

Kamran Rastegar. *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-939016-8.



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In *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East*, Kamran Rastegar examines the multiple ways in which Middle East cinema has contributed to the construction and dissemination of collective memories of violence. Intervening where memory studies and trauma theory converge and deviate, Rastegar revisits trauma theory and suggests the ways it can—and arguably should—account for the colonial experience and its aftermath.

Chapter 1 advances a theory of trauma that distinguishes between “individual trauma”—largely drawn from psychoanalysis—and “social trauma” that ought to account for the communal and collective experience of violence. Rastegar engages the critical perimeters of trauma theory, which inasmuch as it fosters tools drawn from psychoanalysis has yet to account for “sociologically oriented approaches” that analytically separate between individual and social modalities of processing memories of violence (p. 15). In conversation with the works of Shoshana Felman and

Cathy Caruth, among others, Rastegar understands social trauma as cultural memory, a codified experience that emerges from the interplay of social narratives of violence positioned relationally—within, against, or in the aftermath of colonialism. As it channels contested interpretations of historical narratives in the wake of wars and communitarian violence, social trauma frames public discourse and ultimately sustains “the project of national identity formation for postcolonial societies” (p. 29).

In chapter 2, Rastegar explores the intertwinement of social trauma and colonialism. He engages the three film adaptations of A. E. W. Mason’s *The Four Feathers* (1902) and demonstrates the ways in which imperial narratives of traumatic defeat discursively produced an idealized British masculinity as a means of justifying the colonial onslaught on anticolonial forces of emancipation. Moving to anticolonial cinema, Rastegar probes in chapter 3 the gendered representations of anticolonial emancipation movements in films

by the Egyptians Salah Abu Sayf (*Ana Hurra* [*I Am Free*, 1958]) and Henri Barakat (*Al-Bāb al-Maftūh* [*The Open Door*, 1963]), which reinscribed revolutionary women within patriarchal institutions, a move that the Tunisian Moufida Tlatli later challenged in *Silences of the Palace* (1994). In chapter 4, he turns to the cultural memory of the Palestinian Nakba. He retraces the transformation of the Palestinian memory discourse from the 1960s through the 1990s and shows the ways it has evolved from searching for foreclosure in the aftermath of the Nakba to tending to unanswerable questions in the Palestinians' ongoing state of displacement. Rastegar examines Elia Suleiman's cinematic aporias, the impossible representation of the Palestinian experience of dispossession, which ultimately point to the predicament of cultural memory in the context of suspended justice. In chapter 5, Rastegar explores trauma production when Iranian cinema became a vessel for state ideology during the Iran-Iraq war. He discusses films that simultaneously subscribe to and dissent from the parameters of the "sacred defense" cinema, a film genre that has channeled the state's ideological imperatives and prescribed a mode of remembering the war and its aftermath.

But what happens when the state relinquishes its monopoly over setting the ideological ethos of remembrance? In chapter 6, Rastegar turns to that question by exploring trauma production in Lebanon, beginning with the civil war and continuing into the contemporary postwar era. He shows how the urgency and violence of the civil war fostered an understanding of cinema as an act of witnessing. In the postwar era, he maintains, Lebanese cineastes positioned themselves as guardians of collective memory as they stood against state-imposed amnesia. He argues that the conception of cinema-as-witnessing later reemerged, altered, in the aftermath of Israel's war against Lebanon in 2006, as witnessing ceased to be predicated on ideologies of emancipation. Chapter 7 probes the notion of "perpetra-

tors' trauma," or the cinematic depiction of the traumatic memories that perpetrators of war crimes carry and articulate. Rastegar problematizes this depiction of trauma by returning to Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and shows how the film's perpetrator of war crimes deploys a discourse of trauma as a means to achieve atonement and redemption all the while eliding the question of responsibility.

The theoretical and methodological scope of *Surviving Images* addresses the notion of social trauma following a historical, cross-linguistic, and interdisciplinary approach. Rastegar's extensive study of the cinematic production of trauma—from Tunis, Egypt, Algeria, and Palestine, to Iran, Lebanon, and Israel—navigates diverse national narratives and temporalities, based on a methodological framework that carefully balances socially and historically situated interpretations and close readings that tend to the aesthetics of both canonical and overlooked films. As he engages the production of social trauma in the cinemas of the Middle East, Rastegar appropriately disavows a methodological commitment to the "Middle East" as a coherent and politically productive category of analysis. Instead, he circumscribes his investigation of social trauma to the study of cinemas in their national context, by looking at the construction of social trauma against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial violence. But what new critical possibilities emerge when we look beyond notions of territorial nationalism and engage transnational and diasporic cinematic narratives? For instance, what do the transnational Kurdish narratives of self-sacrifice and nationalism in Bahman Ghobadi's films add to our understanding of the political and social ethos of "sacred defense" Iranian cinema? How do war narratives conceived in the diaspora, such as Danielle Arbid's *In the Battlefields* (2004) and Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* (2010), refigure commemorative practices of films produced in Lebanon?

