temple in Jerusalem was described by pageant producers as “the beckoning star of [the Jewish] faith” (CJHS [1933] 2000a:18) and at the same time shone as an impressive example of Western Electric’s technical achievement, thus reiterating the Century of Progress’s celebration of technology by way of a Jewish aspiration to rebuild its own dominant civilization.

Stairs inclined toward the geometric temple structure, and the wide sloping area they created allowed performers to be more clearly visible to the spectators and at the same time to depict a population surging upward toward the realization of their hopes. A separate two-level platform floating within an expanse of flat white space covering the green field in the foreground of the playing space was meant to resemble an altar (fig. 2). Atop the altar, an oversized Torah scroll was unrolled by 12 bearded and robed men when the pageant began, framing the entire performance as a quasi-religious service read aloud from its “parchment.” The scenery and its use suggested that a narrative already authorized and inscribed in the Torah would now be brought to life.

To aesthetically heighten the mise-en-scène and literally extend the pageant’s address into visible space, towers of multicolored lights, disguised as stone columns that concealed the actual instruments, were placed at the corners of the forestage, throwing dramatic beams of color onto the action and into the sky. As though trying to communicate with a divine presence, several lights projected multicolored beams through glass panels in the stage floor, necessarily pointing upward. Indeed the entire set and lights were oriented to the vertical. Each time the chorus
ascended the dramatic expansive stairways that led to the Temple, they repeated man’s upward march. As the Jews made *aliyah* (ascended) to Zion, so human civilization ascended to new heights.

But it was not only the visual aspects of the production that communicated the enormous import of Jewish destiny. From a specially constructed booth built below the stage, sound was channeled and amplified through speakers situated in the stadium. Inside the broadcasting booth a group of professional singers and a small orchestra provided the dominant sound. The featured vocal performers included cantor Avrum Matthews, who represented the unseen Voice and chanted in Hebrew; broadcaster Ralph Schoolman, who narrated the action in English; and former Metropolitan Opera Company baritone Adolph Muhlmann, who voiced the Patriarch Abraham. Other soloists were drawn from opera houses and local choirs. Onstage, above the enclosed booth, over 1,000 vocalists that Isaac Van Grove, the director of the pageant, claimed were “the best trained voices we could find in Chicago and her neighboring cities,” sang while also participating in the action of the pageant (in Citron 1989:58).

Separated and sonorous—the deep voices of the male soloists, the enchanting sopranos in musical conversation, a chorus unified and amplified—these controlled sounds helped to create an imaginary world made orderly and beautiful by a beneficent authority. There was perhaps no clearer authorization of the pageant’s narrative than that it was narrated by an unseen voice often assigned the lines attributed to G-d in biblical passages. Listening to a recording of the performance, it certainly seemed to me that between the chanting of ancient Hebrew and the English translation into stentorian pronouncements, a listener is meant to hear an evocation of a divine presence (*Romance* 1933).

By revealing multitudes as represented by the chorus and concealing vocal performers beneath the stage, by bringing the invisible Voice of a seemingly Divine narrator to bear on the visible masses of performing bodies, the pageant closed the gaps between its themes of divine providence and human progress and thereby solidified the worldview it presented. It used its technologies too, as in most conventional theatre, to mask the production of its sounds by opera stars and choral singers, to make invisible the series of directors positioned in the midst of performers working to synchronize their movement, to conceal the lighting instruments that added so much drama behind scenery or embedded in the stage floor. Effecting an appearance of smoothness was important in every aspect, as the producers of the pageant sought to involve its audience in fantasy without friction and thereby make it effortless to ratify the project the pageant proposed.

In reality, however, the Jewish demand for ground in Palestine was a struggle. Only three years earlier, the Hope Simpson “Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development” to the British Parliament concluded that Jewish immigration should be limited, as there was not
enough arable land to support economic stability for both Jews and Arabs (1930). The Passfield White Paper issued that same year incorporated recommendations to slow both Jewish immigration and land ownership (2006). But the tarp lain over Soldier Field’s greensward implied a smooth, open playing space, stretching as far as the imagination could take it.

