

Middle East through Film

Course code: IRS365/665

Term and year: Winter 2026

Day and time: 10:00-14:30, Mon-Thu, Jan 12-27

Instructor: Ebru Akcasu, Ph.D.

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Consultation hours: By appointment

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| Credits US/ECTS | 3/6 | Level | |
| Length | 15 weeks | Pre-requisite | |
| Contact hours | 42 hours | Grading | |

1. Course Description

This introductory-level course allows students to critically engage with representations of the Middle East in classical and contemporary mainstream and non-mainstream films. The semester will be devoted to the students actively establishing and then building on a foundation that will allow them to recognize and go beyond stereotypes towards a more nuanced understanding of the history of cinematic engagement with a region that remains of great significance for our contemporary world. The course approaches the Middle East and its inhabitants from an intersectional perspective and has an expanded scope of study, including representations by Hollywood and the “self,” and others. Themes touched upon include but are not limited to religion, gender and sexuality, migration and diaspora, tradition and modernity, conflict and resistance, and, power.

2. Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Develop a critical and analytical approach to the cinematic experience.
- Practice being active film watchers.
- Gain a foundational understanding of the Middle East in modern cinema.

3. Reading Material

Required Materials

- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009.
- Hall, Stuart, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis, eds. *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. London: Routledge, 1980.
- Rastegar, Kamran. *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, And Cultural Memory in the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

Recommended Materials

- Alford, Matthew. *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*. New York: Pluto Press, 2010.
- Corringan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. New York: Pearson, 2014.
- Khatib, Lina. *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics and the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

4. Teaching methodology

This course is made up of several components (1) contextualization, (2) screenings, (3) engaged seminar discussion, (4) student presentations, (5) journaling. Each screening will be followed by a group discussion that will address a set of questions relevant to the film and the assigned reading. The final session will be devoted to student presentations, followed by a student's choice film. Readings are available online.

5. Course Schedule

| Date | Class Agenda |
|--------------------------|--|
| Session 1 12 January | Topic: Power, Representation, and Cinema Description: Introductions, course aims, and expectations. Screening: <i>Reel Bad Arabs</i> , 2006 Assignments/deadlines: Journals; Rastegar, "Productive Traumas" |
| Session 2 13 January | Topic: Framing the Other (I) Description: Orientalism and Access Screening: <i>The Sheik</i> , 1921 Assignments/deadlines: Journals; Said, "Orientalism" |
| Session 3 14 January | Topic: Self-Determination Description: Power and agency Screening: <i>Lawrence of Arabia</i> , 1962 Assignments/deadlines: Journals; Hall, "Encoding, Decoding" |
| Session 4 15 January | Topic: Colonialism and Resistance Description: The Question of Self-Determination Screening: <i>Battle of Algiers</i> , 1966 Assignments/deadlines: Journals; Rastegar, "Freedom, then Silence." |
| Session 5 19 January | Topic: Framing the Other (II) Description: Orientalism and Access Screening: <i>Midnight Express</i> , 1978 Assignments/deadlines: Journals; Butler, "Precarious Life, Grievable Life" |
| Session 6 20 January | Topic: Framing the Other, in Reverse Description: Alternative imaginings of the self and other Screening: <i>Conquest 1453</i> , 2012 Assignments/deadlines: Journals |
| Session 7 21 January | Topic: Ideas, Ideologies, and Identities (I) Description: What's Fluid and What's Static? Screening: <i>Persepolis</i> , 2007 Assignments/deadlines: Journals |
| Session 8 22 January | Topic: Ideas, Ideologies, and Identities (II) Description: What's Fluid and What's Static? Screening: <i>The Square</i> , 2013 Assignments/deadlines: Journals |
| Session 9 26 January | Topic: Migration, Exile, Statelessness Description: Displacement, identity, belonging Screening: <i>Flee</i> , 2021 Assignments/deadlines: Journals |
| Session 10 27 January | Topic: Conflict and Catastrophe (II) Description: Revisiting frames of war Screening: Student's choice Assignments/deadlines: Student presentations |

6. Course Requirements and Assessment (with estimated workloads)

| Assignment | Workload (hours) | Weight in Final Grade | Evaluated Course Specific Learning Outcomes | Evaluated Institutional Learning Outcomes* |
|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Class Participation | 42 | 20% | Demonstrating punctuality, preparedness for active participation, critical engagement. | 1, 2, 3. |
| Film journals | 22 | 25% | Engaging critically and coherently with course materials; originality. | 1, 2. |
| Presentations | 12 | 25% | Engaging critically and coherently with course materials and supporting a clearly defined argument. | 1, 2. |
| Comparative essay | 12 | 30% | Engaging critically and coherently with course materials and supporting a clearly defined argument. | 1, 2. |
| TOTAL | 150 | 100% | | |

*1 = Critical Thinking; 2 = Effective Communication; 3 = Effective and Responsible Action

7. Detailed description of the assignments

Assignment 1: Participation

Students must be engaged viewers and discussants of the films for this course to run effectively. Be there, be present, be on time, be ready to discuss. There are no wrong questions or comments. **Due:** Daily.

Assignment 2: Film Journals

Students will keep a film journal to critically engage with themes, narratives, cinematic techniques, the perpetuation and subversion of stereotypes, intersectionality, and cross-cultural commonalities. The journal should be handwritten and updated after every screening and submitted at the end of each session. Word count: 300 per film. **Due:** Daily.

Assessment breakdown

| Assessed area | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Clear thesis statement | 10% |
| Critical thinking, engagement with reading, originality | 45% |
| On time and correct length | 15% |
| Well-structured, clearly defined, and readable | 30% |

Assignment 3: Presentations

Student presentations will take place on the final session. Each student is expected to give a critical and creative re-interpretation of a film/segment of film in dialogue with at least one of the readings. **Due:** 27 January

Assessment breakdown

| Assessed area | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| Critical engagement with film | 30% |
| Integration of readings | 25% |

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|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Creativity and reinterpretation | 25% |
| Presentation structure and delivery | 20% |

Assignment 4: Comparative essay

The final assignment for the class is a comparative essay of 1,500 words for BA students and 2,000 words for MA students. The papers should compare two (or more) films from a critical perspective and an angle of the student's choosing (e.g., representations of culture, politics, identity, who is telling the story, whose voice is missing, stereotypes, etc.). The papers *must* be engaged with the course discussions, seminars, presentations, and readings. **Due:** 30 January.

Assessment breakdown

| Assessed area | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Comparative critical analysis of films | 35% |
| Engagement with course readings and discussions | 25% |
| Argumentation, structure, coherence | 20% |
| Academic writing (sources, formatting, language, etc.) | 20% |

8. General Requirements and School Policies

General requirements

All coursework is governed by AAU's academic rules. Students are expected to be familiar with the academic rules in the Academic Codex and Student Handbook and to maintain the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity in their work. Please see the AAU intranet for a [summary of key policies](#) regarding coursework.

Course specific requirements

There are no special requirements or deviations from AAU policies for this course.