

## THE ARAB VISUAL MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR: FROM SEGMENTATION TO UNIFICATION?

THOMAS RICHARD\*

*The visual memory of the First World War in the Arab Middle East had been primarily invested by local memories, reflecting the need for the states to legitimize themselves, especially in the face of Western and Turkish memories, which tended to appropriate this memory to support their own representations of the war. With the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war, within the context of global renewed interest for the conflict, new visual productions about the First World War have emerged, developing previously unknown aspects of the war, with the aim of making heard the Arab experience between 1914 and 1918, and to contribute to a more complex and, to some extent, unitarian memory of the war.*

### *Introduction*

When it comes to images of the First World War in the Middle East, a few films easily come to mind, the first probably being David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). This epic follows the path of the archeologist-turned-warrior during the Arab Revolt, up to the Versailles Peace Conference where he lost his illusions about political promises in the face of the behavior of European Powers.

Albeit deeply sympathetic towards the Arab cause, over time, this film raised critics, particularly on the political level, being interpreted as an example of Orientalism, in the path of Edward Said's analysis of the film, which in turn has been subject to criticism for not really grasping the object of the movie (Macfie 2007; Caton 1999: 100, 172; Long 2009). These debates expanded beyond the academic arena, and, to some extent, David Lean's film may in militant circles be considered as the epitome of Orientalist movies: it follows a blonde British agent, dressed in white, an intellectual, leading a group of not-so-well mannered Arab tribesmen against the Turks, only to ultimately leaving them at the hands of Western diplomats who carve out the new regional map without taking what they had previously promised into account. Moreover, a vast majority of the film's characters are played by Western actors, with the exception of Omar Sharif, who appears as the fictional Sherif Ali, and a few actors coming from India and Pakistan. At the time of the film's release, Auda Abu Tayeh's ('Awdah

---

\* Centre Michel de l'Hospital, Université Clermont-Auvergne.

Abū Tāyih) descendants, incensed by the portrayal of their ancestor as a greedy and brutal man, tried to sue the production company (Turner 1998: 201), and the narrative of the film has sometimes been interpreted as a variation on the theme of the white saviour coming to the rescue of uneducated natives, in a fundamentally flawed and unequal encounter. In the regard, the fact that Lean created a learned and politically aware character with Sherif Ali, and his very positive portrayal of Sherif Hussein (Ḥusayn) did not weight much, as these were secondary characters, with Peter O'Toole's portrayal of Lawrence catching all the light.

Behind Lean's movie are other Western films, from the *Lighthorsemen* (Wincer 1987) about the battle of Beersheba, to *All the King's Men* (Jarrod 1999), *Anzacs* (Dixon 1985) and *Gallipoli* (Weir 1981), dealing with the Gallipoli Campaign. These films focus on the British and Australian war narratives, as these battles, and particularly the Gallipoli Campaign, are considered to be founding elements of the Australian identity, of its coming of age as a nation, embodied in the «Anzac spirit» (Seal 2007), and expressed through pilgrimages of Australians to the battlefield (Slade 2003). Such films, and their more recent counterparts, are movies developing or interrogating the national Australian myth (Reynaud 2014; Henderson 1982), leading to an appropriation of the events by the Australian narrative on screen.

On the other hand, these events have also been deeply appropriated by Turkey, which considers the First World War as the prelude to its War of Independence, as it is the war that sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire, and during which Mustafa Kemal revealed himself as a great commander, precisely during the Gallipoli Campaign. This memory is partly constructed as a parallel memory to the Australian and British one (Simpson 2010), as it follows the same narrative of a nation born through battle in the trenches of the Dardanelles Straits. It is expressed in Museums and National Parks, such as the Gelibolu National Park on the site of the battle, and the Anitkabir in Ankara, the final resting place of Atatürk (Glyptis 2008; Akçali 2010). It enters in a dialogue with Western memories, as *Lawrence of Arabia*, for instance, had an impact on the Turkish war memory (Akilli 2016). Turkey produced also numerous films about the First World War, such as *Canakkale Aslanlari* (Lions of Gallipoli, Demirag 1965), nearly all of which, until recently, mainly focused on the Ottoman war memory as a primarily Turkish experience (Akin 2018), and on the Dardanelles.

Such a situation left little room for the Arab memory of the war to be visible. Nevertheless, Arab countries kept to some extent alive visual memories of the First World War. Such memories went under dramatic changes recently with the appearance of a will to reappropriate the First World War narrative, and the appearance of panarab expressions of such a

memory, especially in the face of the changing memorial landscape in Turkey and its neo-Ottoman narrative (Kraidy; Al-Ghazzi 2013; Çolak 2006).

Following the steps of Christian Gruber, Sune Haugbolle (2013: IX) and Lucia Volk (2010: 17), through the study of visual products that were used to develop this memory, we intend to understand how a visual memory of the First World War was created in the Arab Middle East, and how it has evolved. Our corpus is made of the films and TV series that were produced on the subject in the region, focusing on feature films. This corpus is supplemented by the study of monuments and museums that deal with this issue in Jordan and Lebanon, which were also created with the purpose of developing a visual memory of the war. Films will be studied in regard of their Turkish and Western counterparts, in which are developed the narratives that Arab productions try to challenge. Due to the long weakness of the film industries in the countries studied here, this makes a rather short corpus, especially at the beginning of the period, albeit significant since the few movies that were produced were shot with the aim of creating landmarks in the local filmographic landscape. More films and TV series have been produced, comparatively speaking, since the 2000s due to the new strength of these industries at a regional level, which will appear in the study.

