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“Behind Cinerama’s Aluminum Curtain”

Cold War Spectacle and Propaganda at the First Damascus International Exposition

❖ Kevin W. Martin

In September 1954, modern experts representing the recently reestablished civilian government of Syria staged the First Damascus International Exposition. The first truly international fair mounted in the post-independence Arab world, the Damascus International Exposition was conceived under the regime of Syria’s recently deposed military dictator Adib al-Shishakli as one of many projects to increase trade, stimulate capital investment, and raise Syria’s “international profile.”¹

Given the historical moment at which the exposition occurred and the number and diversity of states formally participating in the event, it inevitably became the site of “visual and discursive . . . contests” between geopolitical antagonists, “rival claimants” for anti-Zionist leadership, and proponents of competing blocs of states in the region and beyond.² The exposition took place

1. Kevin W. Martin, “Presenting the ‘True Face of Syria’ to the World: Urban Disorder and Civilizational Anxieties at the First Damascus International Exposition,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 2010), p. 393. For the 1952 legislation establishing the exposition’s administration and allocating its initial funds, see Foreign Service Despatch 479, 4 February 1953, in Box 14, Folder 500.7, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, General Records, 1950–1955, 430.1–500.7, Record Group (RG) 84, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). For its formal announcement, see Foreign Service Despatch 647, 17 April 1953, in Box 14, Folder 500.7, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, General Records, 1950–1955, 430.1–500.7, RG 84, NARA. For details about previous expositions mounted in the region, see Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830–1914* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

2. Martin, “Presenting the ‘True Face of Syria’ to the World,” p. 393. Participants included Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the People’s Republic of China, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, France, (West) Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union, Spain, the United States, Yemen, and Yugoslavia. See “Ma’rid Dimashq al-Dawli Safha Mushriqa fi Tarikh Suriya al-Haditha,” *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, pp. 18–19; and “Ta’a ma’i ila Ma’rid Dimashq al-Dawli,” *al-Dunya* (Damascus), 27 August 1954, p. 13.

in the Cold War context, and therefore the conflict's chief protagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union, made the most visible of such efforts.

In this article I analyze the discourse produced by the U.S. government's unusual entry in this multifaceted contest, twice-daily screenings of the film *This Is Cinerama*—the first exhibition of Cinerama's unique “panoramic” widescreen projection and “surround-sound” technology outside the United States, an event that has been almost entirely overlooked by scholars of U.S. public diplomacy.³ Drawing on U.S. government archival materials, the Syrian press, and the content of the film *This Is Cinerama*, I compare U.S. and Syrian perceptions of this multimedia spectacle. In the process, I explore the relationship between politics, technology, and cultural representation, as well as the promise of U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world on the eve of the period in which such efforts became central to U.S. Cold War strategy throughout the developing world.

The Cold War and the “Struggle for Syria”

The postwar era of 1945–1963 was particularly tumultuous in Syria, a “critical juncture” in the country's history, when it was the “focus of multiple, interrelated struggles between local, regional, and global actors,” collectively known in the historiography as the “struggle for Syria.”⁴ The nationalist and anti-imperialist passions then sweeping the region were particularly intense in Syria, a reality that would cause increasing numbers of prominent political figures to eschew close alliance with either the Eastern or the Western bloc. Syria's gradual adoption of a nonaligned, “neutralist” posture, combined with its post-1954 tolerance of the local Communist Party's participation in political life, infuriated U.S. policymakers, who considered nonalignment a Soviet-inspired fraud and judged Syria to be on the brink of “going Communist.”⁵

3. Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 113–114.

4. Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 8; Martin, “Presenting the ‘True Face of Syria’ to the World,” p. 391; and Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (1965; London: I. B. Tauris, 1986).

5. The Damascus exposition occurred just six months before the inaugural meeting of the conference of nonaligned African and Asian states, popularly known as the Bandung conference, in April 1955. For a detailed treatment of the trajectory of neutralism in Syrian and regional politics, see Rami Ginat, *Syria and the Doctrine of Arab Neutralism: From Independence to Dependence* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2005). Syria's two-stage parliamentary elections, held during and immediately after the exposition, were widely acknowledged to be the region's freest and fairest to date. According to Patrick Seale, the elections revealed “a strong current of anti-American and anti-western feeling” and “marked the triumph of neutralism in Arab opinion.” See Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, pp. 182, 184–185.

This perception was reflected in the State Department's "Policy Directive #1," issued six weeks before the opening of the Damascus International Exposition. The directive admonished local diplomatic personnel that their primary task was to "expose [the] extent to which the USSR and internal communist subversion constitutes a real threat to Syria, and promote support of whatever collective security arrangements may develop in the area."⁶ This insistence on viewing Syrian domestic politics through the prism of the U.S.-Soviet zero-sum contest prompted U.S. intelligence agencies to engage in increasingly aggressive and destabilizing interference in the country's internal affairs during the 1949–1957 period.⁷ Such Cold War policy mantras also shaped the U.S. embassy's participation in the exposition, which was, in effect, an exercise in propaganda or, as U.S. officials came to call it, "public diplomacy."⁸

The exposition's Syrian proponents acknowledged and embraced the event's status as "a giant theater—or a great multiplicity of theaters—in which each nation projects the image that it wishes others to have of it," and they saw each country's participation in this "autoethnographic" and propagandistic light.⁹ Syria's self-constructed role as host displayed this spirit, as both official and popular discourse asserted that international expositions offer the clearest evidence of a state's "development and progress" in the "industrial, economic, social, and cultural" spheres.¹⁰ Hence the exposition was labeled "a sign of Syria's progress" and a "reflection" of the "renaissance of Syria" and other "modern Arab states," all of whom had taken "firm and measured steps" up the "staircase of progress."¹¹ This discourse in its most extreme form echoed

6. Foreign Service Despatch 3, 20 July 1954, in Box 1, Folder A1–1, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, UD 3253, RG 84, NARA.

7. For details, see Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, pp. 186–306; Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 116–306; Bonnie F. Saunders, *The United States and Arab Nationalism: The Syrian Case, 1953–1960* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949–1961* (New York: I. B. Tauris Academic Series, 1995); and Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amoralty of Power Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), pp. 34–56.

8. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, pp. xv–xvi.

9. John Knight, "Discovering the World in Seville: The 1992 Universal Exposition," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (October 1992), p. 23; and Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 7. See also "Participation in Expositions is a New Kind of Propaganda," *al-Jami'a* (Damascus), 29 August 1954, p. 20. Perhaps the most interesting example appeared in the United Nations pavilion, which featured a mock "Palestinian refugee tent." See "Secrets in the Corners: The Price of Assembling a Refugee Camp at the Fair," *al-Nuqqad* (Damascus), 29 September 1954, p. 16.

10. "The Damascus International Exposition," *Sawt Suriya* (Damascus), August 1954, pp. 31, 38.

11. "The Damascus International Exposition: Proof of Syria's Progress," *Sawt Suriya* (Damascus), August 1954, pp. 8–9; "Ma'rid Dimashq Mirat al-Nahda Suriya wa-l-Bilad al-'Arabiyya al-Haditha,"

the hyperbole of the promotional campaign for Cinerama declaring that the exposition was “a noble page in the modern history of Syria,” “a light unto humanity, in both East and West,” and even comparing the fairgrounds to the Suq of ‘Ukkaz, the town east of Mecca that was the site of enormous poetry competitions and commercial fairs—the “international expositions” of their day—during the pre-Islamic period.¹²

The Soviet Union underscored its own part in the East-West spectacle by putting up the exposition’s largest pavilion, a building rumored to cost half a million dollars.¹³ “Located in a commanding position at the end of the central esplanade,” surrounded by searchlights, containing enormous displays of manufactured goods, featuring polished stone walls and floors, and a huge red star atop a “gold-plated tower,” the Soviet pavilion was “a topic of discussion high and low in Damascus.”¹⁴ Even resolutely anti-Communist journalists who published editorials mocking the boorishness of the pavilion’s staff and management were compelled to acknowledge that many Syrians “rejoiced” upon learning of the scope of Soviet participation, believing that the United States and its allies “did not support the exposition” as enthusiastically as they had taken part in similar events elsewhere.¹⁵ In the months prior to the exposition’s opening, such attitudes were well known to U.S. embassy personnel, who ruefully observed that most educated and influential Syrians were “convinced” that the sole U.S. interest in the region was Israel, that the United States was hostile to the emergence of “a strong and stable Syria,” and thus that the Soviet Union was Syria’s “only great-power friend.”¹⁶

al-Nas (Damascus), 1 September 1954, p. 3; and “At Midnight the Lights Will Be Extinguished: We Have an Appointment at the Damascus International Exposition,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 2 October 1954, p. 1.

