

Amazing Pictures

Scrolling through my Facebook feed on a summer day in July 2017, I began to notice that several friends had posted the same story about Iraq to their timelines. A click led me to “Amazing Pictures of Peaceful Iraq” on the website of *Business Insider (BI)*.⁴ There, I met a succession of saturated images of mid-century Baghdad. Taken together, they build a colorful modernist cityscape: red buses on grand boulevards, green parks in the background of a bustling café, and svelte swimmers in aquamarine pools. Like windows opening onto idyllic vistas of bourgeois life in a modern city, the pictures stand out like an unbelievable utopia to anyone familiar with the bleak media profile of contemporary Baghdad. For a viewer unfamiliar with Iraqi history, *BI*’s feature of bright and light documentary images of once upon a time in modern Baghdad can even evoke disbelief. Could this really have been what Iraq was once like?

These “amazing pictures” of the past are certainly in discord with images of present-day Iraqi cities devastated by war, corruption, and ecological crises. The juxtaposition is not implicit. It is scripted directly into the photo essay, beginning with the title. The term “Peaceful Iraq” alludes to its opposite: war-ravaged Iraq. This is exemplary of a media narrative that has become commonplace since the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, a motif I describe as “Iraq before.” These narratives center mid-century modernism in Iraq as visible evidence of the “civilization” before the barbarism. The motif neglects to mention and even negates the atrocities of the 1940s and 1950s carried out by the British-installed Hashemite regime because they cannot compare to the atrocities of successive regimes. Iraq-before narratives are especially recurrent in news reporting and clickbait BuzzFeed-esque articles—with titles like “These pictures of Iraq 60 years ago will make you wish you lived there”—as well as photo sharing within the Iraqi diaspora on social media sites like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. Another example is actually embedded in the midst of the *BI* article: a tweet from the popular @Iraqpics Twitter account reiterates a similar captioned image in the photo essay that explains, “The city of #Basra was once called ‘The Venice of the East’ for its many rivers & canals,” a refrain that invokes urban nostalgia for the Iraqi city solely on the basis of a comparison to Western Europe.⁵

BI's military and defense editor Jeremy Bender, who formerly worked for BuzzFeed, authored "Amazing Pictures of Peaceful Iraq." Conveyed in four brief paragraphs and a caption for each image, Bender's words guide a viewer's experience of the images as one of disbelief. For example, he writes, "After the ravages of Saddam Hussein's decades in power and the chaos that's taken hold for most of the years after the US invasion in 2003, it's difficult for outsiders to envision the country as a thriving or even functional place. . . . but before its decades of war and totalitarian rule, Iraq was a quickly modernizing country. . . . below we have some photos that highlight what Iraq was like before decades of war and conflict affected the county [sic]."⁶ *BI* is one of the most popular news websites in the United States. It is notable that *BI*'s military and defense editor was responsible for the popularization of these documentary images of "what Iraq was like before," as it reminds us that any examination of Iraq in US media tends to come from a military-centered perspective. The limitations of this are significant. For example, the interpretation of the past offered in the *BI* article elides the historical context of social and political life in Iraq under indirect colonial rule until the present. Bender passively holds "decades of war and conflict" culpable for Iraq's decline, without acknowledgment of the agents of military violence. This effectively decouples war from the apparently peaceful era that preceded it.

In fact, the succession of political coups and military conflicts in Iraq during the past sixty years cannot be disentangled from the decades of corruption, exploitation, and repression created under forms of colonial dominance that shaped Iraq until the revolution of 1958. The revolution deposed the British-installed Hashemite monarchy, which had reigned since Iraq attained nominal independence in 1932 following the end of the formal British mandate. During the height of oil production and development in the 1950s, the public relations office of the Iraq Petroleum Company created and circulated images of a peaceful and prosperous Kingdom of Iraq under the monarchy for the world to consume. The British-controlled multinational oil company in Iraq had a major stake in regional stability and repressing anti-imperial movements against the status quo, and thus it sponsored media that would serve the state and the company's interests.

