Introduction

Visual Anthropology in the Middle East

Esther Hertzog and Yael Katzir

Abstract: This issue demonstrates the potential and unique contribution of visual anthropology to deepening and expanding anthropological knowledge with historical, artistic, cultural and political perspectives. Describing and analysing historical events, daily social life and the arts, the articles offer original interpretations of human experiences and social processes that are part of the Middle East reality, in the past and present. Some authors suggest striving to establish ethnic, cultural and national identities goes hand in hand with struggles for civilian rights and socio-economic equality. Using illustrations and a feminist analysis, other authors reflect on women's marginalisation in the arts and in the historiography of this region. The use of visual materials, highlighting similarities among divergent communities, entails an optimistic view about the potential contribution of arts to break through fundamental dividing features.

Keywords: community identity, documentaries, gender issues, national identity, women in the Middle East, visual anthropology

This special issue contains articles that reflect on events, processes and social phenomena in the Middle East by using visual means. Its birth took place at the 2017 conference of the International Union of Anthropological Ethnological Sciences commission on the Middle East in Krakow, organised by Soheila Shahshahani. At that conference, the film-makers Abeer Zeibak Haddad and Yael Katzir, together with the social anthropologist Esther Hertzog, organised a session on 'Anthropological Perspectives of Documentary Films about Women in the Middle East'. Following that conference, we were invited to be guest editors of this current issue. The articles included in this issue demonstrate the potential and unique contribution of visual anthropology to the

expanding of anthropological knowledge with regard to historical, artistic, cultural, political and other perspectives.

Visual anthropology serves as 'a mode of inquiry that sticks close to lived experience' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: xiv). This kind of social exploration links between visual and social anthropology, as well as between anthropological gazes and artistic visions. Visual anthropology can offer, sometimes unintentionally, a surprising picture of reality that otherwise would not be identified or acknowledged. The Middle East provides numerous contexts for the 'exploration of the sensory, material and subjective dimensions of field work' (xii). It is a region involved in turbulent events, fierce national battles, revolutionary struggles and religious, ethnic, gender and economic conflicts. Thus, the study of social life in the Middle East by visual means enriches anthropological knowledge in general and about this region in particular. Moreover, elaborating on visual materials enables us to deepen our insights regarding processes that have occurred in the near and distant past.

This collection of articles combines historical events, daily social life and the arts. Thus, it offers original interpretations of human and social experiences that are part of the Middle East, past and present. The visual materials that are used – mostly films and pictures – provide enriching lenses to knowing and reflecting on several issues that represent social life in this region and beyond. Two conspicuous examples are processes of national and community identity formation, and women's rights, status and struggles within the patriarchal regimes in the Middle East.

Striving to establish ethnic, cultural and national identities goes hand in hand with struggles for civilian rights and socio-economic equality, as Eirini Chrysocheri implies in her article that focuses on the Greek community in Alexandria. Regev Nathanshon's article refers to the Arab-Jewish tensions in Israel. The photographs of Druze life in Israel after the establishment of the state (in 1948) are perceived by Lindsey Pollum as a preservation of culture. Younes Saramifar's article claims national identity in Iran is associated with the shaping of memory by those who are implicated in the Iranian memory machine. Women's role in the arts, their achievements and contribution to their country's culture is illustrated in the articles by Carolina Bracco, Shahar Marnin-Distelfeld and Edna Gorny, and Efrat Yerday. Using visual illustrations, artists' narratives and a feminist analysis, these scholars reflect on women's marginalisation in the arts and in historiography.

Reviewing the articles reveals the use of visual materials for highlighting similarities among divergent communities, and for breaking through fundamental religious, national, class and other dividing and distinguishing features. This line of interpreting the articles offers an optimistic view about the potential contribution of arts to bringing people closer, and perhaps even to supporting social and political change. The historical background is at the background or the focus of most articles in this issue. Historical events in Bracco's article are reflected in the portrayal of dancers in the Egyptian cinema. The historical

background includes the last period of the Farouk monarchy, the revolution of the Free Officers Movement and the Nasser regime, and Nasser's death in the early 1970s. Bracco considers the socio-political changes and their cultural repercussions as part of a dialectic relationship that affects the portrayal of dancers in three films featuring the famous dancer Tahia Carioca. In the films, the dancer represents three roles: a working woman, an evil woman and a marginalised woman. Bracco argues socio-political changes in Egypt have been projected on the image of the dancer and have simultaneously changed it.