12. “The Opening of the Fair,” *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, pp. 18–19; “At Midnight the Lights Will Be Extinguished,” p. 1; Advertisement,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 2 August 1954, p. 2; and Advertisement, *al-Jundi* (Damascus), 26 August 1954, p. 10.

13. “Going to the Fairs,” *Time*, 13 September 1954, p. 35.

14. Foreign Service Despatch 185, “Economic Summary: July–September 1954, Syria,” November 4, 1954, in Box 2, Folder “Syria–Economic–Reports–Quarterly–Economic Summary, 1954–1957,” RG 469, NARA; “Gleanings from the Damascus Fair,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 5 September 1954, p. 1; and “Participation in Fairs Is a New Kind of Propaganda,” *al-Jami’a* (Damascus), 29 August 1954, p. 20. Also see Foreign Service Despatch 184, “Political Significance of the Damascus International Fair,” Space–Travel, 4 November 1954, in Box 5, Folder 7B “Syria–Trade–Promotion, 1954–1957,” RG 469, NARA.

15. “A Russian Fez,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 13 September 1954, p. 4; “English Company Threatens to Confiscate the Soviet Pavilion!” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 5 October 1954, p. 4; and “Participation,” *al-Jami’a* (Damascus), 29 August 1954, p. 20.

16. Foreign Service Despatch 3, “USIS–Damascus” to “USIA–Washington,” 20 July 1954, in Box 1, UD 3253, Folder A1–1 “Country Plan, Global and Area Objectives,” RG 84, NARA.

Adding to these officials' disquiet, the fairgrounds also featured an impressive pavilion housing the exhibit of the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as more modest structures built by Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, and a small, unofficial display by the German Democratic Republic.¹⁷ U.S. embassy officials were so disturbed by the PRC's official participation that Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr., made numerous threats, both veiled and explicit, to withdraw from participation in the fair, behavior that became public knowledge and was thus characterized in the local press as "despicable imperialist interference" and an "infringement" of Syria's "sovereignty" and "honor."¹⁸

Given all of the above and President Dwight D. Eisenhower's frequently cited belief in the efficacy of foreign "informational" programs, U.S. ambivalence about participating in the exposition requires some explanation. Largely because of congressional parsimony and hostility to anything that smacked of "propaganda," U.S. government expenditures on "informational activities broadly defined" during Eisenhower's two terms never exceeded "slightly more than one percent of the . . . total . . . spent annually for national security."¹⁹ In 1954, the year of the exposition, the operating budget of the United States Information Agency (USIA) had been slashed by 36 percent from the previous year.²⁰

For these and other reasons, formal permission to acquire space for a U.S. exhibit was not received in Damascus until 30 June 1954, just over

17. The official advertisement for the Chinese pavilion can be found in *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 39. East Germany was denied official participation after West Germany threatened to withdraw. See Foreign Service Despatch 184.

18. See "Confidential Memorandum of Conversation, U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Syrian Foreign Minister 'Izzet Bey Saqqal," 26 July 1954, in Box 1, Folder "Damascus, Secret, 1954, 57F121," RG 84, NARA; "Confidential Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Ibrahim Bey Istuwani, Secretary General of the Syrian Foreign Ministry," 17 August 1954, in Box 1, Folder "Damascus, Secret, 1954, 57F121," Foreign Service Records of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, Secret General Records, 1954–1956, RG 84, NARA; "Confidential Memorandum of Conversation, U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Syrian Prime Minister Sa'id al-Ghazzi," 17 August 1954, in Box 1, Folder "Damascus, Secret, 1954, 57F121, RG 84, NARA; and "The Inhabitants of the Qasa' Neighborhood Reject the American Ambassador and Demand His Withdrawal from Syria," *al-Nas* (Damascus), 25 August 1954, p. 2. One day later Muhsin al-Barazi, the vehemently anti-Communist publisher of *al-Nas* who had close ties with USIS, "visited a number of the leaders and eminent persons of the Qasa' neighborhood" and got them to "repudiate the contents of the petition." See "The Qasa' Neighborhood Petition Represents Only Those Who Signed It," *al-Nas* (Damascus), 26 August 1954, p. 2.

19. Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 227.

20. Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 58–59, 64.

two months before the exposition's opening day.²¹ As a result, the United States was not even listed as an exhibitor in the exposition's official guidebook, which had long since gone to press.²² In addition, the \$5 million special fund for participation in international trade fairs that Eisenhower requested in July was appropriated too late to support U.S. participation in the exposition.²³

Thus, Harris Peel, the director of the Damascus office of the United States Information Service (USIS, the name used overseas for USIA), a man reportedly "worried about the prestige of his country," has rightfully been given the lion's share of credit for making Cinerama happen despite the indifference and frugality of officials in Washington. Peel reportedly convinced the Cinerama Corporation to lend its film, equipment, and two technicians, Warner Brothers' Studio to provide additional technical assistance, and the U.S. Air Force to provide the necessary transport, all free of charge, in a desperate attempt to "steal the show" on a shoestring budget.²⁴

USIS and Cinerama, "The Flying Carpet of the Twentieth Century"

Cinerama was developed by Fred Waller, a prolific inventor, director, and technician with decades of experience at major Hollywood studios. A refinement of Waller's previous attempts to produce three-dimensional film projection, Cinerama employed a "three-camera, three-projector system that projected a 146-degree image" on a parabolic screen (Figure 1) consisting of "110 vertical strips of perforated tape set at angles like louvers of a sideways Venetian blind," as well as a "seven-channel, multidimensional" audio system that produced a synchronized, stereophonic soundtrack of unprecedented fidelity, frequency

21. See Foreign Service Despatch 45, 26 July 1954, in Box 14, Folder 500, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, General Records, 1950–1955, 430.1–500.7, "Economic Matters (General) 1953–54," RG 84, NARA; and "Confidential Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Prime Minister Sa'id al-Ghazzi," 17 August 1954; and Foreign Service Despatch 15, "Assessment Report," 16 February 1955, in Box 2 UD 3253, Folder A8–1 Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA.

22. *Dalil ma'rid Dimashq al-dawli* [Guidebook of the Damascus International Exposition] (Damascus: Maktab al-Dalil al-'Arabi, 1954).

23. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, pp. 137–138; and Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, pp. 65–66. The funds were first used for U.S. participation in the Bangkok Constitution Fair of December 1954.

24. "Going to the Fairs" (see note 13 supra).