We will follow a two-part organization for this study, following a temporal division. First, we will study how the Arab visual memory of the First World War has been expressed through a national prism, but a segmentarian one, closely linked to the particular experience of each state that emerged after the First World War. Then, we will focus on a more unitarian Arab vision (albeit linked to national interests) of this memory, that emerged about a century after the First World War, in the face of the global reflexion on the memory of this conflict, which also tries to shed light on some aspects of the war that until then had gained little attention.

#### *A Segmentarian Memory, Sponsored by Individual States*

Given the tremendous influence the First World War had on the formation of Arab states in the Middle East, it is rather surprising that the memory of this conflict has until recently been rather rare in the museographic and filmographic spaces of the Middle East. While circulating through the countries, one may find elements of this memory, such as a plaque marking the resting place of some German soldiers on Damascus Street in Beirut<sup>1</sup>, or the monuments and stelas of Nahr el-Kelb North of the city, but these monuments, which were erected by colonial powers and which represent the Allied victory in the war did not attract much national interest from the independent states, as they appeared to also represent the beginning of mandatory rule in the Levant (Maila-Afeiche 1995; Volk 2010: 39).

<sup>1</sup> Personal observation 2014.

The fact that one inscription at Nahr el-Kelb does mention the Arab forces within the Allied troops that liberated Lebanon from the Ottoman rule does not appear to be particularly important, and the two stelas that receive most of the attention are the two specifically Lebanese ones, celebrating the end of French mandatory rule, and the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon. The site itself is rarely visited<sup>2</sup> and, when studied in Lebanon, this pertains more to the antique stelas than to the First World War (Maila-Afeiche, et al. 2010).

This attitude is coherent with a segmentarian visual memory of the First World War that has been prevalent in the Middle East since the end of the war itself, with each state promoting its particular war experience, without creating transregional or trans-Arab links. This, in turn, is to be connected with the peculiar development of these states, that were created against the unitarian Arab nationalism which was promoted by the Arab Revolt (Wilson 1991: 204; Muslih 1991: 167; Tauber 2014: 101), and through films and monuments, these states tried to legitimize themselves.

In Lebanon, the visual memory of the First World War focuses as such on two elements: the martyrs that were executed by the Ottomans in Beirut, and the forced requisitions and famine that exerted a huge toll on the population in the mountains. The martyrs are represented by the statue that gave its name to Beirut central square, Martyrs' Square, where Arab nationalists were hung following orders from Jemal Pacha (Ġamāl Bāšā). The statue on the square, inaugurated in 1960 by President Fuad Chehab (Fu'ād Šihāb), was the second one installed on this spot, and the change of statue is symbolic of the struggle for national identity in Lebanon. The original statue, erected in 1930, under the French Mandate, displayed two women, a Muslim and a Christian, holding hands above a coffin, symbolizing the communities of Lebanon under French rule, but was vandalized during this period, a time during which the very existence of Lebanon as a state was questioned by Arab unitarian nationalists (Volk 2010: 78). The second statue, linked to the presidencies of Camille Chamoun and Fuad Chehab, at the height of Lebanese particularism, was designed by Italian sculptor Marino Mazzacurati, and closely follows Western habits of memorialization, with a symbolic woman holding a torch above two young men, sculpted in a heroic style. No mention of communities or of the country's Arab identity is apparent, and all characters have caucasian features. This representation, that completely ignores the Arab Revolt, only focuses on the local activists who gave information to the Allies (British and French). Its features, together with the design by a European artist, suit a time when Lebanon portrayed itself as the most Westernized of Arab countries<sup>3</sup>, and was extremely

<sup>2</sup> Participatory observation in 2000, 2005, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> At that time, the Lebanese constitution described the country as having an «Arab face» rather than being an Arab country.

cautious of panarab nationalism, embodied in the sixties by the Nasserist movement.

The statue has since then acquired a new meaning, which tends to leave aside the First World War, as it came to symbolize the Lebanese Civil War. As Martyrs' Square was situated on the no man's land that separated the two sides of Beirut during the war, the statue has been bullet-ridden, marks which were kept when it was restored in 1996. The restoration of Martyrs' Square itself was at the core of the Solidere project, led by former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Rafīq al-Harīrī) which claimed to renew mutual trust between communities through the restoration of downtown Beirut. Nevertheless, this project has been subject to criticisms, which accused it of erasing Beirut's history (Makdisi 2006: 201), Martyrs' Square was restored only late in the project, and the appropriation or reappropriation of this hugely symbolic space remains problematic. Its history, linked to the difficult definition of Lebanese national identity and culture (Ragab 2011; Larkin 2010), makes it a complex object of identification in contemporary Lebanon. The site of important demonstrations since 2005, the square now also hosts the resting place of Rafic Hariri, following his assassination nearby. It can be considered an interstitial national space, situated between the communities of Lebanon, which each faction has tended to appropriate in turn, following the ups and downs of Lebanese political life, during which its First World War symbolism has tended to be forgotten at the benefit of more recent political and sectarian disputes.

The other part of this narrative, also appearing in the sixties, is represented by another monument, and one of the most well-known films of this period, *Safar Barlik* (Forced Requisition, 1966) by Barakat (Barakāt). Featuring Fairuz (Fayrūz) in the lead part, the film follows the endeavours of peasants from a mountain village to smuggle wheat in the face of requisition and famine under the Ottoman rule. Known for its songs, the movie is a milestone for Lebanese cinema, and for Fairuz's career (El Khoury 2004; Nasr 2018: 84). The film itself is part of a trilogy of films by Youssef Chahine (Yūsuf Šāhīn) and Henry Barakat in which Fairuz starred between 1965 and 1968, through which she rose to the status of a national Lebanese symbol, embodying the nation as a country girl facing hardships (Woods 2014).