Limits on Jewish emplacement were not delimited in this playing space open to the night sky. To accommodate an audience that overreached Soldier Field’s permanent capacity, seats were placed on a portion of the open field. Now the audience area extended from the stadium proper onto the greensward to the foot of the playing area, bifurcating the space of vision and the space of visualization, each space crowded with the potential to overflow into the other (fig. 1). For Bennett at least, a non-Jewish observer, the entire stadium was endowed with heightened meaning that spilled into the crowd. Even the assembled audience of putative Jews seemed available to be read as quasi-performers of iconographic Jewry:

The thrifty metal merchant from the Ghetto—thriftless for once and paying five dollars for a choice seat—was there. The grandee of the marts of trade—paying fifteen dollars for a choicer—was there. The white bearded, black skull capped patriarch—looking as if he had just stepped from a Rembrandt etching, and attended by three generations of his posterity—was there. And the matriarch of Jewry—before whom great-grandchildren, graceful in foreign courtesies, bent to kiss her hand—was there. (1933a:1, 4)

If the Zionist producers of the pageant sought to exchange this European Diaspora–inflected assemblage of Jewish figures with new muscular ideations, the terms of their address would demand further iterations. Representations of Jews such as those Bennett projected onto the audience were deeply embedded in the non-Jewish imaginary, so much so that they persisted in Bennett’s imagination despite the varied representations of Jewish figures onstage, which included bejeweled priests, flower-strewing maidens, and contemporary pioneers. Even the Hassidic Jews depicted in the pageant were stylized in their dress and movement, thereby breaking away from the naturalism of a Rembrandt rabbi (fig. 3).

In addition to these featured characters that were often “voiced” by singers in the underground sound booth, according to the program sold to the pageant’s attendees, the thousands of amateur performers in the chorus bodily represented an array of Jewish and non-Jewish figures:

Worshippers of Moloch and other Idols, Dancers, Slaves dragging Idols; Whip-men; High Priest of Moloch; Priests and Priestesses; Prophets of Moloch; Child-Sacrifices; Clan of Abraham; Egyptian Overseers; Jewish Slaves; Builders of the Pyramids; Moses; Miriam and the Dancing Maidens of Israel; Sheiks of the Desert, Arabs and Caravans, camels, etc; Children, maidens and old people of Jerusalem; High Priest, Priests, Levites, Worshippers; Emperor, Centurions, Soldiers, Torch Bearers; Wanders (sic), Mourners, Symbolic Dancing Group of The Messianic Prophecy; Workers; Chalutzim, Chalutzot, Bearers of Flags of Nations, World Army of Universal Peace. (CJHS [1933] 2000a:19)

Merely reviewing this list, one gets a strong impression not only of a multiplicity brought under the control of one theatrical site but of the pageant’s narrative arc. It began with ancient Israelites integrated with their pagan neighbors; conflated biblical stories of Abraham and Moses (among others) to signify a covenant between the Hebrews and Yahweh; depicted the Exodus and its themes of liberation; highlighted a peace-loving nation established in Jerusalem; dramatically interrupted Jewish celebratory worship at the Temple with an onslaught of Roman soldiers; followed the sorrowful Jewish people through their long exile; alluded to a rekindling of faith by the Hassidim during the Diaspora in Europe; and saw the Jewish people redeemed in modernity through agricultural labor and pacifist internationalism.

Like other Zionist constructions of Jewish history, the long Jewish Diaspora was not highlighted but expressed through movement and dance during an interlude between episodes. Stressing Jewish faith and endurance from origin to redemption, the narrative dwelt in its key
moments on a biblical past and then swiftly gathered up its exiles. Thereby the biblical Jewish occupation of Palestine was closely juxtaposed with a Jewish return to Zion. Bringing these two moments close together in the audience’s imaginations was done for political expediency, reinforcing Jewish claims to land in Palestine. Focused on the mission of Jewish settlement there, pageant producers and writers were not after historical accuracy. Indeed a caveat was issued in the program for the performance:

“The Romance of a People” depicts, in the form of a Pageant-Drama, the faith and destiny of the Jewish People from its beginnings to the present time. The Episodes follow Biblical and historical records; but in some instances a fusion of themes replaces strict chronological order, bringing into immediate illuminating contact incidents, situations and characters separated in time and place but united in significance. The theme is sustained by invisible singers and an invisible choir, and by a visible dramatic and choral cast of thirty-five hundred actors. (CJHS [1933] 2000a:17)5

Honest in its commitment to determining Jewish destiny by way of thematically organized history, this statement also enunciates a Romantic understanding of “Truth” as a depth to be organized through artistic expression.

