

ROUND TABLE

**TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY
SURVEY COURSE****Teaching with Film and Photography in Introductory Middle
East Courses**

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Some years ago, a colleague from another institution told me how much she was looking forward to screening *Nasser 56* in her introductory Middle East history course. Students had just finished reading about the Nasser era, and the screening of Muhamad Fadel's stylish biopic starring the charismatic film star Ahmed Zaki would serve as an enjoyable way to round out the unit. I was surprised, not at my colleague's use of the film in her class, but at her timing. Released in 1996, *Nasser 56* is very much the product of the Mubarak era. It offers rich opportunities to discuss the particular challenges Egypt faced in the 1990s and how this nostalgic look back at a triumphant moment in Gamal Abdel Nasser's (Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's) presidency was marshalled to animate an economically and politically fraught period. Its celebration of 'Abd al-Nasir as an effective and caring patriarch to the nation could be interpreted as an endorsement of Egypt's authoritarian political system. However, the film is less useful as an explication of 'Abd al-Nasir as a political figure, or of 1950s Egypt.

I begin with this anecdote not to castigate a colleague, but rather to draw attention to some of the challenges of using film and photography in the classroom. Because of the indexical qualities of film and photography, that is, their ability to capture traces of the real world at one time and place for viewing by distant spectators, they tend to be received at face value as straightforward reflections of people, places, and events. Even fictional films based on real people and events—like *Nasser 56*—may be intuitively accepted as somehow truthful because their representational qualities are not foregrounded; to naïve viewers, such as students in introductory Middle East courses, a photograph or film clip of Ahmed Zaki acting as 'Abd al-Nasir looks just as real as a photograph of 'Abd al-Nasir himself in ways that a painted portrait or fictionalized story about him does not.

Funding poses another challenge to using film in the classroom.¹ All texts are, of course, the product of their time and place. Because movies are expensive, however, they tend to be particularly marked—at times burdened—by the contexts and circumstances of their making. A writer, painter, or singer may be impeded by censorship, cultural taboos, or the exigencies of earning a living, but as is evident from the rich cultural production of artists and performers from the Middle East in good times and bad, such hurdles are not always insurmountable and can in and of themselves inspire creativity (allusive or allegorical writing, symbolism, etc.) As long as such artists can find a way to create while remaining within the bounds delineated by the censor, and somehow support themselves, they distribute their works with relative ease through inexpensive publishing houses, galleries, performances, the internet, etc. They may also resort to publishing, exhibiting, and performing abroad. A feature film or professionally produced documentary, on the other hand, requires significant investment and thus cannot be created without the active support of government bodies, cultural institutions, or wealthy individuals or corporations seeking to make a profit. Films also depend on the expertise and labor of a large number of people. As a result, the production of a traditional film depends not just on a director's ability to evade restrictions like censorship, but also significant support and buy-in from various interests that will in turn affect the content and appearance of the films themselves.² The interests of a film's funders may leave its traces in the content and look of the film itself. Filmmakers may face significant pressures to reinforce pre-existing narratives and perspectives (e.g., about Islamic movements, the plight of Muslim or Arab women, modernity, development and neoliberalism, etc.).

At the same time, despite these complexities, precisely because of their indexical quality, film and photography can enrich an introductory course in unique ways. Their powerful evidentiary force endows films and photographs with an alluring aura, particularly when they reveal intimate or quotidian details about people and places that are geographically or temporally distant. Watching a short clip of 'Abd al-Nasir delivering a speech offers students an experiential understanding of his importance to Egyptian and Arab history that cannot be achieved by reading a translation of a speech or a description of his charisma. Films and photographs are framed and at times staged, and are therefore defined in part by what a cameraperson chooses to include in the image, but within the frame they may serendipitously capture traces of people, objects and their environments that the cameraperson did not intend, and thereby opens avenues for a range of discussions in the

classroom. Given the rapid and pervasive spread of visual media, students are particularly comfortable with images—it is increasingly how they experience the world. Visual literacy, like writing and critical reading, then, has become a fundamental skill they need to acquire.