Beyond its artistic achievements, the film is also remarkable for its purely Lebanese view on the war. The famine is a key element of the local memory of the war in Lebanon (al-Qattan 2014, 2015: 146; Pitts 2016: 74), both on the family and on the national level. But at the same time, famine was not limited to Lebanon, and Jordan or Turkey also have memories of famine, even using the same word (*safar barlik* was the Ottoman term for war requisitions/forced conscription) (Tarawneh; Naamneh 2011; Akin 2018: 111), which also include a musical memory in the case of Turkey.

Nevertheless, no mention is made in the film of a common experience of the famine, which is made to appear as a purely Lebanese memory, and linked to the particular identity of the mountain villages (which are described as a mix of tradition and Westernization, with a rather modern café). No mention is made either of the famine in Beirut (Tanielian 2014) neither of the national movement in the Arabian peninsula: if one of the characters, a soldier in the Ottoman army, goes AWOL after realizing the tyranny of the regime he serves, it is to oppose it in the Lebanese mountains, and not to join the Hashemite columns.

Iraq's film industry followed the same path when Saddam Hussein decided to fund an epic on the immediate aftermath of the First World War in 1983, *Clash of Loyalties/al-Mas'alah al-kubrà* (Shukri Jameel [Šukrī Ġamīl]). At the height of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi state needed a film that would foster Iraqi nationalism, and, together with the famous *al-Qādisiyyah* (1981) by Abouseif (Abū Sayf), which was directed against Iran, *Clash of Loyalties* aimed at emphasizing Iraqi pride and honor against the former colonizer. The film is focused around the character of Dhari al-Mahmood (Dāri al-Maḥmūd), a key figure of the 1920 uprising against British occupation of Iraq, known in Iraq as the 1920 Revolution, and a crucial moment in the formation of Iraqi nationalism (Kadhim 2012: 135). Cinematographically, the film is very similar in its production and aesthetics to the *Lion of the Desert* (1980) by Akkad (al-ʿAqqād) shot in Libya three years earlier. With very important means, and heavy political second thoughts, it exalts nationalism and the spirit of resistance through the character of a noble hero against foreign occupation (Nairi 2017), embodied here by treacherous British officers.

This film also exemplifies a segmentarian memory of the war, as it makes no link between the Iraqi situation and that of other parts of the Middle East that tried to resist mandatory rule. Despite the presence of characters which played a key part in the First World War such as Faisal (Fayṣal) I and Gertrude Bell, the issue of the war itself is considered to be secondary and the issue of panarab nationalism disappears behind the narrative of the Iraqi national struggle. What is enhanced is again the peculiarity of the Iraqi experience at the end of the war, represented as a founding moment for the Iraqi nation (Zubaida 2002), which is recreated along the lines of memorial and artistic kitsch representations that were favored under Baathist rule (Davis 2005: 176, 200).

This segmentarian memory is also present where one would not expect it, that is at the Memorial of the Jordanian Armed Forces (Winterbun 2013). Situated next to Sports City in Amman, this building serves both as a memorial to fallen Jordanian soldiers, and as a museum dedicated to the Jordanian Armed Forces since the Arab Revolt. About a third of the exhibition is dedicated to the Arab Revolt and to its battles against the

Ottomans. Despite the panarab ideals of the Revolt, its memory has been appropriated by the Jordanian state and its army and is presented as a proto-Jordanian event. Even more, the exhibition can be considered to develop a memory that is segmentarian within the Jordanian society itself.

The building itself is not a hallmark in Amman, and, as our field work in 2012 demonstrated, its existence seems to be ignored by most people in the city. According to the soldiers on guard when we visited the Memorial, school groups come to visit the Memorial, but, apart from members of the armed forces or the police, very few people we interrogated had visited the Memorial, or were even able to locate it. Hence, the Memorial appears to preserve a memory that concerns chiefly members of the security apparatus in Jordan, rather than the country as a whole. The building itself belongs to the army, and visitors are greeted by the flags of various Jordanian units. Since the Jordanian army primarily identifies with the Transjordanian part of the population, the Memorial can be considered as a legitimizing tool for the part played by this Transjordanian component of the population in the definition of Jordanian identity (Nanes 2007: 221).

This observation is confirmed by the objects presented to the visitors, which, when it comes to the Arab Revolt, are seemingly unremarkable. As expected, the role of British officers is downplayed, and T.E. Lawrence only appears on a few pictures. Most of the objects are weapons, maps, goggles, saddles and swords. A few clothes, also, most of which are usual bedouin items. And these objects appear to be purposely unremarkable. These pieces of equipment are more or less the same that any Transjordanian bedouin family may have, such as a rifle that belonged to an ancestor, the family's sword, and so on. As the Museum displays the narrative of the Jordanian armed forces from a Transjordanian point of view, these objects serve to develop a sense of proximity and belonging between the great war that founded the kingdom, and the backbone of its armed forces, by creating an epic narrative that put forward the bedouin participation in this war. This is apparent through the elements and photos that are missing: if pictures of bedouin horse or camel riders are present, almost no mention is made, neither objects are present that can be linked to the regular cherifian forces that fought in 1916-1918. The famous guerilla riders were more an irregular force than the core of the cherifian army, which consisted in its infantry and artillery trained and equipped by Great Britain and France, made up of Ottoman deserters and nationalist volunteers, most of whom did not identify as bedouins (Karsh; Karsh 1997; Leclerc 1998: 39). These troops, which were more linked to the cities of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine and who besieged Medina, while progressing at a slower pace than the guerilla fighters, are a less relevant memory when it comes to the Jordanian identity, which has been recently emphasized by the archaeological study of First

World War battlefields in Jordan, that documented the guerilla aspect of the war (Saunders; Faulkner 2010).

