

REVIEWS

Arab Cinema Studies: A Revisit of the Past and Devaluation of the Present

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Ginsberg, Terri and Chris Lippard, eds. *Cinema of the Arab World: Contemporary Directions in Theory and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 422 pages. ISBN 9783030300814. Hb. \$24.99.

During the past few years, Arab cinema has witnessed a remarkable progress in the content and way of making national productions. Numerous films have competed for the most prestigious awards at widely renowned European film festivals, such as Cannes and Venice, while others have earned nominations at the Academy Awards. The increasing international recognition of Arab feature films and documentaries during the new millennium has made many film critics and scholars more interested in Arab cinema studies. It is true that such research remains very limited in comparison to critical explorations into European and American cinema, yet there are many ambitious attempts by Arab and Western intellectuals alike to fill in the gaps, for which Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard's latest edited volume, *Cinema of the Arab World* serves as a good example. This volume brings together essays by Arab and non-Arab film experts and filmmakers with scholarly background, as well as young researchers in the field; it is edited by two of the leading scholars of Arab cinema today, who also collaborated on another volume, the *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, published in 2010. Many chapters in this book developed from papers presented at the Cinema of the Arab World Conference, hosted by the Film Program of The American University in Cairo in 2018.

The majority of the films analyzed have previously been underrepresented in academic scholarship in both Arab and Western contexts, as these productions explicitly resist nationalist ideas and socio-cultural beliefs prevalent in Arab mainstream productions frequently scrutinized by film critics and scholars. The volume is dedicated to the rigorous study of the contemporary conditions of cinematic production and critical reception in the Arab world. The editors divided the collection of papers into four parts to make readers familiar with the history and status of Arab feature films and documentaries, bringing formerly neglected works to light and redressing previously misinterpreted or marginalized concepts through new theoretical approaches.

In the first part, “History, Positionality, Critique,” Hadi Gharabaghi claims that the practice of documentary production started among the Arab states with “the bureaucratic involvement of the US government” that helped the funding of binational documentary projects for “propaganda purposes” (4). He adds that through this process, the Arab world was introduced to American culture and modernization, and began to adopt some of its principles (4). It also expounds the promising attempts of the Gulf Cooperation Council states to promote an official national identity that differentiates one country from the other through cultural institutions and mediascapes. The main purpose here is to make the world aware that each of these countries has its own culture and identity, which are very distinct from one another. This part ends with Wissam Mouawad’s exploration of the effects of political instability on the Lebanese film industry and its continuous dependence upon international funding, especially from France and Western festivals, in order to guarantee worldwide distribution and a reputation for quality. Consequently, Lebanese filmmakers find themselves obligated to fulfill producers’ expectations by incorporating the so-called “Post Card Strategy,” which most of the time leads to “the projection of an exoticizing discourse about their country” and serves “a neocolonialist ideology” (80). Mouawad adds that filmmakers who refuse to employ the stereotypical depictions of Arabs in their cinematic output usually face exclusion and refusal from the film industry.

The second part, “Festival and Nation Reconsidered,” focuses on North African cinema with special attention paid to the development of the national film culture in Tunisia through the establishment of amateur filmmaking associations, such as FIFAK (founded originally in 1962) and its international film festival, FTCA, organized since 1964. Their members supported the inclusion of women in the building of a national cinema and used a corpus of amateur films against authoritarian regimes. Contemporary Palestinian cinema, for instance, is described as “not yet” an industry due to the absence of a fully-fledged Palestinian state and the unstable status of film institutions. However, the efforts put into this creative cultural industry are praised and recognized, as they aim to reconnect Palestinian people with the world. Light is also shed on FiSahara Festival (meaning “in the desert”), on the daily lives of those who live in the Sahara, and the strategy of utilizing film to publicize the Palestinian cause and defend their culture, in accordance with one of the most focal principles of the volume, which is to give justice and more critical attention to marginalized cinemas.

Documentary filmmaking, as one of the most neglected genres, is brought into focus in the third part of the volume, “From Resistance to Entrenchment and Back Again.” It tackles documentaries from Egypt, Syria, and Morocco, mainly from an anthropological perspective, looks, especially, at underrated works that were superficially received despite their political depth. In the case of Morocco, for instance, there has been an unprecedented progress in terms of the quality and quantity of documentary production since the upheavals of 2011. Most of these productions address controversial social and cultural issues that have been hidden from view mainly for political reasons. In addition to that, emphasis is also put on how films and documentaries in the Arab world have been employed to resist political oppression, social injustice, and cultural repression.

