

# Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

## Visualizing Iraq: oil, cinema, and the modern city

MONA DAMLUJI

Assistant Professor, Department of Film & Media Studies at UC Santa Barbara

[mona.damluji@gmail.com](mailto:mona.damluji@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** Summoning the popularity and prestige of cinema, the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) invented the image of Baghdad for Iraqi audiences as the sight/site of oil modernity in the 1950s. In other words, oil urbanization, or the modernization of the city as shaped by the petroleum industry and its revenues, in Iraq cannot be understood apart from the representation of Baghdad as visible evidence of petroleum's promise to benefit the national population. The British-controlled oil company in Iraq produced a programme of at least two-dozen sponsored films and cine-magazine episodes between 1951 and 1958, which this essay examines as an emblematic case of neo-colonial film, constituting an archive of media practices that bridge the categories of colonial film on one hand, and industrial film on the other. After World War II, the Atlantic Charter reinforced the right to democratic self-rule as a global norm and the British state developed creative tactics to abet its continued control over strategic resources in its colonized territories. Oil above all became central to this story and, as this essay will show, British oil companies played a fundamental role towards reinventing the imperial project in the post-colonial context of Iraq. Through a contextualized analysis of the IPC films, I argue that the company public relations office utilized the conventional approaches and standard formats of colonial and industrial film – including montage, scripted voiceover and staged b-roll – to narrativize the association between neo-colonialist practices of oil extraction and national development as causal, inherent and positive.

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