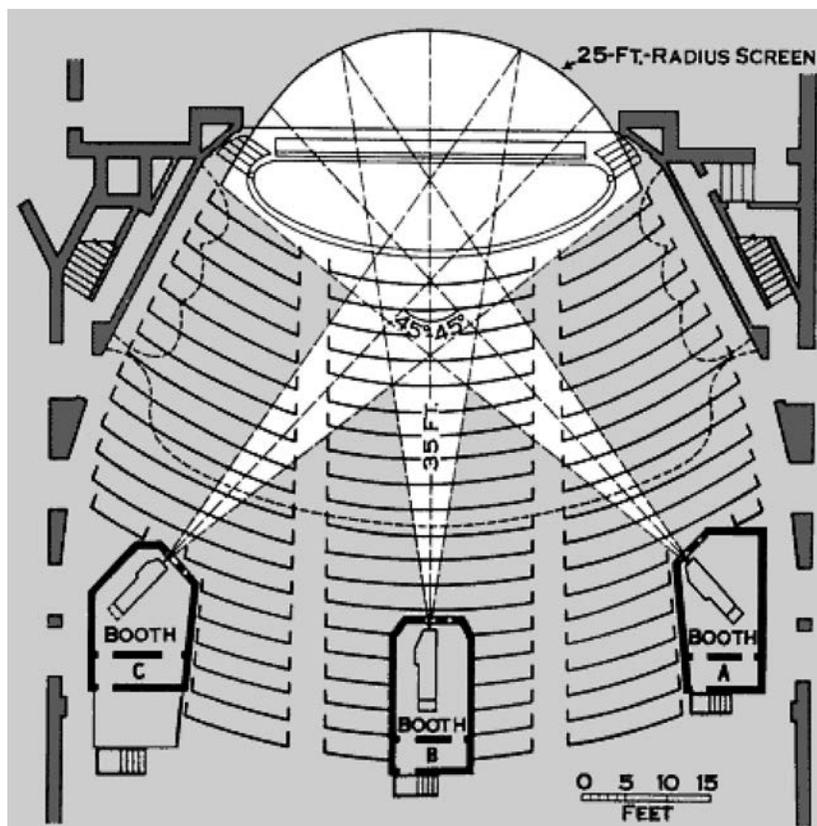


Figure 1. Cinerama's Projection System

Source: Box 2, Cinerama Corporation Collection, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.

range, and volume.²⁵ Thus Waller's system, which inspired the invention of Cinemascope, Panavision, and other subsequent widescreen modes of filming and projection, is perhaps best understood as the remote ancestor of today's three-dimensional surround-sound IMAX format. Scholars have frequently

25. Tom Lecompte, "Cinerama: Secret Weapon of the Cold War," *American Heritage's Invention and Technology*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 10–17; booklet accompanying *This Is Cinerama!*, Merian C. Cooper, Gunther von Fritsch, Ernest B. Schoedsack, and Michael Todd, Jr., dirs., Blu-ray/DVD, with Lowell Thomas (Los Angeles: Flicker Alley, 2012), p. 20. Waller invented and presented "Vitarama" at the New York World's Fair of 1939, and his "Waller Flexible Gunnery Trainer" was used to train thousands of U.S. aircraft gunners in World War II.

noted that such “spectacular new audio-visual means” and the “enhanced visual experiences” they produce have a venerable pedigree at international fairs, dating back to the “Panorama, the Cosmorama, the Diorama, the Europorama and the Ura-norama,” among others, included in the great European “world” exhibitions of the nineteenth century.²⁶

Furthermore, this feature of expositions has persisted to the present day and been enthusiastically adopted by the Arab states with the resources to mount them.²⁷ The most spectacular recent example was the Saudi Arabian pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition, which consisted of multisided IMAX film projections through which a “people mover” conveyed spectators.²⁸

The hyperbolic publicity campaign surrounding Cinerama’s first screening outside the United States made no explicit reference to the technology’s distant ancestors, focusing instead on the process’s “novelty,” while occasionally adding the odd Orientalist flourish.²⁹ Both elements were present in the most prevalent illustrated advertisement, which suggested three-dimensional projection via the protrusion of Cinerama’s Arabic transliteration—“al-Sinirama”—from its distinctive parabolic screen, and triumphantly announced, “The United States of America presents Cinerama . . . the latest innovation of the human mind . . . the flying carpet of the twentieth century” (Figure 2).³⁰

26. Knight, “Discovering the World in Seville,” pp. 22–23; and Georges Douin, *Histoire du regne du Khedive Ismail*, Vol. 2 (Rome: Royal Egyptian Geographical Society, 1934), pp. 4–5, quoted in Timothy Mitchell, “The World as Exhibition,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 1989), p. 220.

27. Cinerama was soon eclipsed by Walt Disney’s Circarama, “a 360-degree photographic display developed by Walt Disney that became a popular standard at U.S. overseas exhibits.” See Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, pp. 138, 144.

28. “The Saudi Arabian Pavilion: The Ultimate IMAX Experience (Videoblog),” *CPD Blog*, 27 September 2010, online at http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/the_saudi_arabian_pavilion_the_ultimate_imax_experience_videoblog/.

29. See, for example, “Cinerama in Damascus,” *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, p. 25.

30. The advertisement is in *Al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 11. The full text beneath the image reads, “At the Damascus International Exposition the United States will exhibit the latest innovation of the human mind for the recreation of his fellow man, ‘Cinerama,’ the flying carpet of the twentieth century. The American pavilion will hold two screenings per day, the first at 7 PM and the second at 9:45 PM. Free tickets will be available exclusively at the special window opened at the American Cultural Office in Parliament Street. This window is open daily from 9 AM until 1 PM for obtaining tickets to the two screenings of that day and subsequent days, and opens in the afternoon from 4 PM to 6 PM to distribute tickets for the two screenings that will take place in the evening of the same day, and each individual will be permitted to receive a maximum of two tickets. Those holding tickets must enter the American Pavilion before 6:50 PM to attend the first screening and before 9:35 PM to attend the second screening because the doors will be locked ten minutes before each exhibition of Cinerama. And we call the esteemed public’s attention to the fact that it is not possible to acquire Cinerama tickets at the American Pavilion.” Orientalist allusions such as the “flying carpet” have been equally enduring: the director of the 2010 Saudi Arabian pavilion describes his exhibit as a “magic carpet.” See “The Saudi Arabian Pavilion: The Ultimate IMAX Experience (Videoblog).”



Figure 2. Advertisement for Cinerama

Source: *Al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 11.

Syrian press coverage about Cinerama bears striking similarities to this advertising campaign, often including photographs and precise technical specifications and frequently repeating the Cinerama Company's extravagant claims about their product's “revolutionary” impact, describing it, for example, as “the

latest marvel,” the “closest thing to reality,” and “science fiction” come true.³¹ In fact, the overwhelming majority of the “reports” and “editorials” about Cinerama published in the weeks preceding the exposition’s opening were, in part or in whole, USIS-provided translations of Cinerama’s own publicity materials.³²

Typical of this “promo masquerading as news” genre was a story announcing Cinerama’s arrival in Damascus. The account began by describing the landing of a massive U.S. Air Force Globemaster C-124 transport plane carrying several tons of equipment at Damascus’s Mezze Airport. The unworldly nature of this astonishing event was suggested by noting that it amazed and delighted a large delegation waiting at the airport to greet “pilgrims returning from the Holy Land.” The article then traced the transport plane’s itinerary from the Berlin Airlift’s staging point at Westover Air Force Base to U.S. Cold War outposts in the Azores and Libya. Then, without a hint of irony, it celebrated the Globemaster’s extensive role in the recently concluded Korean War and proudly declared that Syria was the first Middle Eastern country in which the airborne behemoth had touched down.³³ Such breathless “reports” were often supplemented by ads for local merchants, who described their “elegant” products as “wonders of modern science” recently arrived, like Cinerama, via express airfreight.³⁴

The close correspondence between Syrian press coverage of Cinerama’s appearance at the Damascus International Exposition and the official U.S. discourse is attributable to two factors. First, and most readily apparent, is the sheer volume of advertising space purchased by USIS-Damascus. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Syrian press outlets of the era could not keep their publications afloat via paid circulation alone. Thus dependent on other sources of revenue, many were pleased to print USIS ads and accept the accompanying fees.

The second factor, which becomes clear only after reading the U.S. archival sources, is the time and energy that U.S. officials devoted to influencing

31. “Acting and the Cinema: The Story of Cinerama,” *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 16 March 1954, p. 6; “Cinerama, the Latest Wonder—in Damascus,” *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 35; “Cinerama: The Latest Marvel in Damascus,” *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 11 October 1954, p. 5; and “The Earthly Observatory . . . This Is Cinerama,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 25 August 1954, p. 3.

32. This is obvious when comparing the exposition materials with USIS stories that appeared long before there was any hint that Cinerama would appear at the event. See, for example, “Around the World with Cinerama,” *The Journal of the Police and Public Security* (Damascus), June 1953, p. 16; and “The Story of Cinerama,” *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 16 March 1954, p. 6.

