

# EDITORIAL



## On Photographs and Returning the Gaze

Photography, that nineteenth-century invention, could be seen as a symbol of the age of modernity for several reasons. Not only was it a product of a marriage between science and art but, more importantly, it epitomized *the* new mode of representation, which was distinctly different from all forms of representations (such as painting and copying) that preceded it.

In this sense, photography was at the heart of the age that Walter Benjamin dubbed as that of ‘mechanical reproduction’. Through mass reproduction of the image, the rituals previously connected with viewing an artwork began to disappear. Similarly, the multiplicity of available copies situated the image within endless possibilities of uses and meanings. No longer does the image, in our times, belong to its producer or to the person(s) it depicts; it ‘belongs’, rather, to each and every viewer. As a result of this, we can now position images not only in the moment of their production, but also in endless moments of their uses – and abuses. Consider the simple fact, for instance, that

A panorama of Jerusalem from 1869 by the German photographer Hammerschmidt.

we often access the very same image in different websites and put it to different uses in the Internet. A portrait of a powerful person could be found in sites that oppose that person in specific contexts, in satirical sites that ridicule the person and in sites that have been created for admirers or ‘fans’ of the person to dwell on her/his beauty or follow her/his life in admiration. Furthermore, a picture on the net could be retouched, animated, changed beyond recognition and transferred into new realms and contexts.

In this special issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly*, we explore representations of Palestine and its people while studying, at the same time, a number of photographs, their histories and their use in the context of scholarly research. In more than one sense, we explore Palestine at the modern age of mechanical reproduction by examining the work of certain photographers and the histories of the craft in the east. We also use photographs to interrogate history.

The issue was originally meant to be devoted to the history and uses of photography in the socio/geographical context in question. As contributions started to arrive, however, the original intent gradually began to change. What started as an issue on photography resulted in an issue more about ways of *gazing*. The various contributions in it relate in one way or another to different categories of individuals gazing at the Holy Land – in its widest possible definition. In Glenn Bowman’s contribution, it is the anthropologist and the ethnographer who do the initial gazing, while Michelle Woodward and Linda Wheatley-Irving discuss the gaze of the photographer’s camera. In all three cases, the gazing eye appears to be an intruding and interrogating eye that wants to *see* and to *show*. ‘Seeing’, in these cases, involves the specific and partial subject that the gazer was looking for, while ‘showing’ involves the act of representing the subject to a wider network of spectators. An aura of objectivity appears to be associated with the act of showing or telling. Rarely is it revealed that what is being shown is essentially an incomplete image of the subject – one presented from a particular angle. To use Bowman’s terminology, the image is consistently “perspectival in nature and profoundly partial”.

The three contributions mentioned above challenge common notions of objective representation. Bowman argues that studies of Jerusalem by anthropologists present us with partial knowledge of the lives of the city; Woodward illustrates how photojournalism should necessarily be seen within the societal context in which it is produced and in which it functions. Woodward’s point also relates directly to Wheatley-Irving’s discussion of the ‘Holy Land’ photographs by the early photographer Francis Bedford which place his depictions of Palestine more within the context of Victorian Britain than of Palestine’s social reality.

Like Wheatley-Irving’s essay, two other contributions in this essay relate to the history of early photography in the region. Unlike her contribution, however, they focus on

the work of the native photographers. Badr el-Hage highlights the pioneering role played by early Armenian photographers in making photography an eastern practice. Ahmad Mrowat informs us about the newfound collection of photographs of Karimeh Abbud, possibly the first woman professional photographer in the east, and certainly in Palestine. Looking at the studio portraits that she produced, one wonders if the gaze ought to be taken as a one-way relationship between the photographer and the photographed. For Abbud's subjects clearly gazed with the utmost confidence at the lens of the camera, and by extension at us, the spectators. The poses of the subjects of her photographs, although typical of the period, are so assertive that this viewer felt they were the ones doing the gazing at his world while his gaze into theirs was rather hesitant and insecure. The gaze of the woman standing in front of a Persian rug hanging, carrying and leaning on a chair, was so piercing that her (possibly retouched) eyes appear to be seeing through us as viewers. This Nazareth woman has certainly returned the gaze a thousand times, for she has gazed back at every person who has seen her pose in what appears to be a makeshift studio outside in the open. She refuses to tell us much about who she was and who she could represent.

In her essay on the picture of Palestinian refugee children schooling in a tent, Ella Shohat meditates on the refugee condition; on the power of colonialism to exclude and yet to dominate the lives of its victims by making them speak its own language. But in Mona Halaby's essay on school girls in British Mandate Jerusalem, another 'category' of subjects – to borrow Bowman's terminology once more – is placed on display for our gazing eyes in the various photographs that illustrate the essay. Utilizing school notebooks, oral histories and photographers, Halaby paints a picture, for the reader, of the lives of young women in a private missionary school in Jerusalem in the 1920s and 1930s. By doing so, she not only illuminates our understanding, as partial as that may be, of social life in Palestine during that crucial period, but she also gave voices to young women – a subaltern category at best in those times.

Photographs lend themselves to a variety of meanings. In this issue of *JQ*, they tell part of the story of the Palestinian people. The essays in this issue considered together form a collage of images that both bring a society back to life and illustrate, for us, how we can think about images. They also remind us that it is not only us who gaze at the Palestinians in the photographs but it is also them, whom we see in the pictures, who return our gaze; they stare back at us as a remainder that they cannot be forgotten.

*Issam Nasser, Special Editor for this issue*