Beyond the bedouin aspect, the Memorial has also been developed as a royal Museum. The leaders of the Arab Revolt are not particularly honored in the Memorial, save for the Hashemite family, whose painted portraits dominate this part of the exhibition, starting with Hussein ibn Ali (al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī), presented as the founder of the dynasty, and who appear in most of the pictures that are on display. The most remarkable objects are items that belonged to the royal family, such as Hussein’s walking cane, his ‘*iqāl*, some Qur’ans, or prayer rugs. Since the Hashemites were responsible for the administration of Mecca at the time of the Revolt, and since part of their legitimacy derives from this function, a special emphasis is put on religious objects that underline this link between the family and the Holy City. When it comes to the Revolt itself, the Memorial insists on putting Abdallah (‘Abd Allāh), the first Jordanian King, on the same foot as his more well-known brother Faisal, as each of them was in charge of a column of fighters during the war, while at the same time the memorial appropriates the dynastic memory of Faisal, since the dynasty was overthrown in Iraq, leaving Jordan alone to develop a family and historical narrative of the Revolt. In this regard, the Revolt appears as a legitimizing event that justifies the Hashemite rule in Jordan. The most important ceremony each year at the Memorial is the visit of the King, who comes to pay his respect to the soldiers who fell in defence of the country since the First World War. As such, the Memorial, despite the original panarab drive of the Great Revolt, chiefly serves as a Jordanian monument, in which keeping the memory of the Revolt primarily serves a local purpose of linking the dynasty with the army, and justifying the way the Kingdom was created and maintained.

*Contemporary Evolutions of the Visual Memory: Reappropriation and Unity*

The transformation of the Arab visual memory of the First World War appears shortly before its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in the context of renewed interest towards its meaning and representation. As Europe and Turkey were organizing commemorations, exhibitions, and produced new movies and TV series, the Arab World also produced its own films which adopted a new point of view on the war.

This renewed interest, particularly in Turkey, questioned the ancient Arab narrative, as the stream of new Turkish war films was influenced by the neo-Ottomanist political orientation that developed since the AKP came into power, and was expressed through cultural products which are particularly appreciated in the Arab Middle East (Kraidy; Al-Ghazzi 2013; Yanardağoğlu; Karam 2013; Yörük; Vatikiotis 2013). The neo-Ottomanist orientation of this cinema means that it interprets the First World War in a

more Islamic light, and considers the Ottoman soldiers not only as forerunners of the Kemalist army, but also as defenders of the last Islamic empire. In the same way, while more ancient cinema represented its characters as almost entirely Turks, more recent productions included other nationalities, and particularly Arabs, in their narrative. Last but not least, this cinema also portrayed battles that occurred in the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire. An example of this is the TV series *Mehmetçik Kut'ül Amare* that focuses on the Battle of Kut in 1915, in modern-day Iraq, and quotes the poem by Ziya Gökalp made famous by Recep Tayyip Erdogan which states that «the minarets are our bayonets, the domes our helmets» in an emotional scene when the poem is recited by the whole Ottoman army.

Such a situation questioned the Arab narrative of the war, as, through popular culture, it could appear as a kind of renewal of Turkish cultural imperialism in the Middle East, imposing its image of the Arabs and of the war (Kucukcan 2010). Together with the development of criticism of the image of Arabs in Western films based on the findings of subaltern studies, namely the will to reappropriate one's historical and memorial narrative, this situation prompted the production of new movies in the Arab World, in which Arabs themselves would narrate their war memory.

The Great Revolt has been at the core of this work, with films such as *Theeb* (Dīb, 2014) by Abu Nowar (Abū Nuwār), and TV series such as *Auda Abu Tayeh* ('Awdah Abū Tāyih, 2009) or *Lawrence al-'Arab* (2008) by Mousa (Mūsà). All these films aim at narrating the Arab Revolt from a purely Arab point of view, particularly in regard to Western representations of it. As such, the part played by British agents is reevaluated, and they appear as rather ambiguous characters, helping the Arabs in their quest for freedom, but also clearly having an agenda of their own. In contrast to Peter O'Toole's impersonation of Lawrence in David Lean's epic, in the series of the same name, Lawrence appears as a chubby character, fascinated by Saladin, and much more of a politician than in the 1962 film. He is cunning, can appear to be a bit treacherous, and his portrayal, albeit not negative, contrasts with the heroization in the same series of the Arab leaders, particularly of the Hashemite princes Faisal and Abdallah. While the weaknesses of the character were not ignored in 1962, they are more apparent here, as Lawrence appears as an unstable man, who shares to some extent the stereotypes about the Middle East and the Arabs that were common at the time, and if he is a key character in the Great Revolt, the leading part is played by the Arab princes.

In the same way, the series about *Auda Abu Tayeh* appears as a belated answer to the shock that was caused by his portrayal in David Lean's film. If the character retains his aura as a fierce warrior, the series departs clearly from the portrayal of a desert pirate that was felt to tarnish the leader's memory. On the contrary, he is presented as a true Arab nationalist, driven by

the will to liberate the Arab territories from Ottoman rule. He is presented as a devoted follower of the Hashemites (and not of Lawrence), with a strong political sense. Moreover, since the series, produced in Jordan, where it was a public success, counts among its viewers descendants of Auda Abu Tayeh's tribesmen, it can dwell much more on bedouin politics in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the reconstitution of bedouin customs and habits has received particular attention. This did not prevent it from raising debates among the Huwaitats (Auda Abu Tayeh's tribe) when people felt that an aspect or another had been trivialized or too heavily fictionalized<sup>4</sup>.