33. “Airplane Traverses a Very Long Distance before It Reaches the Syrian Capital to Present ‘Cinerama’ at the Upcoming Damascus International Exposition,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 18 August 1954, pp. 3–4.

34. Advertisement for “Matador Click” pens, *al-Nas* (Damascus), 5 September 1954, p. 4.

local press coverage. Throughout the 1950s, U.S. embassy personnel closely monitored the Syrian press, maintaining detailed lists of current titles, their estimated circulations and perceived ideological orientations, and the relative receptivity or hostility of their publishers and editors to State Department and USIS initiatives.³⁵ Thus, by the time the Cinerama promotion began, a detailed plan had long been in place to “reach” and influence various sectors of Syrian society (the political elite, professionals, educators, and military officers) through the Syrian press.³⁶

Much of this effort was conventional and aboveboard, like the twice-daily dispatch of “bulletins” to “each daily newspaper in all Syrian cities” and the free, unsolicited provision of translated feature articles (25 per week) accompanied by otherwise prohibitively expensive photo-engravings. As the diplomatic correspondence confirms, such efforts sometimes made it possible to “obtain space in Syrian journals” for the placement of “large quantities of features and other material such as anti-Communist articles, which would otherwise not be published here.”³⁷ Yet USIS employees also established close, covert relationships with the most cooperative publishers and editors, associations that made it possible for USIS-Damascus to plant its own material in the local press without attribution, giving it, according to the agency’s own assessment, “an aura of respectability far beyond pamphlets and other material which bears our label.”³⁸

35. Confidential Memorandum, n.d., in Box 3 UD 3253, Folder E “Press & Publications, 1955–1956,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA. See also Confidential Memo, “List of Cooperative Syrian Newspapers,” July 1955, in Box 3 UD 3253, Folder E “Press & Publications, 1955–1956,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA; Operations Memorandum, 30 August 1955, in Box 3 UD 3253, Folder E, “Press & Publications, 1955–1956,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA; “Background Notes on Damascus Press,” Confidential Memorandum, 3 September 1955, in Box 3 UD 3253, Folder E, “Press & Publications, 1955–1956,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA; and “Press and Publications: Press Attacks on USIS,” Box 3 UD 3253, Folder E “Press & Publications, 1955–1956,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, RG 84, NARA.

36. Foreign Service Despatch 3, “USIS-Damascus” to “USIA-Washington,” “Country Action Plan,” signed by Harris Peel, and referencing USIA CA-776 of 20 May 1954, 20 July 1954, in Box 1, UD 3253, Folder A1–1 “Country Plan, Global and Area Objectives,” RG 84, NARA.

37. The centrality of advertising to this process is evident in USIS’s discussions of its failure to place the “preferred type of material” (e.g., “anti-communist and ‘American strength’ articles”) in state-funded publications such as the Ministry of Defense weekly *al-Jundi*. See *ibid*.

38. *Ibid*. In this, the USIS apparently took its cue from previous British programs administered by the Regional Information Office (RIO) in Beirut, whose employees’ experience during the post-1945 period led them to conclude that “it was generally possible to place a remarkable quantity of [unattributed] material into local newspapers” and at minimal risk of detection. James R. Vaughan,

The Wonder of American Reality—“Ladies and Gentlemen, This Is Cinerama!”

This Is Cinerama, the U.S. government’s borrowed instrument for influencing the minds of Syrians, was presented in an extraordinarily receptive environment. By the early 1930s, U.S. films predominated in Syria’s urban cinemas, a situation that persisted well into the 1950s, when approximately 63 percent of films screened in the “cinema palaces” in the heart of “new Damascus”—*al-Salhiya*—were American.³⁹ Thanks to the ubiquity and content of these Hollywood productions, Damascene film audiences had for two generations come to associate wealth, overt sexuality, and technological advances with the United States.⁴⁰

Thus, when the vice chairman of the board of the Cinerama Productions Corporation, the journalist and explorer Lowell Thomas, appears on screen to introduce *This Is Cinerama*, he tells a story familiar to Syrian filmgoers. Rising from behind his film-set office desk, Thomas predictably trumpets Cinerama’s wondrous “novelty,” its status as “an entirely new form of entertainment” and “the latest development in the magic of light and sound.” In support of these assertions, he places the technology underlying Cinerama in the historical context of humanity’s evolving capacity to produce realistic visual representations, an effort spanning the eons from cave paintings to “moving pictures” complete with sound and color images.⁴¹

This trope—that Cinerama signified the realization of human technological potential—is maintained throughout the presentation, which celebrates the invention’s ability to simulate “the sweep and scope of what the eyes actually see in life, the full wonder of reality,” as well as the “tremendous power” of its distortion-free “stereophonic sound.” Thus Thomas concludes his

The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945–1957: Unconquerable Minds (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 21.

39. Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 198. Based on a detailed survey of cinema advertising, I have estimated national or regional market shares as follows: United States, 63.12 percent; Egypt, 17.35 percent; Western Europe (primarily Italy and France), 9.66 percent; India, 5.12 percent; Mexico, 0.98 percent; and the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 0.059 percent.

40. One of the more notable examples of this influence was the Ba’thist Sidqi Isma’il’s poem “America, America.” Composed in a Salhiyya café in November 1956, the poem declares, “We knew her [America] on the screen from the time we were children. And as adolescents, we knew the stories of cowboys and crime. Oh, how they affected us. We loved them so! And when we were older, we felt the reverberations of [Rita] Hayworth’s dance and [Marilyn] Monroe’s walk.” The poem originally appeared in issue 14 (14 December 1956) of Isma’il’s satirical samizdat newspaper, *al-Kalb* (“The Dog”), and is reproduced in the collection *Jaridat al-kalb* (Damascus: Matabi’ al-Idara al-Siyasiyya, 1983), pp. 55–58.

41. *This Is Cinerama*, film.

introduction by declaring that Cinerama is “an entirely new medium” that will “revolutionize the technique of motion-picture storytelling.” He then shouts, “ladies and gentlemen, this is Cinerama!”

All of this is unsurprising, as it conforms so closely to the style and substance of Cinerama’s promotional materials and their reproduction in the Syrian press. But what of the film’s content? Cinerama’s dramatic visual effect was most pronounced when its camera was mounted on rapidly moving objects. The first such conveyance to make its appearance is the rollercoaster at Rockaways Playland amusement park in Queens, New York, which was called, in a nice bit of Cold War serendipity, the “Atom-Smasher.” We also see the result of filming from a series of speedboats towing stunt-skiers at a Florida resort and from a helicopter flying over Niagara Falls. But most of the kinetic footage was produced by mounting the Cinerama camera beneath a B-25 bomber making low-altitude passes over symbols of U.S. prosperity, might, and physical beauty: Mount Rushmore, the geysers at Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Tetons, Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, the Golden Gate Bridge, Arches National Monument, Hoover Dam, the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park (which translates into Arabic rather infelicitously), steel mills in Pittsburgh, Midwestern wheat fields, and the Pentagon outside Washington, DC. Much of this scenery is accompanied by a soundtrack of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing “America the Beautiful.”

As expected, Thomas’s narration often proclaims Cinerama’s realistic depiction of these “wonders.” Just as frequently, however, it boasts of America’s “grandeur,” “stupendous” achievements, “vast military power,” and economic vigor.⁴² Such sentiments were cheerfully embraced by officials at USIS-Damascus, who devoted five pages of the film’s printed program to “a description of American strength and power,” linking these qualities to the theme “America the Beautiful.”⁴³ The composition of *This Is Cinerama* displays another quintessentially American characteristic: business promotion garbed as entertainment. The skiing and boat-racing segments, comprising almost 25 minutes of the film’s footage, are little more than an extended commercial for the Florida theme park Cypress Gardens, owned and operated by Dick Pope, the long-time friend of Cinerama inventor Fred Waller.