Image Extraction

When I clicked open the *BI* link, I immediately recognized that the photo essay did not include actual photographs. Rather, it featured screenshots of a

digitized oil-company-sponsored film posted on YouTube that I had watched and even presented many times as part of my research on oil media in the Middle East. The original film, *Ageless Iraq*, is a twenty-one minute English-language prestige documentary made in 1954 about the social, cultural, and economic landscape of Iraq. The film was sponsored by the Iraq Petroleum Company, produced by the Associated British Pathé and Film Centre, and distributed by the Associated British Pathé and the Petroleum Film Bureau in London. In the essay, Bender describes the film inaccurately as “a travel reel that showcased the beauty and diversity of scenery found throughout the country between 1950 and 1959,” recently shared by the British archival footage company Pathé, which omits and obscures critical details about the origins of the images featured.⁷

Insufficient evidence remains from the film’s original production to illuminate the specific history of how and for what perceived purpose *Ageless Iraq* was made. However, the film falls into a pattern of industrial film sponsorship in the region that entailed the hiring of foreign production companies—in this case, the Associated British Pathé—to make films for various uses ranging from internal employee instruction to international public relations.⁸ On the other hand, *Ageless Iraq* is a production that deviates from the Iraq Petroleum Company’s distinctive approach to media sponsorship in general. Unlike its contemporaries in the region, like Anglo-Iranian and the Kuwait Oil Company, IPC largely prioritized in-house media productions for local Arabic-speaking audiences. Like all oil-sponsored media, the film would have had to be approved by government censors in Iraq prior to distribution. The high-quality production was regarded by the Hashemite regime as an effective way to promote Iraq’s international image as a modernizing and economically robust state. Certainly, in addition to any theatrical distribution, *Ageless Iraq* was promoted in trade publications as an educational resource to British schools and film societies.

The original sponsored film features extensive scenes depicting the successes of the oil industry in Iraq, as one might expect from a documentary sponsored by an oil company. However, the *BI* essay excludes any images related to oil operations, further obscuring the oil-sponsored origins of the film. This omission recalls what Laura Mulvey describes as the “double impression of imperialism” in colonial films, expressed on the one hand as the controlled image framed by the colonizer’s eye and on the other hand as the colonizer’s “blind spot.”⁹ Here the author has selected specific screenshots to assemble a narrative about Iraq’s history as told by the

military and defense editor, excluding images of the oil industry and information about the film's oil sponsorship that could contextualize the production of the film and the modernization of the country during the mid-twentieth century.

While the 2014 essay excludes oil from the portrait it paints of Iraq, the 1954 film epitomized the celebration of oil modernity by attributing the modernization of Iraq and even the liberation of Iraqi women to the growth of an extractive industry controlled by a foreign company. In the closing scene, for example, the film cuts directly from images of oil infrastructure in Iraq's northern fields to a montage of young Iraqi women in pageants, at work in various professions, and finally in a dress shop. The voiceover is anything but subtle, claiming, "Today, her revenues from oil are helping Iraq to lay the founding for a new standard of wellbeing for all; the young people of today know that life is going to be different for them and better, far better, than it was for their fathers," continuing toward the end of the montage, "and it's natural that with all these modern developments, the women of Iraq are breaking away from their traditional style of dress, unaltered for centuries, to wear the comfortable, practical clothes that are right for this new way of life." *Ageless Iraq* illustrates Iraqi modernity using the Orientalist trope of the liberated Arab woman whose white savior, in this case, is the oil company. The oil narrative is central to the film, celebrated through the aesthetics of infrastructure composed of high-angle vistas of rigs, pipelines, and pumping stations. Yet visible evidence of oil extraction does not fit into the post-2003 fairytale of peacetime Iraq, likely because imperial desires to control Iraq's oil have fueled the British- and later United States-led invasions and occupations of the country.