Rastegar steers away from a survey-based approach, and in so doing, he fittingly recognizes the importance of conducting close readings without, however, losing the political thread of his overall argument. His analyses are substantiated by a careful exploration of the intellectual genealogies in which films were sociologically, historically, and politically embedded. For instance, his interpretation of Iran's "sacred defense" cinema is particularly insightful due to his intricate readings of film narratives about self-sacrifice and memory, which situate trauma production both within and outside the ideological edicts of state cultural practices. Similarly, his exploration of contested trauma narratives in postwar Beirut beautifully captures the transformation of commemoration practices, from "testimony" to "memory" and back, which have constituted the Lebanese memory discourse in the 1990s. One would have hoped, however, for a reference to the fatigue of the memory discourse that has begun to emerge in Lebanese cinema and literature.

Taking trauma theory into fascinating new directions, Rastegar invites us to consider, for instance, the ethical implications of representing social trauma based on the experience of those who are simultaneously traumatized subjects and perpetrators of traumas. As he approaches the trope of suspended justice, Rastegar turns to the abject and the grotesque by examining the motifs of vampires, zombies, and ghosts in Lebanese postwar cinema. He conceives the incomplete work of mourning as a specter that haunts postwar citizens oblivious to their pasts. As he invokes the spectral and the abject, he opens up an entire literary and artistic corpus for reconsideration and suggests new ways to examine the notion of social trauma in postwar Lebanese cultural production.

Rastegar's use of the notion of melancholia to frame the Palestinian cultural memories of violence is vital but could have benefited from further substantiation. His conception of melancholia adheres to Sigmund Freud's early analytical

distinction between normative mourning and clinical melancholia, one that Freud would revisit and complicate further in his later writings. Rastegar clearly separates between the two modes of mourning in his discussion of Suleiman's trilogy, particularly as he describes the protagonist's lingering in neither mourning nor melancholia but rather in a memory *purgatorio* due to the lack of closure stipulated by the ongoing Palestinian state of dispossession. But could we not read the very suspension of resolution, the lingering of this state of unresolved grief, this *purgatorio*, as the kernel of a Palestinian collective melancholia? Melancholia would be redefined in this sense not as a clinical condition but as an impossible act of mourning, akin to how David Eng, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler have accounted for the never-ending mourning processes of different racial, postcolonial, and gendered subjectivities.

Rastegar's approach to studying cultural memories of violence is vital as it neutralizes culturalist, orientalist, and power-blind readings of Middle East cinemas. As he maintains the theoretical thread that ties together different cinematic narratives of social trauma, Rastegar occasionally blurs the distinction between anticolonialism in pre-independence narratives and anti-imperialist critiques in post-independence narratives. For instance, as chapter 3 examines the patriarchal representation of women's anticolonial militancy in Barakat's *The Open Door*, it shows us how the political consciousness of the female protagonist Layla is triggered by the anticolonial struggle. But one could suggest that while Layla's political sensibilities are anticolonial, they are also paradoxically empowered by and yet ultimately at odds with the post-independence state ideology of emancipation that arguably failed her generation of militant women. Distinguishing between pre-independence and post-independence modes of representing social trauma will reveal the paradox of the postcolonial state. Both the vector of anti-imperialist ideologies and the locus of repression and political failures, the postcolonial Arab

state has engendered a discourse of disenchantment that has derived its terminology from psychoanalysis (for example, *iḥbāṭ* as depression). Readjusting the theoretical grid by making it accountable to the internal critique of the oppression, militarization, and subservience of the post-colonial state would make legible entire cinematic traditions in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and beyond. Such an approach to trauma would refine our readings of other films outside the scope of *Surviving Images* that probe state-induced social trauma, such as Hussein Kamal's post-1967 film *Adrift on the Nile* (1971), Merzak Allouache's parody of state patriarchy in *Omar Gatlatto* (1977), and Radwan al-Khashef's allegory of the vanishing welfare state in *Date Wine* (1998).

Rastegar concludes *Surviving Images* at the contemporary moment, when new technologies, virtual identities, and digital narratives point to new possibilities for the visual production of trauma. He shows how revolutionary and social movements in Tunis, Iran, Libya, and Egypt have configured new mnemonic practices by embracing the digital age. In his very last statement, Rastegar gestures toward the war in Syria as an illustration of the "postcinematic" modus of remembrance, one in which social trauma is shot in one-minute videos, produced on laptops, and screened online rather than relayed on the big screen. While providing an expansive framework to read trauma production in twentieth-century cinema of the Middle East, *Surviving Images* looks to the future by pointing to the emergence of a new era of trauma production, one that will enchant us yet destabilize the very foundation of cinematic practices.

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