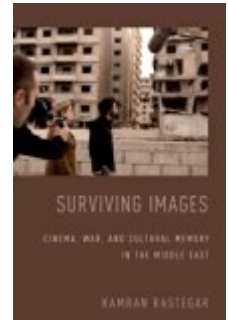


Kamran Rastegar. *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-939016-8.



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Published on H-AMCA (May, 2016)

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Kamran Rastegar's *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East* treats the cinematic medium as the contested terrain of discursive battles within what he describes as the arbitrary boundary marker, that is, the Middle East. With this self-critical stance with regard to its geographical focus, perhaps dictated by the recognized academic field of area studies, Rastegar presents an encompassing postcolonial reading of cinematic production and its role in the writing of history and cultural memory through its power of representing social violence and its traumas.

Beginning his study in the late nineteenth century and extending it into the present, Rastegar traces the history of cinematic production through colonial contexts, independence struggles, and various postcolonial moments, drawing attention to the continuities as well as ruptures among these deeply intertwined histories and their subjects. Whether discussing the empire, the independent state, or the various resistances of colonizers and decolonizers, the book is as much

about the power of the cinematic medium as it is about the networks of power that it is entangled in. To make this case, Rastegar tackles canonical and relatively more marginal films of various genres with particular attention to their different spheres of production and reception, local and international.

Structurally, the author unfolds a multifaceted argument that reaches across politico-historical eras through chapters dedicated to different national contexts: Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, Iran, Lebanon, and Israel, as well as one dedicated to Palestine. In each chapter, he is able to focus on complementary yet distinct aspects of the ways in which cinematic production is employed to represent and negotiate trauma and its histories. For instance, Rastegar focuses on the role of the female figure in the Algerian, Egyptian, and Tunisian independence struggles with such examples as Salah Abu Sayf's *I Am Free* (1958) and Henri Barakat's *The Open Door* (1963); while the traumatic experience of war comes to the fore in the Iranian and Lebanese contexts with such exam-

ples as Bayram Beyzai's *Bashu, The Little Stranger* (1987) and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *A Perfect Day* (2005). In dealing with such diverse tropes, the book is able to engage with several bodies of literature, including feminist theory, trauma studies and its psychoanalytic readings, memory studies, history, and perhaps most centrally, postcolonial studies.

The introductory chapter lays out the theoretical groundwork of the book through the *longue durée* of the Algerian independence movement. It begins with an account of the reception of Rachid Bouchareb's *Outside the Law* (2010), a story of three brothers in France set against the backdrop of the Algerian independence movement and the Algerian War between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s. Rastegar introduces the film by recalling the large crowd gathered to protest Bouchareb's depiction of the Sétif Massacre in the film, thus drawing attention to what he calls "trauma production." This kind of reading, which takes into consideration the ways in which such historical movies become a trope through which the imaginary of colonial histories are negotiated today, reveals an interesting operation that Rastegar performs on his subject matter. Treating the role of the cinematic medium in the formation and negotiation of cultural memory in both the past and present tenses, he reveals the multiple layers of traumatic effect that may emanate from these memories and their various articulations by different producers and audiences. "What is most at stake," Rastegar writes, "is identifying who has the right to interpret this history, what forms of cultural memory are given legitimacy, and whether it is possible to arrive at a resolution of the putative traumas of the various claimants" (p. 14).

Each successive chapter frames the cinematic works in question within the relevant background of the various nations' and stateless peoples' histories. Rastegar's close reading of these films is thus placed within a matrix of social, political,

and economic histories that determine and overdetermine the production, signification, and re-signification of the formative traumas (what the author articulates as "productive traumas" in the very first chapter). The shifts that the historical contextualization afford affect the intent of filming as much as its reception. Rastegar provides examples for this, such as *The Four Feathers*, based on A. E. W. Mason's early Edwardian novel (1902) by the same title, which was remade at least seven times in cinematic or television versions. Each remake reflects the ideological shifts that frame the history of British colonialism and its memory from the various locales where it was produced. He analyzes Merian C. Cooper's 1929 version, the Korda Brothers' 1939 version, and finally Shekhar Kapur's 2002 version in relation to the particular milieu from which each film reflected the colonial history recounted in Mason's novel. Nevertheless, Rastegar claims, each version "map[s] coherently upon their social contexts, which share in their idealization of imperial masculinity but which do so for somewhat different ends" (p. 48).