Figure 3. Choreographer and dancer Nathan Vizonsky in his costume for the “Dudele” song from the second interlude. The Hebrew lettering tumbling down his arm and leg juxtaposed with the stripes of the tallit, or prayer shawl, draped over his shoulder, suggest musical notes and staff— he is an abstract figure rather than a naturalistic character. (Courtesy of Phyllis Funari)

4. Weisgal himself, Rabbi Solomon Goldman, and Zionist polemicist Maurice Samuel were variously credited with writing the pageant. It also seems likely that in staging the work, Isaac Van Grove had a great deal to do with the pageant’s significations.

5. Probably written by Rabbi Goldman, this text appears in The Romance of a People performance program, but indicates no author.
Thus the invisible and visible work together to get us closer to the significance of representation. History then, either as it is written or as it lived in a materialist sense, is suppressed for the sake of something deeper, more valid. Zionist appropriation of biblical history transformed the episodes recorded in the Five Books of Moses into a human-driven redemptive teleology. Interweaving the Pentateuch narratives with the dominant narrative of progress circulating at the Fair, and ending it with the Jews’ return to rebuild Jerusalem, was the exemplary gesture of cross appropriation that the context of the World’s Fair encouraged.

As it incorporated evolutionary science and ideologies that easily divided the world into those primitive peoples who had not yet evolved and those benevolent conquering powers who would civilize and thereby carry them along on their uphill march, The Romance of a People integrated these ideals into its own particular story of Jewish redemption through self-reliance.

The pageant’s first episode depicted a sea of writhing forms, their gesticulations gradually growing more frenzied in their enthralled worship of a giant steam-spewing bull (fig. 4). Scantily clad “virgins” were held aloft by scantily clad men who sought to sacrifice them to this false idol. Booming from underneath the stage through speakers placed throughout the audience, the voice of the Unseen Reader (Ralph Schoolman) admonished the people, while a figure representing the Jewish Patriarch Abraham stepped into focus, thereby bringing monotheistic order out of chaos (CJHS [1933] 2000a:18; Evans 1933b:10; Siegel 1997).

This scene was the focus of a feature article and photographs that ran the week before the pageant in the Chicago Tribune. The Reverend John Evans, who wrote the article and witnessed the scene in rehearsal, extrapolated a special bond between Protestants and Jews:

It is not always understood that Abraham, the father of the Jew, was the first protestant. He protested against the several ideals of early people. He protested against human oppression and despotism. Religion of that early day had no humanizing influence. The gods were monstrous symbols of blind forces of evil. As the ancient oriental despot was the incarnation of ruthless cruelty, so the gods were regarded as powers which could be placated only by human blood. (1933b:10)

In this early episode, monotheism was asserted as the ordering force that undergirded Evans’s conception of “humanizing.” It necessarily contrasted with what both Evans and the Zionist producers imagined as the brutal practices of Eastern tribes. Notably, the very sexuality and sadism on display in this episode was first represented as titillating and then rejected as immoral. Thus a Judeo-Christian civilizing intervention emerged in this moment as a force of repression, but a repression seen as necessary to bring humanity out of chaos.

The pageant proceeded with a Jewish nation as protagonist cast in the role assigned to the Western conqueror, in this case of Eastern space. Ignoring the “complex dynamics of human
life” this Zionist story merged with a long tradition of what Edward Said has described as Orientalist narratives that depict the East as a set of signs and codes serving to reinforce the truth of its Western protagonist’s vision (1978:232).

In this manner, *The Romance of a People* brought a North American cultural Zionist weltanschauung into view. And as the organizing ideology of the spectacle, Zionism painted a “self-portrait of power” as it sought to empower the Jewish people by attaching them to more overarching nationalist and progressive ideologies. By bodily co-opting the represented identities of its historical enemies and contemporary combatants, the putatively Jewish performers in the pageant delivered up those identities to the pageant’s narrative, where they were processed as nonthreatening phantom projections. Thereby, the collective performance of Hebrew identity gained strength and dimension.