Another reason for the exclusion of oil from the essay about an oil-sponsored film is that the article does not set out to present the original film as its central object in the first place—emphasized by the fact that details provided to describe the film are incorrect and incomplete. Rather, the article reproduces a selection of digital screenshots of a digitized version of only the first half of the film posted to YouTube. As the next section will examine, while the film is decontextualized, its digitized afterlife is marked by the instrumentalization of oil media images that take on new meanings.

Reel Remediation

In 2003, the British Pathé initiated a digitization project as part of an effort to revitalize and (re)monetize its entire motion picture archive. According to their website, “This has allowed the British Pathé collection to be placed online for everyone to explore” and, I would add, to extract from.¹⁰ One major outcome of the archive digitization effort is that *Ageless Iraq* resurfaced from historical obscurity. The Petroleum Film Bureau in London, the nontheatrical film distributor carrying *Ageless Iraq*, shut down in 1973 and effectively ended audience access to the film, that is, until thirty years later. By 2006, when I first found it online, the digitized copy of *Ageless Iraq* appeared via the British Pathé website as two separate digital video clips that corresponded to the parent analog media objects: “Reel One” and “Reel Two.” A preview of the film was made available on the website free of charge; however, they put a price tag of fifty GBP on the right to license and download each clip.

In the years that followed (in 2009, 2011, and 2013, at least), “Reel One”—which includes the first half of the original *Ageless Iraq*—surfaced in Iraqi social media networks via YouTube. Iraqi users based in different countries posted copies of the nearly ten-minute-long clip ripped from the Pathé website. Titled variously with Arabic mistranslations or English commentary, the most popular posts featuring the digitized half-version of the original film have received more than one hundred fifty-four thousand views to date, and the audience continues to grow.

It is not clear whether British Pathé discovered the YouTube users’ violation of the license agreement since the clip remains up on the site today. But on 13 April 2014, timed precisely to coincide with the eleven-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, British Pathé launched its own presence on YouTube featuring a video post titled “Ageless Iraq Reel 1 (1950–1959),” which has received two hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred eight views to date.¹¹ The *Business Insider* piece—published 19 June 2014—was in fact reporting on Pathé’s reproduction of the existing partial digital reproduction of the original analog film to the social media site. Thus the act of reporting transformed the reproduction into a social media event.

The Pathé took notice of the post’s popularity, likely spurred by the virality of the *Business Insider* feature. On 8 August 2014, as part of rebranding their YouTube channel, the British Pathé posted a new three-minute and forty-

five-second, completely reedited version of its digital reproduction of *Ageless Iraq*. This condensed and recut version is titled, "Welcome to Baghdad: How Iraq Used to Be in the 1950s," tagged "#BritishPathé #History #Iraq #Baghdad #1950s #Fifties #MiddleEast," and described as a "fascinating insight into Iraq in the 1950s. It is a country that is steeped in a rich history and culture. The very beginnings of civilisation [sic] started here. It is where man began cultivating the land and where writing was conceived. It even used to be a tourist hot spot."¹² The title and description reframe the film by employing the "Iraq before" motif, likely in an effort to appeal to the same audiences drawn to "Amazing Pictures of Peaceful Iraq."

Like the *Business Insider* essay, the newer Pathé post fully adopts the license to editorialize history in line with the fairytale narrative that elevates oil modernity and the extractive neocolonial regime of the petroleum company and state agreement, while simultaneously erasing any trace of oil industry and capital. Nowhere in the video or its presentation does it acknowledge the oil company sponsorship or include images or narration linking this vision of modern Iraq to oil extraction or the neocolonial presence of the British-controlled petroleum company. To date, the video continues to gain more and more visibility. As of September 2020, the video posted in 2014 had seven hundred ninety-four thousand five hundred sixty views, which had increased more than one hundred thousand views from when I checked one year earlier.