*Theeb*, characterized as a «bedouin western» (Hambuch 2018), follows the same steps in its portrayal of the Arab Revolt, while making use of symbols at a deeper level. A coming of age film (Nashef 2018), it is set in the bedouin community, and it follows a young boy, who accompanies his older brother and a British officer who aim at blowing up strategic Ottoman railways. The expedition goes wrong after they are attacked by bandits, and most of the characters are killed, with the young boy attending one of his wounded opponents, who sides with the Ottomans, and with whom he will create a bond. After they go to an Ottoman police station, where the bandit collects money for his help against the Revolt, the main character kills the man, for reasons pertaining to revenge and nationalism altogether.

Critically acclaimed (the film won 15 awards in international festivals), *Theeb* appears as a reflexion on the epic memory of the First World War. In itself, it is far from spectacular, relying heavily on its scenography and on its use of natural landscapes to carry its meaning (Lucca 2015). As a coming of age movie, it can be interpreted in two ways: meaning the coming of age of the Arab nation to free itself from the Ottoman rule, but also as a coming of age of the memory of the First World War that can develop more freely than in the previous decades an original representation of the Arab Revolt, and present a renewed Arab point of view. The claustrophobic impression conveyed by the landscape of the Wadi Rum is contrasted with the empty spaces of the desert, where the hero deepens his understanding of the Revolt, of the British intervention in the Hijaz, and of his duties as a man in an changing and troubled world.

What is also particularly interesting is that, despite its Jordanian nationality, the film refuses to emphasize the heroic aspect of the Revolt. On the contrary, although dialogues are rare, some very important lines are said by the man that *Theeb* saved: he states that he became a bandit because of the arrival of the Hijaz railroad that deprived him of his job as a guide for pilgrims en route to Mecca, underlying the local difficulties that were induced by the modernization process in the Middle East. As he sides with

<sup>4</sup> See here a debate about the series on the Huwaitat tribe internet portal <http://web.archive.org/web/20101120055501/http://alhowaitat.net/showthread.php?t=13728>, retrieved on 24/06/2019.

the Ottomans, he allows the director to underline the fact that the Arab Revolt was also a civil war, with many Arabs fighting on the Ottoman side, something which appears to be very new on screen and contrasts with the apparent unanimity in the opposition to the Turks (albeit for a few traitors) that was common in the previous decades.

One last scene is also meaningful. It shows the two characters walking next to the railroad in dunes littered with the bodies of fighters who tried to attack an Ottoman train. Together with the film's extremely detailed and realistic portrayal of bedouin life in the 1910s, this scene appears in direct relation to the famous train attack scene that is a highlight of David Lean's 1962 film. It challenges its depiction of the Arab Revolt, and its exotic aspect, as a great adventure in a foreign land. What is more is that, by appropriating a Western aesthetic, this movie avoids the problems posed by romanticism and self-exoticism (Khair 2012). It also avoids a direct confrontation with the 1962 film by offering a more subtle reflexion about the representation of the Arab Revolt. As he adapted Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, David Lean did not intend to film a proper epic about the Arab Revolt, as his film is more focused on Lawrence's inner struggles, his discoveries, and his own coming of age as a key actor in the Revolt. *Theeb/Dīb* does not negate this aspect, but rather offers another coming of age film, but one which is purely Arab, and which develops aspects that Lean's film did not address.

The unitarian aspect of the war's memory is developed in al-Jazeera's three-parts documentary *World War One through Arab Eyes* (2014), which tries to frame a global picture of the Arab participation in the war, a choice quite logical considered the panarab sensitivity of the channel (Lamloum 2009). The first part is dedicated to Arab colonial troops within the Allied armies, the second to the Ottoman World, and the the last one to the negotiations and treaties that forged the Middle East after the war. This endeavor to link very different situations appears to be new, as it gives relatively little importance to the Arab Revolt, and evokes elements that had previously been rarely mentioned, due to the national aspect of the memory, such as the Arab participation in the war within the Ottoman army. Until recently, apart from the case of officers (Uyar 2013), this aspect had remained a family memory<sup>5</sup>, and was ignored by the visual memory of the war: Ottoman soldiers were, for nationalist purposes, both in Turkey and in the Arab World, considered to be Turks, while Arabs were considered to be opposed to the Ottoman rule as a whole. From a different point of view, this documentary joins *Theeb/Dīb* and recent Turkish films in their apprehension of the First World War as an Ottoman civil war.

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Henry Laurens 2012, Professor at the Collège the France, where he holds the chair of Contemporary History of the Arab World.

But the scope of the documentary is far greater, as it tends to present the First World War as not only an Ottoman civil war, but also as an Arab and Islamic civil war. As a whole, Arabs are portrayed as essentially victims, deprived of their rights, and made to fight either as colonial troops of the Allies, or appear as pawns of these very same Allies in their endeavors to destroy the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the documentary devotes about the same time to the famine in Lebanon and Syria that it does to the Arab Revolt, following here the more ancient narrative, but linking these hard times with the general Arab suffering throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The documentary presents in a rather sensational way the hardships and brutality endured by the colonial troops in the French army, interviewing Jacques Frémeaux, a highly recognized French scholar on colonial Algeria (Frémeaux 2004; 2006: 215, 280), but also heavily interpreting the revolt of colonial soldiers who refused to serve in France as a refusal to fight against fellow Muslims and Arabs (while this revolt was more about refusing to fight abroad), or making mistakes, such as when French brutality towards Algerians is illustrated with images showing Italians in Libya. The images themselves are rather poorly sourced, and the general impression of the documentary is more that of a lament on the fate of the Arab World, with a rather sentimentalist narrative, rather than an in-depth analysis. This aspect is coherent with the channel's taste for breaking news and its self-portrayal as offering its viewers «alternative journalism» that challenges usual narratives, in this case the Western visual narrative of the war (Zayani; Sahraoui 2017: 50). This issue, which is linked to the channel's editorial line and to its choices, also appears in the case of Islam, with Arabs portrayed as hesitating to fight against the Ottoman Caliph, for fear to create a rift within the Muslim world, while at the same time discussing the various efforts made by belligerents to deal with the issue of Islam and attract Muslim soldiers. The channel, which hosts Yusuf al-Qaradawi's (Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī) very influential TV show (Graf; Skovgaard-Petersen 2009: 118), and which pays particular attention to issues pertaining to Islam (Eftaghah 2006; Dabbous-Sensenig 2006), tends in this light to reevaluate strongly the role played by Islam in the war, probably beyond its actual importance.