The question of who can speak (and for whom) is one that resonates throughout postcolonial studies, particularly in its subaltern studies contingent. Rastegar takes this question seriously and articulates it in terms of not only colonial relations but also their echoes, reproductions, and re-articulations within the postcolonial moment through ideological, social, and economic structures, such as state and international discourse, sponsorship, and distribution channels. Rastegar is able to situate cinematic production in relation to power in terms of its visual aspects and its political and economic conditions of production.

Particularly interesting is the way in which he deals with the filmic negotiation between reality and fiction, documentary and reenactment, and lived experience and the dynamic nature of memory. Closely related to the power of the camera, these interwoven dichotomies become central to the representation of trauma, and its negotiation.

For instance, in the irresolute Palestinian experience wherein neither mourning nor melancholia seems to present a suitable form of representation of trauma, “what remains most evocative of the Palestinian story is its frequent irreconcilability to traditional narrative forms” (p. 96). In a chapter discussing this particular example titled “The Time That Is Lost: Cinematic Aporias of Palestine,” Rastegar employs Jacques Derrida’s philosophical concept of “aporia,” a sort of traumatic impasse, in explaining the role of Palestinian cinema as being one that pushes the limits of truth and reality from the sides of both the cliché and pure fiction. Rastegar traces this theoretical framework in Elia Suleiman’s trilogy of films: *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), *Divine Intervention* (2002), and *The Time That Remains* (2014).

In a similar vein, Rastegar takes a critical approach to the visual archive that played an important role in recording the role of the women in the independence struggles of Algeria and Egypt, particularly with regard to the way in which photographic and filmic archives were revisited and subjected to editing and reframing. In the chapter “Freedom, Then Silence: Memory and the Women of Egypt and Tunisian Independence,” Rastegar is able to tease out the competitive ambiguity of the relationship between women’s liberation and anticolonial national liberation by analyzing the ways in which women are portrayed and placed within the narratives of such films as Sayf’s *I Am Free*. The main protagonist in this film is a woman named Amina whom Rastegar describes as being the epitome of the woman whose political activism in the anticolonial movement ends up conflicting with her search for freedom as a woman. Furthermore, Rastegar’s analysis traces the shift in the way in which women’s liberation is viewed and represented before and after national liberation, as part of the very anxieties and traumas of these historical and national contexts. This kind of revision and self-reenvisioning is also traced through the trope of the mirror, which gives rep-

resentation to the inner voice of the female protagonist in the film *The Open Door*.

Surviving Images should be required reading for students of cinema studies, particularly those who are interested in the region. It is an excellent book to place next to Ella Shohat’s *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1987) and Hamid Dabashi’s *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema* (2006). However, as a multifaceted project that approaches its subject from angles of trauma, postcoloniality, and industry, it desires an audience that should by no means be limited to those interested in the region only. Anyone interested in postcolonial studies, particularly those interested in cultural production, would benefit greatly from Rastegar’s contribution to a growing literature that draws parallels and connections between the colonial experience, independence struggles, and the current postcolonial moment. By drawing attention to the perseverance of shifting yet ever-present power relations and their hegemonic discourses, while at the same time acknowledging the resistances that adapt accordingly, the book is able to speak to theoretical discussions of cultural production and power.

In examining disparate yet interrelated instances of trauma in this region, Rastegar could have included a chapter on Turkey to articulate the historical context of the last years of the Ottoman Empire. This is a historical context that witnessed the Armenian Genocide and laid the groundwork for the ongoing Kurdish struggle for cultural and civil rights within the Republic of Turkey. Critical cinematic output about both struggles has been prolific and even interrelated through the trope of missing persons. Yılmaz Güney’s oeuvre would surely be the place to begin such an endeavor, to be followed by more contemporary works, such as Orhan Eskiköy and Zeynel Doğan’s *Dengê Bavê Min (Voice of My Father)* (2012), Fatih Akin’s *The Cut* (2014), and Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioglu’s *Bakur*

(*North*) (2015). This book is an important resource for those who will undertake future work and pursue such endeavors. It is an exemplary work of scholarship in its theoretical depth and breadth, refreshing in the eclectic way in which he engages with an “area,” and rigorous in its analytical specificity.

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Citation: Lara Fresko. Review of Rastegar, Kamran. *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East*. H-AMCA, H-Net Reviews. May, 2016.

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