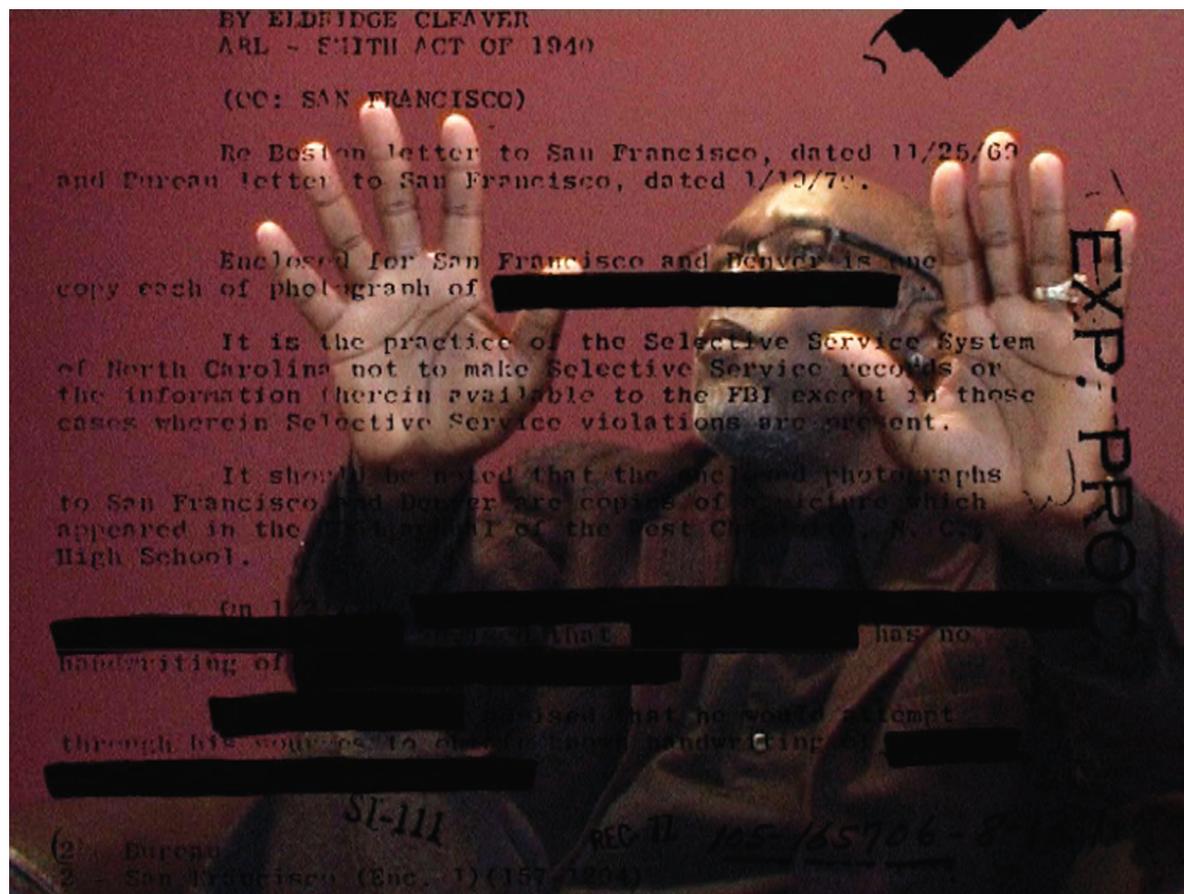


BOOKS



Mounir Fatmi:
History of History,
2006, video,
37 minutes, 30
seconds. Courtesy
Goodman Gallery,
Johannesburg and
Cape Town.

Screening the Middle East

by Anna Wallace-Thompson

LAURA U. MARKS

Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image

Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2015; 416 pages, 135 black-and-white illustrations, \$32 hardcover, \$21 eBook.

Untangling the history and polemics of the Middle East—the focus of so much creative production from that region—has all too often proved a frustrating and, ultimately, thankless task. Few know this better than the artists themselves. “Foreign audiences wanted to gain an authentic Arab view through the eyes of the work,” writes Laura U. Marks in the introduction to *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. “Local audiences tried to anticipate what the foreign audience would look for in the work; foreign audiences rejected some works as not authentic enough; local audiences rejected some works as giving the wrong impression to foreign audiences.”

Insights like these make Marks’s volume truly refreshing, as she provides a clear yet comprehensive view of moving-image art in the Arab-speaking world. (Turkey and Iran have their own

languages and cinematic cultures.) Marks—previously the author of *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*—elucidates many complex issues, interspersing her accounts throughout the book wherever a particular artist-director or cinematic theme needs a broader sociopolitical context.