Chrysocheri's article also relates to historical and social background connected to Egypt. It analyses the spatial and social boundaries of the Greek community in Alexandria before and after Nasser's 1952 revolution. The visual materials are used for analysing the process of reproducing the Greek Alexandrian identity. Employing the Greek Alexandrian's unique and valuable identity related to a past glory is perceived as a device for reinforcing the internal solidarity of the group. Chrysocheri argues that the community's self-inflicted exclusion, in a 'golden cage', serves to reinforce its members' feelings of collective survival among 'others', within a 'potentially dangerous' environment.

A historical perspective plays a role in Pollum's article too. Using photographs from the Israeli Druze village Daliyat al-Carmel from the 1930s to the 1970s, she argues the photos produce an expanded visibility, which nuances the understanding of Arab-Israeli life after 1948. They introduce cultural complexity to the often-simplified conflict between Jews and Arabs. Unlike photographs of expulsion, photographs of Arab culture, like dance, music and weddings within the Druze community, indicate relatively uplifting parts of Arab-Israeli life that existed in the new state. The photographs are perceived as a means of preservation of culture, portraying a multicultural and joyous lifestyle. Pollum concludes joy and violence occur simultaneously, oftentimes in spite of each other.

The historical background, starting at the time of British Mandate in Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel (in 1948), serves as a framework in Marnin-Distelfeld and Gorny's article. The authors use botanical art illustrations to show how flowers growing in the land of Israel reflect the connection between the creation of a new Jewish identity and the Jewish homeland. The article unveils the unknown artistic contribution of three female artists to the Israeli culture. It reveals that botanical art in Israeli culture is perceived, as in Western culture, as gendered.

Women's contribution to Israeli culture is also discussed in Yerday's article. Yerday highlights the unique contribution of Israeli women of Ethiopian origin to local art. Analysing the subjects of a group of female artists' paintings, Yerday argues they are changing their attitudes towards the 'white gaze.' This is happening even though they are constantly subjected to it by the Israeli hegemony and the western masculine discourse in general. These artists alter the boundaries that seem to be designated for them. Thus, Yerday demonstrates

how contemporary female artists of Ethiopian origin are changing an agenda that reflects their lives as black women in Israel.

Using visual material, Esther Hertzog's essay takes the gender outlook even further. Relating to two documentaries, she demonstrates some common features of men's violence against women in the Jewish and Palestinian societies in Israel. Despite basic differences, in socio-economic conditions and civil rights, both groups are denied fundamental rights, being subjugated to patriarchal control. Abeer Zeibak Haddad's film about 'honour killing' emphasises the profound threat on girls' and women's physical safety. Yael Katzir's film is about Jewish women's struggle for religious rights. Both films suggest that the state fails to ensure women's rights and safety and expose women's compliance to males' oppression.

The ethnic-national tensions, characterising Israel's reality, are highlighted by Nathansohn. He documented a group of neighbourhood residents who wished to produce a film about their experiences in a mixed neighbourhood in Haifa. The film production has never materialised, because while the group dynamic reflected the mixing atmosphere of the neighbourhood, their script succumbed to the hegemonic discourse of separation in Israel. However, Nathansohn suggests failing to abide by the hegemonic discourse of separation and failing to stick to realism that could have highlighted ethno-national street-level ambiguities, the project succeeded. It avoided releasing a false representation of its members' experiences, and failed to counter the struggles for recognition and equality.

Relating to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Saramifar's article discusses the meaning of remembering and the implications of memory. He portrays mnemonic practices of Iranians who engaged with the past and keep the memories of martyrs of that war alive within frames and words. Using pictures taken during the annual commemoration of the martyrs, he seeks to show how religiosity, politics and generational guilt are entangled in the post-war Iran. Opposing 'memory scholars', Saramifar argues remembering is a practice that is locally shaped according to the politics of everyday life. Thus, he draws an ontological approach toward the memories in Iran by ways of seeing and religious worldview of those who are implicated in Iranian memory machine.

Summarising this issue, we would like to re-emphasise the potential contribution of visual anthropology as a means for expanding anthropological methodology and scholarship; for offering academic challenge to perceived and structured distances among rival and hostile cultural, national and religious collectives; and for acknowledging the marginalisation, discrimination and oppression of 'others' in the region of the Middle East. It is worth mentioning that half of the articles relate to women's and gender issues. This fact can be understood as connected to the feminist involvement and intellectual interest of the editors. An alternative explanation for this implication can be related to the growing feminist awareness concerning the profound gap between men and women in terms of economic, political, religious and other aspects that

characterises patriarchal regimes. This aspect appears to be a conspicuous common denominator of many societies in the Middle East. We hope that describing and analysing this gendered reality would serve to promote further research on this topic and contribute to enhancing women's solidarity.

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Reference

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