The last part of the documentary, devoted to the treaties that ended the war, also adopts a rather teleologic understanding of these treaties and rushes to present time, with a tendency to substitute emotion through images for legitimate criticism of the Allies' policies in 1919. Arabs at the peace conference and after, especially the leaders of the Arab Revolt, are presented as manipulated and fooled by Allied powers, without much interrogation of the part they played in the secret negotiations that preceded the peace conference (Alkhazragi 2011). As victims, Arabs are represented going through an endless cycle of violence, made of revolts against foreign

occupation, from the 1925 Druze revolt against the French authorities in Syria, to the 1936 Revolt in Palestine, ending with the proclamation of Israeli independence, and its renewed cycle of violence. This, in turn, leads the viewer<sup>6</sup> to another long documentary produced by the channel, devoted to the *Nakbah* (*Al-Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe* 2013), which picks up when the *World War One through Arab Eyes* ends, and similarly mixes strong elements drawn from recent research with an extremely emotional presentation aimed at shocking the viewer.

As a whole, the documentary, as the movies recently produced, aims at developing a new understanding of the First World War, but, in this case, an understanding that can be considered also problematic, as it tends to reinvent this memory, and to twist it according to the channel's editorial line, rather than explain it as would be expected from a documentary. In its way, Al-Jazeera has produced a recreation of the war memory.

### *Conclusion*

The visual memory of the First World War in the Arab Middle East went under two phases, a first one clearly marked by the national memories of the states, and a second one more focused on the reappropriation of the memorial narrative and on a more panarab sensitivity. Nevertheless, these phases are also to be understood as an evolution, since the reappropriation process, or even the panarab issue, tend to be presented with an emphasis on local memories. *Theeb/Dīb* aims at reappropriating the Arab Revolt narrative from the West, but does so following an extremely local, Jordanian narrative. In the same way, one can argue that the panarab aspect of al-Jazeera's documentary is to some extent a collection of local memories united by the TV channel, but *World War One through Arab Eyes* is inclined to present them as parallel stories rather than developing a memory that really intertwines the various war experience of the Arabs between 1914 and 1918. And, at a deeper level, although making an emotional appeal to panarabism, this is done following the channel's editorial line, which is in turn linked to Qatari foreign policy imperatives (Samuel-Azran 2013), making, one can argue, the documentary an element of visual memory that follows national interest as closely as did the productions developed in the 60s and 80s.

Developing a national memory of the war, in its diverse local forms, and to make it known through films and museums, played a crucial part in the legitimization process of the states, and, as these states appeared with the breakup of panarab nationalism, it had to be segmentarian and local. These local narratives were also important in keeping alive a war memory that had

---

<sup>6</sup> In a metaphorical way, but also much more directly: the autoplay on Al-Jazeera's Youtube channel launches the documentary about the *Nakbah* as soon as the one about the First World War ends.

otherwise been appropriated by the West and by Turkey, against which the Arab film industries could not compete (especially since Egypt, the strongest Arab film industry, was not involved in this narrative). But, as Arab film and TV industries have grown stronger, it has become possible to develop new productions that challenge either Hollywood's romantic apprehension of the war and the ANZAC narrative on one side (lately *The Water Diviner*, Crowe, 2014), and the neo-Ottoman narrative developed by Turkey on the other. Some of these productions may appear a bit low-budgeted, and less spectacular than their foreign counterparts, or their predecessors of the 60s-80s. They can also be subject to criticisms for overemphasizing one aspect or another, especially when it comes to the representation of historical characters or when they take sides in the debates about the causes and the outcome of the war. Nevertheless, these productions have brought to light new aspects of the war's visual memory, and have made considerable endeavors to open a debate about the war, and to develop a proper visual Arab memory. More than anything, they have proven that this visual memory is an extremely complex and alive memory that comes to be understood and represented by taking into account its various expressions.

### *Bibliography*

Akçali, E. (2010), *The Ambivalent Role of National Monuments in the Age of Globalization: the case of Atatürk's mausoleum in Turkey*, in "Borderlands", e-journal, Special Issue: *Ambivalent Architectures*, 9, 2, pp. 1-23, [www.borderlands.net.au](http://www.borderlands.net.au).

Akilli, S. (2016), *Secrets Hidden in the Mirage: the Cinematic Constructions of Lawrence of Arabia in the Turkish Mind*, in "Hacettepe University Journal of Turkish Studies/HÜTAD Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi", 24, pp. 7-26.

Akin, Y. (2018), *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Alkhazragi, Hussein D. (2011), *Un petit prince à la sdn: la lutte du roi Hussein du Hedjaz pour l'indépendance des provinces arabes de l'Empire ottoman*, in "Relations internationales", 146, 2, pp. 7-23.

Caton, S.C. (1999), *Lawrence of Arabia. A Film's Anthropology*, University of California Press, Oakland.