The same can be said for the *Business Insider* article, which appears to be enjoying a multiyear viral loop on social media. The original publication date was in July 2014, and if you recall from the beginning of this essay, I encountered it on Facebook in summer 2017. In fact, one of the reasons this particular post caught me by surprise was because I had seen the same thing posted to some of the same people's feeds three years prior. The article and the Pathé recut are a particularly troubling kind of media assemblage, enabled by the remediation of oil-sponsored media. Originally, Pathé digitized and posted the film to its own website in order to monetize it by extracting new value from the all-but-forgotten film through licenses for its digital reproduction. However, it's clear that the most value has been derived in the form of cultural currency ascribed to the digital reproduction of the film as it mediates the colonial present for mass audiences that continue to grow. Notably, it is this very notion of corporate cultural currency that drove oil companies like the Iraq Petroleum Company to sponsor prestige films in the first place.

Ageless Iraq is a well-earned title, for it is this version of Iraq, created by an oil company and its client state, that endures. Beyond its afterlives on social media, clips of the digitized film have been extracted and reproduced as archival footage in numerous documentary films about Iraq, including *Forget Baghdad* (dir. Samir Naqqash, Germany/Switzerland, 2003) and *Iraq's Invisible Beauty* (dir. Sahim Omar Kalifa, Belgium/France, release forthcoming), which both examine the country's history through first-person perspectives of Iraqis who lived through the political upheavals of the 1950s and beyond. Ultimately, the resurfacing of *Ageless Iraq* in contemporary film and media reproduces and upholds the oil modernity narrative. More than sixty years after the original production, the oil-sponsored images live on as signifiers of the good life that once existed in Iraq.

Notes

- 1 See Mona Damluji, "Oil Media Archives," in *Petrocinema: Sponsored Film and the Oil Industry*, ed. Marina Dahlquist and Patrick Vonderau (Bloomsbury, Forthcoming).
- 2 Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).
- 3 For a detailed account of the entangled histories of British colonial rule and oil industrialization in Iraq, see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, & Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
- 4 In 2014, Comscore ranked *Business Insider* as the top business news publication in the United States, when it boasted more than 35 million unique visitors in a single month.
- 5 Iraq Pictures, Twitter post, May 1, 2014, 2:39 p.m., www.twitter.com/IraqPics/status/461983153759223808/photo/1.
- 6 Jeremy Bender, "Amazing Pictures of Peaceful Iraq," *Business Insider*, 19 June 2014, www.businessinsider.com/amazing-pictures-of-peaceful-iraq-2014-6.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, *Films that Work: Industrial Film and The Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
- 9 Laura Mulvey, "Dislocations: Some Reflections on the Colonial Compilation Film," in *Film and the End of Empire*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 10 "History of British Pathé," *British Pathé*, www.britishpathe.com/blog/history/.
- 11 British Pathé, "Ageless Iraq Reel 1 (1950-1959)," YouTube Video, 9:50, April 13, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YY-V-BI7GU8.
- 12 British Pathé, "Welcome to Baghdad: How Iraq Used to Be in the 1950s | British Pathé," YouTube Video, 9:50, August 8, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AajPxROvcTA.

Mona Damluji is Assistant Professor of Film & Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a Peabody and Emmy Award-nominated producer of the short documentary series *The Secret Life of*

Muslims. Her teaching, research and creative work engages underrepresented media histories and cultural studies of oil, urban space and infrastructure with a focus on the Middle East and its diasporas. Mona's current book project *Pipeline Cinema* is a history of how multinational petroleum companies shaped local cultural norms and global popular imaginaries of oil and the Middle East through film and media sponsorship in the twentieth century. Mona is a co-curator of the traveling exhibition *Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture* and *Multitudes: An Art Exhibit after #muslimban*. Her publications appear in *Urban History*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, *Ars Orientalis*, *MEI Insights* and *Jadaliyya*.