Filming the Middle East

HISTORY THROUGH THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO LIVE IT

STORY BY PETER NICHOLS; PHOTO BY JON PERLMUTTER

In the opening scene of the film *Paradise Now*, a young Palestinian woman and an Israeli soldier stare long and deep into each other's eyes. Their lingering gaze at an army checkpoint suggests love, but it's not. Is it suspicion? Defiance? Hatred? It's hard to say, but it *is* intimate, pointing up the irony of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Or is it a paradox where each side knows the other with a lover's closeness and, at the same time, neither really understands the enemy in their midst?

It's impossible to say for sure, but it makes rich fodder for discussion, and that's exactly what happens in Eve Troutt Powell's history course, Filming the Middle East. *Paradise Now* is one of over 20 movies the class viewed by filmmakers from Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere in this troubled region. Balanced with reading assignments from history texts, the films probe how different "national cinemas" and ethnic or religious viewpoints characterize Egyptian political history, the roles of women, the creation of Israel, the experience of poverty, the Palestinian diaspora, the Iranian revolution and much more.

Powell, an associate professor of history and an expert on the modern Middle East, says the course grew out of her efforts to show students how American films and news media distort the region. "I want the students to hear the voices of Middle Eastern artists and see how *they* look at history," she explains. "I try to get the students to entertain the possibility that

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Movies can part the curtains of political reality and historical fact and reveal people as more than one-dimensional types depicted in slogans and headlines and Hollywood cartoon villains. "Students are used to getting their information from screens," she notes. "Watching a film, they get the look I'm waiting for. They're lost in it. They can't distance themselves from it. They see it in me too." After the screenings, the class crowds to the front of the room, eager to offer their own interpretations or to take issue with the directors and each other.

"Before I took this course, the Middle East was an abstract concept to me," reports Julia Cohen, C'10. "Viewing the films, I found myself in Middle Eastern shoes, experiencing the frustration, joy, fear and relief — and hoping for some kind of happy ending." English major Dave Mangum, C'07, observes, "In texts, we analyze things in military, economic, political and sociological terms but usually overlook the personal responses

to change. The films show flesh-and-blood people with all their complexities and ambiguities."

Paradise Now is a good example. The film, directed by Palestinian-born Hany Abu-Assad, follows two young men from Nablus as they are prepared to carry out a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. Their motives are a muddle of political grievance, religious belief that looks a lot like doubt and poignant personal histories. The riveting story neither condones the bombing nor condemns the bombers, but looks behind the militancy at the truth and confusion and humor that attend the mundane tasks of getting ready to kill by killing yourself. The movie ends with a bomber seated in a crowded bus. The scene cuts to white, and credits roll down the screen in silence. Powell flicks on the light. Everyone has "the look."

"These films show me that the Middle East contains more political, religious and personal complexity than I had thought," Mangum says. "Seeing these issues acted out by real people, I'm reminded of how cautiously I think external powers should tread." ■