Hanan al-Cinema, which comprises fifteen thematic chapters and an introduction, covers a wide variety of topics, ranging from Arab Communism to cinematic archives to digital algorithms to the filmed body. Marks balances in-depth research with an engaging and accessible writing style—this is a book one can read both for pleasure and for education. It is not, the author states, a definitive survey but rather a series of essays spliced with analysis of individual artists and filmmakers. Some of the practitioners—e.g., UK-born, Egypt-based Sherif El Azma or Egypt-born, UK-educated Hala Elkoussy—definitely emphasize filmmaking, while others work more or less equally in several mediums. Among the latter are Lebanese novelist and critic Mohamed Soueid; Morocco’s Mounir Fatmi, known for graphic and installation art; Egyptian sound and performance artist Hassan Khan; and Lebanon-based actor and playwright Rabih Mroué. In presenting

ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON is a London-based writer who frequently covers cultural activities in the Middle East, where she was raised.

Akram Zaatari:
Tomorrow
Everything
Will Be Alright,
2010, video, 12
minutes. Courtesy
Sfeir-Semler
Gallery, Beirut and
Hamburg.



such figures, Marks seamlessly merges lyricism and scholarship to create a highly diverse introduction to Arab experimental cinema.

Unabashedly partisan, the author, a professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, boldly addresses issues like Palestinian nationhood and Islamic terrorism, which she calls “a term that Western politicians and the Western media use to render political struggle meaningless by dismissing it as irrational crime.” As a counterpoint, Marks praises artists like Elia Suleiman, who in his 1990 video *Muqaddimah Li-Nibayat Jidal (Introduction to the End of an Argument)* collages decades of Western stereotypes of Arabs (turbaned, scimitar-wielding, bare-midriffed, veiled, religiously fanatical, conniving, mercantile, martyrdom-seeking) into a madly prejudicial visual and auditory hodgepodge.

Marks also offers ruminations on topics such as funding and film distribution. “It’s a ready irony,” she writes, “that the majority of early films recording aspects of Arab society are owned not by Arab archives but the archives of the countries that once colonized them.” She also notes that forty percent of Egypt’s classic film heritage is controlled by a private Saudi Arabian media corporation, which shows the works exclusively on its Rotana Cinema channel.

The book sometimes reveals particular cultural circumstances through amusing anecdotes, as when Marks recaps Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s *The Lost Film* (2003). When a print of one of their movies goes missing in Yemen, the artists at first receive back only snippets of footage cut by the local censors. Visiting the country, they find that images, outside those in the mind, are not highly valued in Yemeni culture. Moreover, film production has essentially ceased since radical Islamists rose to power. It takes much searching, ending in a scrap-metal market, for the artists to realize that thieves were after not the film itself but the canisters in which it was stored.

Other themes include the enduring legacy of Ashura, the Shi’a commemoration of the death of Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of Mohammed, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Works focusing on Ashura mourning rituals tend to be either blatantly heartrending or, when the subject is processions of self-wounding devotees, nearly too gruesome to watch. Marks also evokes the legacy of the desert: “A landscape that preexists us, outlives us, and, unlike other landscapes, forgets us, the desert makes us aware of the limitations of human perception and memory.”

Traveling through the desert, she observes, has always deeply affected one’s sense of time and (dis)connectedness. Today that experience is expressed in a new form—the Arab road movie, to which she devotes a chapter called “Asphalt Nomadism.”

MARKS FOCUSES primarily on contemporary practice—not the 16mm formalist work we associate with 1960s art films but rather “experimental media art,” which encompasses film and video, computer and mobile-device programs, and internet productions. In her view, the most interesting new works from the Arab-speaking world are created by artists who, like many of their fellow countrymen, have the ability to “parse the political significance of extremely local or seemingly slight events with stunning acuteness.” She points to a malaise induced by a chain of events, both historic and modern, that created deep rifts throughout the Middle East: invasions, religious factionalism, colonization, the creation of Israel, the dispossession of the Palestinian people—the list goes on. Marks establishes from the beginning that she does not want to over-politicize. But she does spend a good portion of the introduction setting up the historical, social, economic, and political realities of the Middle East and exploring how, in these circumstances, “the incapacity to act intensifies the conditions of creativity.”

The region, Marks says, is in the middle of a new cinematic *nahda*, or renaissance, linking current moving-image art to the century-long cultural flowering prior to the Six-Day War of 1967, which put an end to a great deal of creative freedom. This prompts her to examine the birth of experimentation—and to claim that creativity often arises in the face of repression. Today’s sense of subjugation, “presses Arab artists to perceive even more keenly, inform themselves even more precisely, plunge into public archives and private memory, dream, fantasize, and invent.” Powerlessness, a pervasive awareness of being under the domination of outside forces, certainly leads to reaction and resentment but also, in many cases, to free acts of exploration.