Syrian documentary director Amiralay Omar and Lebanese director Randa Sabbagh made “repudiated” films that withstood neoliberalism and authoritarianism (215). These films are viewed as performative texts that elide the borders between the cinema of the third world and European art films or Second cinema (206). Maroun Baghdadi is another Lebanese director whose documentaries are purely political; he seeks to galvanize public opinion using Eisenstein’s theory of montage. The fusion of images and politically oriented music with a focus on emotion and dialogue were among the techniques he employed to make his audiences embrace left-wing politics.

The last section of the book is devoted solely to Egyptian cinematic productions, and reveals the prevalent use of humor in movies to deconstruct totalitarian regimes. Isabelle Freda analyzes *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992), one of the most renowned films in the nineties, as an anarchic and carnivalesque work which draws upon Michel Foucault’s “grotesque sovereignty” to portray governmental ineptness and administrative malfunction (310). Humor is also adopted to unveil the truth behind the life of the ordinary Egyptian citizen, who is deprived of political agency and power—his is a “bare life,” Giorgio Agamben is quoted as saying (308).

“Political Aesthetics of State and Revolution in Egypt,” the closing chapter, ends with new analytical interpretations of two of the most misinterpreted documentaries. *Cairo Chronicles* (2004) is a feminist depiction of the trauma of the filmmaker’s exile from and return to Egypt. It is described as a performative critique of “mythological nostalgia” and post-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist Egypt as “a site of political corruption” (369). *Out on the Street* (2015), on the other hand, is regarded as a theatrical performance of capitalist social relations, which draws from decolonial,

Marxist, and critical theory, as the way it presents the effects of neoliberal policies on labor conditions in modern Egypt suggests.

This volume successfully takes the reader on a cinematic journey from the very beginnings, when Arab national cinemas began to emerge and grow during the seventies, to the latest films and documentaries that have gained international attention for their rigorous depiction of socio-cultural, political, and economic issues. It also acknowledges the efforts of most Arab countries to develop their own film industries by funding and establishing facilities where aspiring filmmakers, scriptwriters, and cinematographers can learn everything required to make quality films. However, some of the authors believe that these efforts might not be enough, as the Arab film industry still suffers from several problems, including the limited number of film productions per year, the deficiency of adequate international commercial distribution, the lack of expertise, prevailing censorship, and so on. Introducing the reader to Palestinian and Sahrawi cinemas and the impediments they encounter—as they are still not considered industries due to the lack of film production infrastructures and individuals to support them—can be regarded as the highlight of the volume, and one of the fully accomplished promises of the editors.

Despite its theoretical and analytical depths, the volume failed to fulfill my expectations for a single reason: it is not as “contemporary” as the title and date of publication suggest. The editors state in the introduction that “the recent burgeoning of attention to new Arab filmmaking within the international mediascape” was among the main factors behind their determination to publish such a book (vii). However, scholarly readings of the latest critically acclaimed commercial as well as non-commercial films screened in the last decade are totally ignored and disregarded here with very few exceptions. Many films and documentaries from Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, and Palestine have been increasingly present since the beginning of the millennium at Cannes, Venice, and the Berlin Film Festivals, the BAFTA Film Awards, the Golden Globes, and the Academy Awards. Still, focus is mainly on works from the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when films were made under different socio-political circumstances and for different audiences. Hopefully, the publication of a second edition in the coming years will address this flaw by incorporating more recent feature films and documentaries. Given the volume’s academic level, this initiative will certainly inspire and assist graduate students and scholars of Arab Cinema studies. Politics tends to be present in all aspects of daily lives, hence most of the works studied are purely political. However, the overtly politicized

readings and the choice of these particular films, perhaps, are questionable since there are other less politically-motivated films that could at least have been examined from a more socio-cultural or philosophical perspective as a break for readers less involved in the politics of the region. After all, the main reason behind the thematic choice of this volume is to get a deeper understanding of the films' cinematic language, cinematography, narrative styles, and composition.

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