Çolak, Y. (2006), *Ottomanism vs. Kemalism: Collective memory and cultural pluralism in 1990s Turkey*, in "Middle Eastern Studies", 42, 4, pp. 587-602.

Dabbous-Sensenig, Dima (2006), *To Veil or Not to Veil: Gender and Religion on Al-Jazeera's Islamic Law and Life*, in "Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture", 3, 2, pp. 60-85, <https://www.westminsterpapers.org/articles/abstract/10.16997/wpcc.31/>.

Davis, E. (2005), *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, University of California Press, Oakland.

El Khoury, Tania (2004), *Les cinémas libanais et leurs publics*, in "L'Homme & la Société", 154, 4, pp. 131-144.

Etfagha, Mohameden Baba Ould (2006), *Voyage à l'intérieur d'al-Jazira*, in "Outre-Terre", 14, 1, pp. 317-326.

Frémeaux, J. (2004), *Les contingents impériaux au cœur de la guerre*, in "Histoire, Économie & Société", 23, 2, pp. 215-233.

Id. (2006), *Les colonies dans la Grande Guerre: Combats et épreuves des peuples d'Outre-mer*, Éditions 14-18, Paris.

Glyptis, L. (2008), *Living up to the father: The national identity prescriptions of remembering Atatürk; his homes, his grave, his temple*, in "National Identities", 10, 4, pp. 353-372.

Gräf, B.; Skovgaard-Petersen, J. (eds.) (2009), *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Gruber, Ch.; Haugbolle, S. (eds.) (2013), *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Hambuch, D. (2018), *Furrows and Forks in Emirati Short Films: Sabeel and Dreams of Rice*, in "Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée", 45, 3, pp. 396-410.

Henderson, G. (1982), *The ANZAC legend after 'Gallipoli'*, in "Quadrant", 26,7, pp. 62-64.

Kadhim, Abbas (2012), *Reclaiming Iraq. The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Karsh, E.; Karsh, I. (1997), *Myth in the desert, or not the Great Arab Revolt*, in "Middle Eastern Studies", 33, 2, pp. 267-312.

Khair, Tabish (2012), *Re-Orientalisms: meditations on exoticism and transcendence, Otherness and the Self*, in *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics. The oriental Other within, infra*, pp. 156-170.

Kraidy, Marwan M.; Omar Al-Ghazzi (2013), *Neo-Ottoman cool: Turkish popular culture in the Arab public sphere*, in "Popular Communication", 11, 1, pp. 17-29.

Kucukcan, T. (2010), *Arab Image in Turkey*, in *SETA, Report*, 1, June, [http://setad.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SETA\\_Research\\_Report\\_1\\_Arab\\_Image\\_T\\_Kucukcan.pdf](http://setad.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SETA_Research_Report_1_Arab_Image_T_Kucukcan.pdf).

Lamloum, Olfa (2009), *Al-Jazeera: a Pan-Arab revival?*, 15, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00356755/>.

Larkin, C. (2010), *Remaking Beirut: Contesting Memory, Space, and the Urban Imaginary of Lebanese Youth*, in "City & Community", 9, 4, pp. 414-442.

Leclerc, Ch. (1998), *Avec T.E. Lawrence en Arabie. La Mission militaire française au Hedjaz, 1916-1920*, Préface de M. Larès et M. Brown, Editions L'Harmattan, Paris.

Long, A. (2009), *The Hidden and the Visible in British Orientalism: The Case of Lawrence of Arabia*, in "Middle East Critique", 18, 1, pp. 21-37.

Löschnigg, M.; Sokolowska-Paryż M. (2014), *The Great War in postmemory literature and film*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston.

Lucca, V. (2015), *THEEB*. Film Comment, 51, 6, p. 73.

Macfie, A.L. (2007), *Representations of Lawrence of Arabia: From Said's Orientalism (1978) to David Lean's Film (1962)*, in "Journal of Postcolonial Writing", 43, 1, pp. 77-87.

Maila-Afeiche, A.-M. (1995), *Politique de conservation de deux monuments historiques libanais: Nahr-el-Kelb et Zbaydé*, in "National museum news", 2, pp. 6-9.

Ministère de la culture direction générale des antiquités Maïla-Afeiche, A.-M.; et al. (2010), *Le site de Nahr el-Kalb*, Ministère de la culture, Direction générale des antiquités, Beyrouth.

Makdisi, Saree (2006), *Beirut, a City without History?*, in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, *infra*, pp. 201-214.

*Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (2006), Edited by Ussama Makdisi and P. Silverstein, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Muslih, Muhammad (1991), *The rise of local nationalism in the Arab East*, in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, *infra*, pp. 167-185.

Nairi, Asma Hedi (2017), *Collective identity and traumatic memory in the cinematic expression*, in "Abant Kültürel Araştırmalar Dergisi", 2, 4, pp. 43-56.

Nanes, S. (2007), *National identity in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, in *Nationalism in a Global Era. The persistence of nations*, *infra*, pp. 221-239.

Nashef, Hania (2018), *Coming of Age in Troubled Times: Son of Babylon and Theeb*, in "Film International", 16, 2, pp. 24-32.

Nasr, Ghassan (2018), *Fairouz and the Rahbanis: Nation, Nostalgia, and a Lebanese Cosmopolitan Modern*, Diss. Indiana University.

*Nationalism in a Global Era. The persistence of nations* (2007), Edited by M. Young, E. Zuelow, A. Sturm, Routledge, Abingdon.

Pitts, G.A. (2016), *Fallow Fields: Famine and the Making of Lebanon*, Diss. Georgetown University, [https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1042896/Pitts\\_georgetown\\_0076D\\_13464.pdf?sequence=1](https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1042896/Pitts_georgetown_0076D_13464.pdf?sequence=1).

al-Qattan, Najwa (2014), *When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon*, in "International Journal of Middle East Studies", 46, 4, pp. 719-736.