This is why so many artists—particularly those from the Levant—delve into archives. Marks argues that Arab image-making, as practiced by artists such as Lebanon’s Akram Zaatari, one of the cofounders of the Arab Image Foundation, is a form of archaeological excavation, a piecing together of lost or buried histories: “The past persists, enfolded, in virtual form, and some of its facets may unfold to some degree in the present.”

Marks discusses at length this notion of enfoldment—the way certain historical facts and ideas come to light while others remain dormant, and the ability some individuals have to excavate lesser-known truths. “Artists (and others) do so in order to allow other aspects of experience to circulate, before they enfold back into the matrix of history.” The author’s most salient point is that Western and Arab audiences interpret this act of enfoldment differently. “So while Western audiences think Arab cinema shows them an image of experience,” Marks argues, “Arab audiences know they are seeing information.” These films vividly convey to Middle Eastern people how their culture is currently being represented to, and perceived by, the rest of the world.

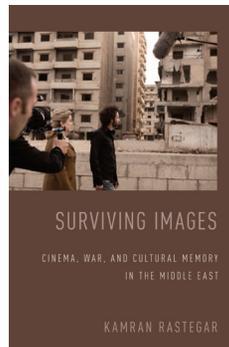
Marks does an impressive job of bringing these many themes together into a holistic view of creative expression in the Middle East. That is not to say that *Hanan al-Cinema* might not have benefited from a concluding essay, to balance out the masterful scene set by the introduction. Without a final summary, there is some sense of anticlimax at the end of the last chapter—but then, perhaps, it is up to readers to close the book and ruminate on what they have read. Marks’s affection for the subject shines through (after all, *hanan* means “tenderness”), and this is a book that should be mandatory reading not just for every student of film or new media, but for anyone with an interest in the passionate, intelligent, and accomplished cinematic work coming out of the Middle East today. ○

Books in Brief



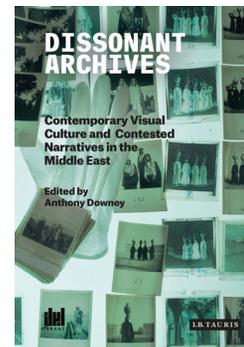
OMAR KHOLEIF, ed.
The Rumors of the World: Rethinking Trust in the Age of the Internet
 Lebanese artists Joana Hadji-thomas and Khalil Joreige question the authenticity of personal narratives in the digital age, especially how the internet has undermined our trust in images and information. Edited by curator Omar Kholeif, this exhibition catalogue surveys the duo’s film work, sculpture, and photography with essays by artists and scholars, including Laura U. Marks.

Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2015; 240 pages, 128 color illustrations, \$34 paperback.



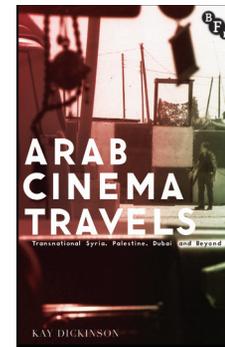
KAMRAN RASTEGAR
Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East
 Tracing the history of Arab cinema, scholar Kamran Rastegar argues that conflict fuels cultural identity. Through case studies of films produced in Iran, Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine—the animated *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman and *The Time That Remains* (2009) by Elia Suleiman among them—Rastegar posits that cinema has played a productive role in shaping the collective memory of the region’s shifting sociopolitical landscape.

Oxford University Press, 2015; 248 pages, 62 illustrations, \$99 hardcover.



ANTHONY DOWNEY, ed.
Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East
 Because institutional archives structure historical narratives that are often at odds with the realities of the conflict zones they chronicle, artists from North Africa and the Middle East are challenging the hegemony of state-sanctioned archives. This collection of essays examines works by figures such as Emily Jacir, Walid Raad, and Mariam Ghani.

London, I.B. Tauris, 2015; 472 pages, 280 illustrations, \$28 paperback.



KAY DICKINSON
Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond
 From twentieth-century Arabic travelogues to recent films that portray Israel as a place of limited physical mobility for Palestinians, historian Kay Dickinson assesses Middle Eastern films in relation to geopolitics. Migration, tourism, and trade, she argues, have shaped global perspectives on the Middle East and influenced contemporary Arab filmmakers.

London, British Film Institute, 2016; 232 pages, illustrated, \$96 hardcover; \$29 paperback.