In addition to these expressions of U.S. triumphalism, exceptionalism, and commercialism, *This Is Cinerama*’s scene selection and narrative script are also informed by a remarkable degree of insularity and parochialism. One half

42. Ibid.

43. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

of the film is set in the “world” outside the United States and clearly attempts to emphasize the picturesque and the “exotic.” Yet these scenes are limited to four countries—Scotland, Italy, Spain, and Austria—an attenuation that renders somewhat comical one of USIS-Damascus’s proudest boasts about Cinerama’s screening at the exposition: “The film itself . . . was graphic proof that Americans are interested in foreign countries and other peoples.”⁴⁴

With foreign exhibition in mind, the producers shot an alternate “European” introduction to Part Two of the program. Yet no comparable footage was produced for audiences in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, or East Asia.⁴⁵ Clearly, for the film’s producers, Western Europe was the “outside world.”⁴⁶

This Is Cinerama also offers fodder for the student of Orientalism and other forms of essentialism. During Thomas’s overview of the history of visual representation, he lingers over the appearance of feature-length “moving pictures” and two of their products, the Hollywood “star system” and the “movie palaces” of major U.S. cities. To illustrate the convergence of these phenomena, Thomas selects scenes of “romance,” “glamour,” and “violence” from Rudolph Valentino’s final film, *The Son of the Sheik*. In addition, three of the film’s European segments, excerpts from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*, filmed live on the stage of the La Scala opera house in Milan, offer “High Orientalist” visuals in the form of faux Egyptian and Ethiopian costumes, sets, and dances, particularly in the “triumphant scene” from Act 2 of the opera.⁴⁷ Finally, *This Is Cinerama* expresses an essentialist, racially tinged view of the American South. In addition to “Southern belles” languidly posing in “antebellum” dresses and hats, the “Florida’s Cypress Gardens” segment features “African jungle” sound effects accompanying Thomas’s description of the Florida Everglades as a “dark wilderness, weird, sinister, . . . with all the strange, gloomy beauty of the tropical jungle.”⁴⁸

44. *This Is Cinerama*, film; and Foreign Service Despatch 15.

45. *This Is Cinerama*, film.

46. The European segments sometimes betray an even narrower, Anglocentric worldview, as when Thomas’s narration of a “gathering of the clans” piping and drumming performance at Edinburgh Castle describes that city as “the British north,” a political/geographic designation that would surprise most Scots. *This Is Cinerama*, film.

47. The two other scenes are labeled, somewhat inaccurately, “The Temple Dance” and “Finale.” Some of the cast members of this performance of *Aida* attended screenings in Damascus to promote the film. See “al-Sinirama fi Dimashq,” *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, p. 25. Scholars disagree on *Aida*’s status as a work of Orientalism. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 125–132; and Paul Robinson, “Is ‘Aida’ an Orientalist Opera?” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1993), pp. 133–140.

48. *This Is Cinerama*, film.

Escaping from the “Cineramatic Prison”: Dissident Voices

When Syrian journalists criticized U.S. foreign policy or called attention to the more unsavory social phenomena in the United States, U.S. embassy personnel called them “stupid and vicious.” These critics also became the subjects of repeated official protests to senior government officials about “the iniquities of the Syrian type of journalism.”⁴⁹ Such complaints, which often mentioned the supposed “venality” of Syrian publishers and editors—that is, their tendency to seek payment for “favorable (or less unfavorable) press”—proliferated during the summer of 1954 and sometimes included veiled threats of U.S. withdrawal from the exposition if the Syrian government failed to take “prompt and effective action” against the offenders.⁵⁰

Despite the persistent disaffection at the U.S. embassy, exceptions to the unreservedly positive coverage of Cinerama were relatively rare. Salah Dehni, Syria’s most prominent film critic of the day and a relentless critic of Hollywood bombast and superficiality, provided one such exception.⁵¹ Dehni, who attended a screening of *This Is Cinerama* and clearly read the translated technical and promotional materials with care, constructed his essay around the question of whether the experience of viewing Cinerama lived up to the “massive publicity campaign” asserting its status as “a new direction in the history of cinema” and a motion picture “innovation” equal to that “of

49. “Confidential Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Ibrahim Bey Istuwani, Secretary General of the Syrian Foreign Ministry,” 17 August 1954 (see note 18 *supra*).

50. Foreign Service Despatch 3, “USIS-Damascus” to “USIA-Washington,” 20 July 1954, in Box 1, UD 3253, Folder A1–1 “Country Plan, Global and Area Objectives,” RG 84, NARA; and “Confidential Memorandum of Conversation, U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Syrian Prime Minister Sa’id al-Ghazzi,” 17 August 1954. See also “Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr. and Foreign Minister ‘Izzet Bey Saqqal,” 22 July 1954. The assessment of “venality” was shared by many Syrian politicians. See, for example, Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Ambassador James S. Moose, Jr., and Foreign Minister Faydi Bey Atassi, 8 June 1954, in Box 1, Folder “Damascus, Secret, 1954, 57F121,” Foreign Service Records of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, Secret General Records, 1954–1956, RG 84, NARA. In this case Atassi counsels the ambassador that “there was no use buying Syrian journalists because they would not remain bought.”

51. Dehni was a major figure in Syrian popular culture after the establishment of Ba’thist rule in 1963. He also for many years hosted a radio program about the cinema, directed several feature films, and contributed chapters to film histories. See, for example, Salah Dehni, “History of the Syrian Cinema (1918–1962),” in George Sadoul, ed., *The Cinema in Arab Countries* (Beirut: Interarab Centre of Cinema and Television, 1966), pp. 98–107; and Salah Dehni, “The Syrian Cinema in 1963,” in Sadoul, ed., *The Cinema in Arab Countries*, pp. 179–181. For Dehni’s taste in “serious” Hollywood films, see “A Story from Hollywood That Is Not Superficial,” *al-Idha’a al-suriyya* (Damascus), 1 April 1954, p. 13.

sound.” As for the campaign, Dehni confirmed what we already know about the scope and scale of the USIS’s efforts: “Free press releases, photographs, and articles were distributed to newspapers and magazines” as part of an attempt to create “the impression that, after a long wait, . . . we have arrived closer to ‘complete cinema,’ with true-to-life . . . images . . . sound, and three dimensions.”⁵²

Dehni’s assessment of Cinerama’s capacity to fulfill these promises was deliberate and dispassionate. He succinctly and accurately described the technical principles of Cinerama’s operation, conceded the process’s novelty, willingly joined the chorus of those congratulating Waller for his “great new invention,” and generously attributed some of the problems experienced at the screening he witnessed to the “difficult technical conditions under which Cinerama was staged outdoors in Damascus.” Granting the enhanced realism produced by Cinerama’s wide screen, Dehni noted that Cinerama’s full effect was achieved only when its cameras were mounted on a rapidly moving vehicle, rendering the technology impractical for use in a conventional, multi-character, narrative film. And noting that the process of staging Cinerama was unwieldy and prohibitively expensive, Dehni presciently concluded that Cinerama was a “gimmick” that would “not be widely used in the near or distant future” and would never be seen in Damascus again.⁵³

Finally, Dehni provided the results of his informal post-screening survey of opinions, assessing “the impressions that this new invention made on people here.” Some spectators claimed, disingenuously, that they slept through much of the screening, while others expressed opinions ranging from “admiration” to “mild disappointment.” Ultimately, however, Dehni concurred with one local viewer, whose summary assessment was presented in the form of a proverb: “The funeral procession is greater than the deceased”—that is, the reality did not live up to its hype.⁵⁴

A lengthier and more biting critique was produced by Nash’ at al-Tighilbi, the publisher of the illustrated popular-culture weekly *al-Jami’a*, and a journalist, editor, and publisher with vast experience in all forms of print and

52. Salah Dehni, “The Seventh Art: What about Cinerama?” *al-Jundi* (Damascus), 23 September 1954, p. 33. Dehni poked fun at these claims by declaring, “all that remains for inventors is to direct their efforts to the introduction of smell,” apparently unaware that this had been attempted at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34. Dehni maintained an interest in “spectacular” cinematic technology, publishing articles comparing Cinerama to Cinemascope and 3-D. See “Cinerama and Cinemascope: Two Ways to Save Cinema from Suffocation,” *al-Jundi* (Damascus), 23 December 1954, pp. 26–27.

