

New Arab Cinema at Lincoln Center

Mónica López-González



"Beirut Hotel" (Danielle Arbid, 2011)

Featuring ten full-length feature films and nine shorts and working in collaboration with the Dubai International Film Festival, “Orientation: A New Arab Cinema” begins Friday, August 24 and runs until Wednesday, August 29. Continuing in its efforts to bring already rising Arabic filmmakers and the new wave of emerging Arabic cinema to American audiences, the Film Society of Lincoln Center showcases a set of films that fearlessly address such issues as the harsh realities of immigrating to the United States (Cherien Dabis’s “Amreeka”), the paradoxes of female sexual and social liberation amidst traditional cultural restraint (Danielle Arbid’s “Beirut Hotel,” Hesham Issawi’s “Cairo Exit,” Narjiss Nejjar’s “The Rif Lover,” Susan Youssef’s “Habibi”), the personal, political, and religious consequences of everyday mishaps (Yahya Al-Abdallah’s “The Last Friday,” Dima El-Horr’s “Every Day Is a Holiday,” Michel Khleifi’s “Zindeeq”), the effects of corruption on basic societal institutions (Marianne Khoury and Mustapha Hasnaoui’s “Zelal”), and the pros and cons of Westernization (Ali F. Mostafa’s “City of Life”).



“Habibi” (Susan Youssef, 2011)

Although heavily influenced by modern Western filmmaking techniques and sometimes lacking in truly innovative narrative structure (even the valiant female directors who give women a stronger and more affirmative voice fall prey, for example, to their culture’s expectations of what women [stereotypically] can and cannot do), the films presented are a wonderful, colorful sample of where cinema from modern metropolises within Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates is headed. From the long shots of unwavering silence in the Jordanian drama “The Last Friday” and the glamorous color-saturated sexiness of the Moroccan drama “The Rif Lover,” to the heart-wrenching Egyptian documentary “Zelal” on the mentally confined Christians and Muslims in Abbasiya, the largest psychiatric hospital in the Middle East, no speck of sociopolitical dust is left to the will of the wind without at least some pondering or even subtle critiquing. If the protests since December of 2010 against anachronistic dictatorship, government corruption, human rights violations, and economic decline, otherwise known as the “Arab Spring,” are any sign of what the newer generations in the Arab world are fighting for, then these films are a sure creative force to be immediately reckoned with. “Zelal” ends with a very poignant comment from one of the documentary’s protagonists that equally stands as a metaphor for all filmmakers as artists as they tell their stories and make their voices heard: “I’m not crazy, I just have mental problems. Caused

by the pressure you face. Pressure after pressure creates mental illness. What can you do? If your family brings you here, and then you leave....Oh God! ...Society judges you. What am I supposed to do? Will they call me crazy?"



"The Last Friday" (Yahya Al-Abdallah, 2011)

Programmer Richard Peña provides some insights into the programming of the series.

How did the concept of this series come about? Why bring Arab cinema to NYC now?

The Film Society and I personally have a long-time interest in cinema from the Arab world. In 1996 we presented "A Centennial of Arab Cinema," possibly the largest such showcase ever presented in America. We have done series devoted to Youssef Chahine, Salah Abu Seif, Syrian and Lebanese cinema, as well as an earlier "New Arab Cinema" series in 2003. Thus Arab cinema has for years been an essential part of our offerings.

This particular series came about because I was impressed by some of the most recent films I saw emerging from the Arab world; I was also interested to learn more about the role of some of the new producing organizations that had begun in the Gulf region. I had some personal contacts with the people working in Dubai, and so we decided we would try to work together on a film series.

Lastly, the past few years have seen enormous changes in the region, which are still going on, and I think this series is good way to get a sense of what people are thinking and feeling, even if the films are not directly related to the "Arab Spring."



"Every Day Is a Holiday" (Dima El-Horr, 2009)

What's different about this New Cinema compared to Arab cinema pre-1960s? Have directors consciously chosen to tell more intimate personal stories than just explicitly focus on socioeconomic and political issues?

Pre-1960? If you really mean that period, you're talking almost exclusively about Egyptian cinema, which accounted for about 95% of all Arab-language films up to that point. Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s developed one of the world's great film industries, supplying films not only to the Arab world but also to Turkey, Iran, and many other markets. It was an export-oriented cinema, and therefore tried to create a kind of cinema that depended little on specific Egyptian references.

If anything, this generation of filmmakers doesn't see the difference between political and personal issues, but yes, there is less of a tendency to make the kinds of national epics that one saw a lot in the 1980s and 1990s.

What are the main themes and styles of filmmaking that dominate Arab cinema today? Did this directly influence how you selected the films for the series?

I'd like to think that I selected the films that seemed to me the most successful works of art, according to my arbitrary standards. It's hard to say what the main themes are, but I do think there is a certain emphasis on the conflict between individual desire and what's perceived as public duty.



"Amreeka" (Cherien Dabis, 2009)

Many of the directors showcased have left to study cinema and looked for funding away from their Arabic origins. Can you say more about why this is such a widespread phenomenon?

We all live in an increasingly globalized context, in which travel and emigration are simply part of our contemporary reality. One can hardly find a European or Latin American film that isn't a co-production with partners from all over the world, so why shouldn't Arab filmmakers avail themselves of the same funding possibilities?

With regards to overseas film schools, I think the important factor is that young Arab artists have the chance to be exposed to a wide range of work from many parts of the world, and these influences have begun to have their impact on Arab filmmaking.

You are including five fairly prominent contemporary female filmmakers. What do you think is the most characteristic feature or set of features that a female voice brings to this cinema that is still so male-dominated?

It's probably a bit of an overstatement to imply that female directors generally are more focused on the interpersonal, but I do think that is pretty much accurate. It's no accident that the rise of the notion that the "personal is political" in the West coincided with the emergence of second-wave feminism. Women artists have been crucial in exposing the way politics asserts itself in everyday life.



"Cairo Exit" (Hesham Issawi, 2010)

You have created a very complete program with full-length features and shorts. What is your opinion about these even-younger rising filmmakers with their shorts as dramatic social commentaries? Is the new generation of filmmaking becoming more and more dissecting of its immediate intellectual and emotional surroundings?

Obviously, I'm impressed by all our filmmakers. I think this new generation is showing that courage, and indeed "fearlessness" are its hallmarks. Increasingly, there are no longer taboo subjects; young Arab filmmakers feel empowered to look at their societies with very critical eyes, regardless of the consequences.

You've included the harrowingly poignant non-narrated documentary "Zelal" by Marianne Khoury and Mustapha Hasnaoui about the failed healthcare system of Egypt. No other film presented in the series merges society, politics, religion, medicine, and sheer human dignity with such eloquence. Tell us more about how this film has, or has not, made an impact in Egypt and abroad.

It is a very powerful film, but I frankly do not know how it was received in Egypt. But as I said, there are fewer and fewer taboo subjects for this generation.

Any must-see-no-matter-what favorites of the series?

Everything!