Under such circumstances, what is an instructor to do? Critical viewing skills may be as complex and difficult to teach as critical reading skills. How can an instructor of a Middle East studies course find the time to help students develop such skills when there is already so much to teach in so little time? Instructors of survey courses cannot suddenly turn themselves into film or visual culture experts with detailed knowledge of the landscape of image production from and about the region, of course. Nor can we allow goals for visual literacy to compromise our fundamental goal of area studies expertise that our courses are designed to develop. But all of us can and should take the time to consider how the readily available meta-information about a film affects its form and content: when, where and who made and funded it; for what types of audiences; for what purposes (to entertain, to impart information, to elicit emotional responses such as anger, wonder, pity, enthusiasm, etc.). These considerations can easily be incorporated into how one selects and teaches visual materials.

Beyond this type of preparation, however, film and photography are particularly well suited for teaching one of the most difficult and yet, to my mind, most important skills that we should be developing in our students, namely the ability to see events and contexts from another's point of view. Every image captured by a camera includes three perspectives: that of the viewer, the cameraperson, and the photographed person(s). While these three perspectives (that of the creator of a work, the work itself, and the reader/viewer/listener of a work) exist to some extent in every text, films and photographs are particularly useful for the undergraduate classroom because they render them concretely visible. Moreover, since our students come to our classrooms having already created, viewed, and posed for photographs and videos, instructors can draw on that experience in their teaching. I teach a freshman seminar on photography in the Arab World in which I ask students not just to read Orientalist photographs, but to create one of their own and then to write about the strategies they employed to produce their othering images (e.g., dressing a subject up in costume, populating the set with specific props and framing out signs of modernity; emptying particular spaces of people, etc.).³ I have found that this experiential exercise develops an embodied understanding of perspective and framing that students then incorporate into their analytical writings about other texts.

Paying attention to the relationships created between our students and people who appear in the films and photographs we ask them to view is another excellent way to foster an awareness of perspective. Selecting films for viewing that create relations of equality between filmed subjects and viewers (e.g., ones in which subjects are treated as experts regarding their own lives; first person films, films that are in some way open-ended, making it clear that people, events, or situations presented are more complex and multivalent than any one text can convey) is a good first step in this process. Discussing the inequality produced by films that infantilize, victimize, or other its subject is another. Asking students to reflect on their own reactions to visual materials (especially films) can also help them to think analytically about the relationships that such texts create between themselves and the people and places they are studying, and whose interests may be served by fostering such relationships. We can ask students what emotional responses the films they watch elicit (pity, anger, empathy, wonder, curiosity, etc.) and reflect on what actions or policies such emotions might foster or undermine. This type of analysis does not require the incorporation of a new unit devoted to visual analysis within the Middle East survey course. It can be addressed by incorporating a brief framing of visual material with the appropriate metadata about its creation, and the incorporation into discussion and assignments of questions that focus not just on the content of a film but also on student's experiences while viewing the film.

The effects that film and photography have had on relations between people have been the subject of cultural criticism for nearly a century. By turns hopeful and despairing, writers have contemplated visual media's capacity to arouse and desensitize, to connect and isolate, to inform, interpret, and mask. Whether the net impact of such texts on individuals, communities, and their relations with each other is positive or not, there is no question that cameras will be among us for the long term, and that learning to interpret how they are used to represent the Middle East has become a basic skill that we as educators cannot ignore.

Endnotes

¹I do not want to suggest that funding is the sole determinant of film content and form. Filmmakers may resist or undermine such structures even while working within the institutions that funding and distribution networks create.

²I use the term "traditional film" to refer to professionally produced fictional and documentary films. Of course, there now exists a rich body of alternative material—photographs, short videos, and at times full-fledged films—created by amateurs, citizen journalists, etc. that do not depend on such resources.

³This exercise does not depend on quality equipment or expertise with a camera. Cellphone cameras work well. Sarah Graham Brown's *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950* (London: Quartet, 1988) and Derek Gregory's "Emperors of the Gaze: Photographic Practices and Productions of Space in Egypt 1839-1914" (In *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographic Imagination* edited by Joan Schwarz and James Ryan, 196-225. London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2003) are useful texts to accompany such an exercise.