broadcast media.⁵⁵ A political free agent—he never joined any political party—al-Tighilbi clearly felt no constraints when criticizing the USIS and its contribution to the exposition. His intervention comprises three separate editorials, each of which merits a brief summary. In “Free Tickets . . . for Sale on the Black Market,” al-Tighilbi complains that Cinerama tickets, despite being “distributed free of charge during the initial days of the Exposition” at the USIS office, were, just one week later, freely available on the black market and even “sold openly . . . at local cinema ticket windows, in dark corners of the Exposition, and in front of the space assigned to Cinerama,” even as U.S. officials repeatedly declared that no tickets were available. He then speculates about USIS employee involvement in this illicit trade and chastised the agency for neglecting its “duty” to provide tickets to dignitaries and “honored guests.”⁵⁶

In “A Protest against the Magazine *al-Jami'a*,” al-Tighilbi expresses shock and resentment over the behavior of USIS officials, who, in addition to refusing to reserve blocks of Cinerama tickets for his employees, made strenuous official protests to Syria’s Directorate General of Propaganda and Information and allegedly threatened a lawsuit over an editorial that *al-Jami'a* had published three weeks previously. Declaring that he did not understand “why the Director of the American Information Office [USIS] experienced all of this anger,” al-Tighilbi highlights the hypocrisy at the core of U.S. Cold War diplomacy in the region. U.S. officials incessantly trumpeted the superiority of Western democracy over Communist dictatorship, and USIS dedicated extensive resources to distributing (overtly and covertly) materials echoing this message of free markets and individual liberties. Yet, when Syrians exercised the most fundamental of these liberties, “freedom of expression,” official representatives of the land “where one can even criticize the American President” immediately and vigorously expressed their outrage. Thus al-Tighilbi concludes, “freedom

55. Nash'at al-Tighilbi, a former actor, was a founding member of the Syrian Editors' Union, twice Director of Syrian National Radio, and the publisher of the satirical weekly *Asa al-Janna*. For biographical information, see Sami Moubayed, *Steel and Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria, 1900–2000* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2006), pp. 503–504; George Faris, ed., *Man huwa fi Suriya 1949* (Damascus: Matba'at al-'Ulum wa al-Adab Hashimi Ikhwan, 1951), p. 128; and George Faris, ed. *Man hum fi al-'alam al-'arabi. al-Juz' al-awwal: Suriya* (Damascus: Maktab al-Dirasat al-Suriyya wa al-'Arabiyya, 1957), p. 108.

56. Nash'at al-Tighilbi, “Free Tickets . . . for Sale on the Black Market,” *al-Jami'a* (Damascus) 9 October 1954, p. 13. The free distribution of Cinerama tickets was precisely scheduled and widely advertised. See “Cinerama Tickets,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 29 August 1954, p. 4; and *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, p. 14. The open selling of tickets in front of the Cinerama screening site is particularly striking because USIS advertisements specifically declared that tickets would not be available there. See *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 11.

of opinion” is a “commodity” that America exports only in symbolic form, never intending its “consumption” by foreigners.⁵⁷

Al-Tighilbi’s third editorial, “Behind Cinerama’s Aluminum Curtain,” is the cleverest and most humorous of the three, and thus perhaps the most effective.⁵⁸ (It is also the source of the title for my article.) Al-Tighilbi asserts that *al-Jami’a* is “not alone” in holding the opinions that caused such offense at the U.S. embassy, nor is it “affected by the atmosphere” created by the “paid advertisements” filling the local press. Echoing Salah Dehni, al-Tighilbi declares *al-Jami’a* unimpressed by the “massive publicity” campaign accompanying Cinerama’s arrival in Damascus and its screening at the International Exposition.⁵⁹

Al-Tighilbi then reiterates the essential points of his previous and “impartial” epistle: “We said that Cinerama was a step in the improvement of cinema, but that we could not acknowledge that it is a miracle.” While praising the “magnificence” of Cinerama’s “wonderful” audio system, he suggests that its excessively “elevated volume” is yet another “form of propaganda to impress the spectators.” He then turns to Cinerama’s “defects,” the most significant of which are the failure of the three projected images to “align completely and harmoniously” and the tendency of some “wide-perspective” scenes to appear distorted or “hollowed.”⁶⁰

This is, al-Tighilbi notes, the opposite of the three-dimensional “protruding” effect depicted in the USIS advertisement (see Figure 2 above) and described in the agency’s “promotional publications and brochures.” In fact, al-Tighilbi asserts, “no one was able to observe” anything like this effect except the small number of spectators “who sat with only a few centimeters between their noses and the screen.” And even these, al-Tighilbi claims, “did not actually see a protruding image. Rather, they become disoriented as their eyes raced back and forth between the right screen and the left one, thinking that the images were protruding from the screen when it was actually their eyes protruding from their sockets.”⁶¹

57. Nash’at al-Tighilbi, “A Protest against the Magazine ‘al-Jami’a,’” *al-Jami’a* (Damascus), 9 October 1954, p. 12.

58. Al-Tighilbi was mistaken about the composition of the vertical strips of the Cinerama “curtain,” which were made of “standard perforated screen material.” See Erik M. Rondum, “Cinerama Specification Sheet,” n.d., American Widescreen Museum, http://www.widescreenmuseum.com/widescreen/cinerama_specs.htm.

59. Nash’at al-Tighilbi, “Behind Cinerama’s Aluminum Curtain.” *al-Jami’a* (Damascus), 9 October 1954, p. 12.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Al-Tighilbi's polemics aside, some of the USIS promotional material placed in Damascene newspapers supports his claims. Once the twice-nightly screenings began, daily newspapers published photographs of prominent figures seated in the audience undergoing "the Cinerama experience." The Egyptian singer-actor Mohamed Fawzi and his wife, Madiha Yousri; Prime Minister Sa'ïd al-Ghazzi and his family; former Prime Minister Khalid al-'Azm and his wife; and Egyptian actor Farid Shawki were all depicted experiencing various degrees of disorientation from the effect described in the *al-Jami'a* editorial.⁶²

Al-Tighilbi concludes the third commentary by recounting a humorous and rather telling anecdote, one of the "strange events" that "occurred inside the Cinerama Theater." Reminding his readers that the USIS's publicly announced policy dictated locking the theater doors ten minutes before the commencement of each screening and keeping them locked until its conclusion, he lamented the establishment of this "Cineramatic prison" from which some spectators attempted to escape, "whatever the cost."⁶³

Al-Tighilbi describes one such "escape attempt" as follows: "a spectator and his son rose to leave," only to have a Syrian employee of USIS rush to block their path.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to leave for a moment because the noise is upsetting my son."

"But this is not noise."

"I know, but my son is unable to bear the loud volume."

"Cinerama didn't amaze you?"

"It amazed me . . . except that my son . . ."

"This is unseemly . . . How can you leave now in front of everyone . . . What will they say about you?"

"They'll say that I left . . ."

"But they'll say that Cinerama did not amaze him."

"I told you . . . it amazed me . . ."

62. See the photographs in *al-Nas* (Damascus), 6 September 1954, p. 4; *al-Nas* (Damascus), 10 September 1954, p. 4; and *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 23 September 1954, p. 6. I can testify to the power of this disorienting effect. One of my earliest memories is a family outing to see *How the West Was Won* in Cinerama, a screening we had to flee when my grandmother was made ill by the experience.

63. Al-Tighilbi, "Behind Cinerama's Aluminum Curtain," p. 13. For the USIS announcements, see the advertisements for Cinerama tickets in *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 11; *al-Nas* (Damascus), 29 August 1954, p. 4; and *al-Raqib* (Damascus), 4 September 1954, p. 14.

“Then it would be better to stay.”

“But my son . . .”

“He will get used to the sounds.”

“I’m asking you to let me leave . . .”

“They don’t allow anyone to leave during the screening . . .”

“Do you want the truth?”