For example, the pageant program describes an interlude that depicted “the soft twilight of dawn resting on the Jewish homeland” while “barely visible, a caravan of camels passes across the field.” Costumed as Arab nomads, performers softly intoned their song written in the Bedouin style, “Gamel, Gameli” (My Camel, My Friend), until “[p]eaceful, drenched in rest and freshness, the scene die[d]” (CJHS [1933] 2000a:18). If Jews were seen to be marching uphill together to advance civilization on behalf of both Christians and Jews, Bedouins were seen as trapped in an idyllic netherworld and made supplemental to the main story. They were passive figures drawn into an exotic landscape. These nomads took over a portion of the metaphoric eternal wandering attributed to Jews. Jews were newly figured in *The Romance* as active, progressive, civilizing agents. Arabs were introduced as living outside of modern time and without direction or focused passion. Peacefully, the pageant suggested, they awaited modernist redemption.

To project a dream of empowerment ultimately realized, the pageant itself had to be realized as perfectly as possible. Synchronizing large and complicated production elements depended on concealing and smoothing out the human labor and technological systems that produced them and required tremendous ingenuity and effort. Isaac Van Grove directed the pageant and as director of such a massive cast of extras plus featured performers, created an ingenious system to control the flow of the performance (fig. 5).

While directing another conductor of the underground orchestra that played throughout the pageant, Van Grove also conducted the chorus of some 3,500 performers onstage, though they could not see him directly. Using a system of mirrors, telephones, and strategically placed group leaders, Van Grove passed along instructions in all directions while he was hidden from the audience by the set pieces (Citron 1989:62–63; Evans 1933a:8). Thus as much as possible a seamless flow of action, narrative, and music was projected through a high- (and low-) tech system that integrated widely separated dramatic elements. The discrete contributions to the pageant’s grandiose effects were hidden in order to emphasize the impressive enormity of synchronous technological and human energy amassed for the event.

Indeed, gathered en masse, the cast and audience were made greater not only by their numbers, but also by human mastery over technology. Nature did not dwarf man according to *The Romance*’s terms. Rather, the production approach of the pageant underscored the World Fair’s thematic assertion that man had attained the prowess—harnessing sound and light waves—to rival nature’s power.

Naturally, it is important to acknowledge the impact of an open-air setting, where most spectacular pageants, in Europe and the United States, were performed during this period. In the *4 July Herald and Examiner*, reporter Carol Frink described “a night so perfect that the brilliant three-quarter moon and every visible star seemed part of the impressive stage setting” (in Citron 1989:90). It was in heightening the gathered public’s awareness of this shortened distance between man and the cosmos that *The Romance of a People* might have been able to stir feelings of unity among those congregated. *Chicago Daily News* reporter S.J. Duncan Clark
recounted that the “sublime and profoundly stirring message” of the pageant reverberated from the altar “up to the shining stars and echoed back as if those multitudinous spheres rejoiced to know that faith survived upon the earth. Upon 150,000 tongues, babbling but a moment before in chatter of the commonplace, there fell an awed silence” (1933:5).

While spectacular pageantry “turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation” as Debord claims ([1967] 1994:7), a kind of super-effect of spectacle’s dismissal of an individual’s critical appraisal is the camaraderie that circulates among audience members, brought out of their individual contemplation into a contemplation of the transcendent relationship of humanity to the universe as divinity. Aimed at sensibilities rather than critical analysis, spectacle’s pitfalls and possibilities are both real and risky. And no matter the amorphous elaboration spectacle may have the power to inspire, it is always set in motion by an ideology asserted into networks of power. By proliferating its spectacular effects through dominant narratives of power, The Romance of a People asserted the rightness of its particular Zionist project.

While a public performance such as The Romance of a People was not identical to political change, it was one of many initiatives taken to achieve consensus on Jewry’s right to national existence. That its representations were larger-than-life, its labor hidden, its critics quieted, and its narrative structure closed, betrays an underlying ambition to stabilize Jewish identity in conformance with an emerging ideology. Such ambition ultimately tolerates no dissent, as contemporary Jewish critics of conservative political Zionism may well understand.
References