Ead. (2015), *Fragments of wartime memories from Syria and Lebanon*, in *Syria in World War I. Politics, economy, and society*, *infra*, pp. 146-165.

Ragab, Tarek Saad (2011), *The crisis of cultural identity in rehabilitating historic Beirut-downtown*, in "Cities", 28, 1, pp. 107-114.

*Re-orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics. The oriental Other within* (2012), Edited by L. Lau, A.C. Mendes, Routledge, Abingdon.

Reynaud, D. (2014), *National versions of the Great War: Modern Australian Anzac cinema*, in M. Löschnigg; M. Sokolowska-Paryż, *The Great War in post-memory literature and film*, supra, pp. 289-304.

Samuel-Azran, T. (2013), *Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy*, in "American Behavioral Scientist", 57, 9, pp. 1293-1311.

Saunders, N.J.; Faulkner, N. (2010), *Fire on the desert: conflict archaeology and the Great Arab Revolt in Jordan, 1916-18*, in "Antiquity", 84, 324, pp. 514-527.

Seal, G. (2007), *ANZAC: The sacred in the secular*, in "Journal of Australian Studies", 31, 91, pp. 135-144.

Simpson, C. (2010), *From Ruthless Foe to National Friend: Turkey, Gallipoli and Australian Nationalism*, in "Media International Australia", 137, 1, pp. 58-66.

Slade, P. (2003), *Gallipoli thanatourism: The Meaning of ANZAC*, in "Annals of Tourism Research", 30, 4, pp. 779-794.

*Syria in World War I. Politics, economy, and society* (2015), Edited by M. Talha Çiçek, Routledge, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Tanielian, M.S. (2014), *Feeding the City: the Beirut Municipality and the Politics of Food during World War I*, in "International Journal of Middle East Studies", 46, 4, pp. 737-758.

Tarawneh, Mohamed Fayez; Naamneh Mahmood (2011), *Urbanization and Social Identities in Jordan: The Case of Irbid*, in "Journal of Comparative Family Studies", 42, 4, pp. 615-635.

Tauber, E. (2014), *The Arab Movements in World War I*, Routledge, Abingdon-on-Thames (new edition).

*The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (1991), Rashid Khalidi; Lisa Anderson; Muhammad Muslih; Reeva S. Simon, Editors, Columbia University Press, New York.

Turner, A. (1998), *Robert Bolt: Scenes From Two Lives*, Century Hutchinson Ltd., London.

Uyar, M. (2013), *Ottoman Arab Officers between Nationalism and Loyalty during the First World War*, in "War in History", 20, 4, pp. 526-544.

Volk, L. (2010), *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Wilson, M.C. (1991), *The Hashemites, the Arab Revolt, and Arab Nationalism*, in *The origins of Arab nationalism*, cit., pp. 204-21.

Winterbun, J. (2013), *The Martyrs Memorial and Museum in Amman*, in "Military History matters", 18/06, <https://www.military-history.org/articles/museum-the-martyrs-memorial-and-museum-jordan.htm>.

Woods, E.M.B. (2014), *From Black and White to Colour: The Portrayal of Female Identity Through Musical Performance in Middle Eastern Film*

and Video, Diss. School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), [http://www.academia.edu/download/35898944/Woods.Dissertation\\_copy.pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/35898944/Woods.Dissertation_copy.pdf).

Yanardağoğlu, E.; Karam, Imad N. (2013), *The fever that hit Arab satellite television: audience perceptions of Turkish TV series*, in "Identities", 20, 5, pp. 561-579.

Yörük, Z.; Vatikiotis P. (2013), *Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera "Colonialism"*, in "International Journal of Communication (19328036)", 7, pp. 2361-2385.

Zayani, M.; Sahraoui, S. (2017), *The Culture of Al Jazeera: Inside an Arab Media Giant*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC.

Zubaida, Sami (2002), *The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq*, in "International Journal of Middle East Studies", Special Issue: *Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia*, 34, 2, pp. 205-215.

### *Filmography*

Abouseif, Salah (1981), *al-Qādisiyyah*, General Organization for cinemas and theaters.

Abu Nowar, Naji (2014), *Theeb/Dīb*, MAD Solutions.

Akkad, Moustapha (1980), *Lion of the Desert*, Falcon International Productions.

Al-Jazeera (2013), *Al Nakba: the Palestinian catastrophe*, Al Jazeera documentary unit. Id. (2014), *World War One through Arab Eyes*, Al Jazeera documentary unit.

'Awdah Abū Tāyih (2009), Arab Center for Media production.

Barakat, Henry (1966), *Safar Barlik*, Phenicia films.

Crowe, R. (2014), *The Water Diviner*, Entertainment One Films.

Demirag, T. (1965), *Canakkale Aslanlari*, Türk Silahlı kuvvetleri ile and filmin.

Dixon, J. (1985), *Anzacs*, Nine Network.

Jarrold, J. (1999), *All the King's Men*, BBC.

Lean, D. (1962), *Lawrence of Arabia*, Horizon Pictures.

*Mehmetçik Kut'ül Amare* (2018), TRT 1.

Mousa Thaer (2008), *Lawrence al-'Arab*, EBLA International.

Shukri, Jameel Mohammed (1983), *Clash of Loyalties/al-Mas'alah al-kubrā*, General Organization for cinemas and theaters.

Weir, P. (1981), *Gallipoli*, Village Roadshow.

Wincer, S. (1987), *The Lighthorsemen*, Columbia TriStar.