“Please.”

“I became upset . . .”

“You too . . .”

“Yes . . . me too . . . I want to leave. Did you invite us to watch Cinerama or to enter prison?”

Al-Tighilbi reports: “The voice of this spectator grew loud enough to begin attracting people’s attention . . . so the doorman, fearing that this argument would spoil the screening, finally hurried to lead the man out. . . . And we were told that this happened more than once by those exiting from behind Cinerama’s aluminum curtain.”⁶⁴

Success or Failure? U.S. Post-Operative Assessments

State Department and USIA documents held in the National Archives provide a cost-benefit analysis of staging Cinerama at the First Damascus International Exposition. These sources confirm that the scope of the Cinerama effort imposed a severe strain on local USIS resources, that officials far away in Washington were pleased with the perceived “return” on this investment, and that USIS and Foreign Service officers stationed in Damascus, although given to the requisite degree of self-congratulation for the official record, were generally more temperate and varied in their assessments.⁶⁵

64. Al-Tighilbi, “Behind Cinerama’s Aluminum Curtain,” p. 13.

65. On the strain on USIS resources, see, for example, Foreign Service Despatch 15. The “Damascus Fair Project” consumed more than 3 percent of the entire budget of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Syria for fiscal year 1954 (October 1953–September 1954). See “Finances—Regular Program” Financial Report, 20 April 1955, in Box 12 (Entry No. 3247), Folder 127 Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, Damascus Embassy, General Records, 1950–1955, 000–310, RG 84, NARA. On Washington’s assessment of the perceived “return” on investment, see “Confidential Outgoing Message, Washington to Damascus,” “Assessment Report,” 12 October 1954, in Box 2, UD

Budgetary reports and periodic performance assessments submitted by Foreign Service and USIS officers reveal the remarkable expense that Cinerama entailed for the U.S. diplomatic mission in Syria, as all other cultural diplomacy activities were “sacrificed to some extent for the United States exhibit in the Damascus International Fair.”⁶⁶ For example, because the Cinerama Company dispatched only two employees to operate equipment and oversee technical issues, USIS was forced to assign the entire staff of its film section (in addition to numerous other employees) to the Cinerama project from “the first of July until the first week in October,” thus forcing the suspension of “normal” film and other cultural programs throughout this period.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the USIS office had to close early each day so that all employees not required at the Cinerama site could distribute tickets.⁶⁸ Thus, from July through October, all USIS operations except for the library and press section effectively ceased to function.⁶⁹ As a result, USIS officials in Damascus retrospectively devised their own idiosyncratic calendar to describe their activities in the summer and fall of 1954: “getting ready for Cinerama; showing Cinerama; getting over Cinerama.”⁷⁰

Officials at USIA headquarters in Washington were effusive in their praise of these efforts, declaring the U.S. role in the exposition a “resounding success” and “a major achievement for everyone at the post.”⁷¹ This perspective was apparently shared at the White House, for President Eisenhower subsequently endorsed the use of Cinerama as the official U.S. entry at subsequent “international trade fairs.”⁷²

Nevertheless, the coda to USIA-Washington’s effusive praise came in the form of a stark reminder of Cold War policy objectives, expressing the hope

3253, Folder A8-1, RG 84, NARA; and Vaughan, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945-1957*, p. 85-86.

66. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*

71. Confidential U.S. Information Agency Outgoing Message, “USIS Semi-Annual Evaluation Report,” 17 August 1955, in Box 4, Folder “Syria-Reports-Semi-Annual, 1954-1957 7B,” Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948-1961, Deputy Director for Operations, Office of Near East, South Asia Administrative Officer, Near East Central Files, Syria; Subject Files, 1954-1959, Political Affairs—Reports, RG 469, NARA.

72. “Going to the Fairs.” Eisenhower considered Cinerama so effective that he personally endorsed a “multimillion-dollar plan to outfit a ‘mothballed’ aircraft carrier with a huge Cinerama theater and send it on world tours.” But Congress “killed the plan” because of its astronomical costs. See Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006), p. 223.

that “this success in the motion picture medium” would yield a “holdover effect”—that is, that the film section’s imminent “resumption of regular program activities” would display “sharper direction in terms of objectives and target audiences . . . especially in the use of those films having a more direct anti-communist approach.”⁷³

Foreign Service and USIS personnel at the embassy in Damascus fulfilled the bureaucratic imperative of inscribing their achievements in the official record. These documents declare that Syrian officials praised Cinerama’s effectiveness as a “drawing card, and were proud to boast that Damascus was the site of its first presentation outside the United States,” and assert that the public considered Cinerama “the dramatic highlight and the most discussed novelty of the Fair,” thus constituting a “major factor” in that event’s overall success.⁷⁴ Such self-aggrandizement sometimes approached the absurd, as in one USIS assessment report proclaiming that “by the Moslem calendar this year was 1374 A.H.; but most Syrians think of it as the year Cinerama came.”⁷⁵

Such assessments, whether literal or exaggerated, were almost always made in comparison to the propagandistic potential of Soviet-bloc exhibits. This perspective was manifested in a number of strangely defensive yet celebratory declarations: Cinerama was, we are told, much more “impressive technologically than Soviet tractors and generators;” it demonstrated “the high state of American technology,” for which “the Soviets were no match;” “diverted local attention from . . . less glamorous bloc exhibits;” and “offset” the propaganda triumphs of the Soviets and their satellites, thereby preventing them from “walking away with the show.”⁷⁶

These determinations inevitably appeared in support of a specific assessment-cum-policy recommendation: “This year’s experience has established that participation in” events like “the Damascus International Fair offers one of the most effective and productive propaganda opportunities available not only to counteract Soviet efforts but also to dramatize United

73. Confidential U.S. Information Agency Outgoing Message, 17 August 1955.

74. Foreign Service Despatch 184; and Confidential Foreign Service Despatch 213, 30 December 1955, in Box 5, UD 3253, Folder J1 “Damascus Fair,” Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Syria, U.S. Information Service, Damascus, General Records, 1954–1957, RG 84, NARA.

75. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

76. Foreign Service Despatch 15; Foreign Service Despatch 184; and Foreign Service Despatch 158, “United States Participation in the 1955 Damascus International Fair,” Space—Travel, 12 October 1954, in Box 5, Folder 7B “Syria—Trade—Promotion, 1954–1957,” RG 469, NARA. Some scholars have asserted that the appeal of Cinerama in Damascus caused the Soviet Union to withdraw from the Bangkok Constitution Fair in December 1954. See Osgood, *Total Cold War*, p. 223.

States strengths and accomplishments.”⁷⁷ Officials at the Soviet embassy appear to have shared this view, for they lodged protests over the “unfair” U.S. competition, claimed that Soviet scientists had developed Cinerama years before, quickly organized a Soviet film festival in response, and ultimately reverse-engineered (or stole) Cinerama’s technology to produce their own “Kinopanorama.”⁷⁸

Yet the same U.S. archival documents that present the USIS officials’ conclusions often feature more sober acknowledgments that the “large scale Communist bloc participation” produced “a net gain . . . for the Communist position in Syria,” that Cinerama was “unable to neutralize the impact” of this participation, or even that its presence served merely to attract greater numbers of spectators to the fairgrounds, “where they were exposed” for the first time to “numerous communist exhibitions and their intensive propaganda” that “could not fail to have an impact on the impressionable and indiscriminating average Syrian.”⁷⁹

Coda: Technology and Visual Representations of Orient and Occident

By the time *This Is Cinerama* was released, Thomas’s carefully constructed persona as a globetrotting war correspondent, explorer, writer, radio personality, entrepreneur, and adventure traveler had made his face, voice, and name among the most recognizable in the English-speaking world. Thomas’s first step on this path to fame was his popular (and lucrative) lecture/slideshow presenting a highly dramatized and embellished account of his brief association with T. E. Lawrence during the First World War. Starting in New York in 1919, Thomas took this show to England and then, in revised form, to continental Europe and to “cosmopolitan” audiences in many of Britain’s imperial possessions, finally publishing several books based on these lectures.⁸⁰ In the process he immortalized his subject as “Lawrence of Arabia.”

Thomas’s career as a showman was thus symmetrical and ironic. He originally achieved prominence and wealth via the skillful employment of

77. Foreign Service Despatch 184.

78. On the Soviet film festival, see *ibid.* On *Kinopanorama*, see Lecompte, “Cinerama,” pp. 10–17.

79. Foreign Service Despatch 184; Confidential Foreign Service Despatch 213; and Foreign Service Despatch 184.

80. The most famous of Lowell Jackson Thomas’s books, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1924), converted T. E. Lawrence into Lawrence of Arabia.

a state-of-the-art multimedia spectacle (lecture, slideshow, live music, and various “Oriental” props), all in the service of hype. He thus created the first true, international media celebrity, T. E. Lawrence. More than thirty years later Thomas invested a large portion of his material and symbolic capital developing and hyping what was perhaps the last manifestation of the great mass audience multimedia spectacle, Cinerama.

In the first case, Thomas knowingly and deliberately offered a representation of the “exotic,” “mysterious,” “impoverished,” and “primitive” East to a variety of “Western” audiences. When his image and Arabic-dubbed narration appeared on the Cinerama screen at the Damascus International Exposition, Thomas presented the “dynamic,” resource-rich, “developed,” and technologically advanced West to more demographically circumscribed “Eastern” audiences. Thomas’s relative success and failure in these enterprises raises a host of questions—technological, aesthetic, epistemological, and political/economic—about the processes of cultural representation. Timothy Mitchell has argued that, in the context of nineteenth-century exhibitions, “Orientalism was not just a particular instance of the general historical problem of how one culture portrays another, but something essential to the peculiar nature of the modern world.”⁸¹ I contend that by the mid-twentieth century such events were primarily venues for the staging of “autoethnographies,” or acts of representing one’s own culture (however constructed) to “others,” be they “Oriental” or “Occidental.”⁸² Thus we have an “instance” of a different “general historical problem.”

Conclusion

Joseph S. Nye, who coined the term “soft power,” defines it as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”⁸³ Nye further states that “the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).”⁸⁴ Finally, Nye adds two caveats to his definition of “soft power”: (1) “soft power depends

81. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 32.

82. On “autoethnographies,” see Tenorio Trillo, *Mexico at the World’s Fairs*, p. 7.

83. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. x.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers”; and (2) “domestic or foreign policies that appear to be hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to the opinion of others, or based on a narrow approach to national interests can undermine soft power.”⁸⁵

The USIS’s screening of *This Is Cinerama* at the First Damascus International Exposition was an exercise in “soft-power”; that is, cultural diplomacy. Conducted at a time when such efforts in the developing world had temporarily lost support in Washington, the exercise’s nominal success is evident. When U.S. officials in Damascus initially proposed the Cinerama exhibit to their superiors in Washington, they listed “three major objectives”:

- (1) To neutralize the effect of the large, expensive Soviet and Satellite exhibits by sponsoring one which would make theirs look ordinary and commonplace.
- (2) To participate with a good exhibit so that Syrians would not get the impression that the United States cares nothing about their feelings and friendship while the Soviet Union was proving its “esteem.”
- (3) To make United States technological leadership apparent to all who saw our exhibit.⁸⁶

In this, they could claim limited success, for the month of screenings and extravagant publicity appear to have accomplished the first objective, whereas the verdict on the second and third was less certain.

In terms of more substantive policy objectives, however, USIS officials freely admitted that their “secret weapon of the Cold War” was a failure.⁸⁷ Cinerama did not make Syrians more amenable to an alliance with the West, counteract the negative effects of U.S. support for Israel, or heighten local awareness of the “danger of communist subversion.” Furthermore, the archival record indicates that USIS officials never seriously expected Cinerama to accomplish any of these goals.⁸⁸ As documented by Kenneth Osgood and Laura A. Belmonte in their histories of USIA, analysts in Washington were well aware that the effects of their government’s policies, which most local “interpreters and receivers” deemed inimical to their own national interests, could not be overcome by public diplomacy efforts, even those that thrilled and entertained through the display of wondrous new technology.⁸⁹

85. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16.

86. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

87. Lecompte, “Cinerama,” pp. 10–17.

88. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

89. See, for example, Osgood, *Total Cold War*, pp. 131, 133–134; and Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, p. 127.

This is but one example of a much larger phenomenon, what James R. Vaughan has called “The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East.” Vaughan attributes this failure to “the tendency of both British and American officials to impose a strategic agenda upon a region that was often unwilling or genuinely unable to recognize it,” an agenda that “fundamentally failed to address the key issues that dominated Middle Eastern politics—the Arab-Israeli dispute and the conflict between Arab nationalism and foreign ‘imperialistic’ interference in the region.”⁹⁰

A survey of the documents generated by the USIS office in Damascus supports Vaughan’s assessment. Throughout this body of texts, we see the frequent repetition of Cold War policy mantras informed by the oft-cited Policy Directive No. 1.⁹¹ Such statements often appear in documents that feature accurate and insightful summaries of prevailing attitudes—and thus reveal the futility of such policies. The story of Cinerama’s ephemeral, and ultimately inconsequential, success at the First Damascus International Exposition is thus a familiar one, reflecting the all-too-common abstraction of foreign policy formulation and execution from obvious realities on the ground. The Cinerama story also suggests that, as Joseph Nye has observed, the successful exercise of soft power is almost always hostage to the effects wrought by the exercise of its “hard” counterpart.

But explanations for Cinerama’s relative success or failure can also be found outside the realm of geopolitics. The very purpose of the First Damascus International Exposition was the representation of a particular “reality.” Just as the “great nineteenth-century world exhibitions . . . formed part of Europe’s colonising project,” the First Damascus International Exposition was seen as a grand representation of Syria’s “decolonization”—its “true” independence and aspirations for regional leadership.⁹² At the center of the exposition’s narrative was the young Syrian state’s autoethnography, the presentation of “evidence” that the country and, by extension, its “Arab” neighbors had firmly planted their feet on the “staircase of progress” and had begun to ascend.⁹³

Thus, much of the Cinerama Corporation’s public discourse would have resonated with exponents of Syria’s national narrative. The company’s

90. Vaughan, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945–1957*, pp. 9–10.

91. Foreign Service Despatch 3, “USIS-Damascus” to “USIA-Washington,” 20 July 1954, in Box 1, UD 3253, Folder A1–1 “Country Plan, Global and Area Objectives,” RG 84, NARA.

92. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. xiii.

93. “At Midnight the Lights Will Be Extinguished: We Have an Appointment at the Damascus International Exposition,” *al-Nas* (Damascus), 2 October 1954, p. 1.

promotional materials, at their most sensational, claimed a truly “miraculous” achievement, the very effacement of the distinction between reality and its representation. The details of this discourse, however, reveal a more modest assertion: Cinerama was a mechanism for simulating “reality”—that is, “manufacturing the experience of the real.”⁹⁴ Yet this claim was sufficiently alluring to entice 125,000 spectators to the Cinerama Theater, arouse bitter complaints over the limited availability of free tickets, and stimulate a thriving black market for the sale of these tickets.⁹⁵

More significantly, the assertions of Cinerama’s “novelty” and of its status as “the latest development” and “the human mind’s most recent invention” were framed as the culmination of a centuries-long process of accelerating progress, the triumphant realization of a dream as old as the species itself, the realistic depiction of life in motion.⁹⁶ The U.S. pavilion thus gave expression to the teleological conception of history and the developmental fixation that inspired the First Damascus International Exposition. This best explains the few criticisms of Cinerama that found their way into print. Spectators inundated with the discourse of progress had delighted at the prospect of seeing the “wonder” of artificially reproduced “reality.” The technology’s shortcomings ensured its failure to fulfill this dream, while simultaneously confirming America’s image as the locus of technological innovation.

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94. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. ix.

95. Foreign Service Despatch 15.

96. *This Is Cinerama*, film; and the advertisement in *al-Mukhtar* (Damascus), 2 September 1954, p. 11.