

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Thematics and Hermeneutics in Four Recently Published Books on Middle Eastern/Arab Cinema

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**ROY ARMES.** *New Voices in Arab Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xiv + 333 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Paper US\$35.00 ISBN 978-0-2530-1522-8.

**GAYATRI DEVI AND NAJAT RAHMAN, EDS.** *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014. 264 pages, bibliography, filmography, contributors. Paper US\$29.95 ISBN 978-0814339374.

**JOSEF GUGLER, ED.** *Ten Arab Filmmakers: Political Dissent & Social Critique.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 272 pages, illustrations, index. Paper US\$30.00 ISBN 978-0253016522.

**KAMRAN RASTEGAR.** *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 248 Pages, notes, bibliography, index. Paper US\$29.95 ISBN 978-0199390175.

**A**long with the periodic irreverence towards Area Studies by its disciplinary counterparts, there has also been some discomfort within the narrow confines of Film Studies for scholarship that focuses on individual national or regional cinemas. And yet, the growing interest in the cinema of the Middle East (North Africa included) is unquestionable. The four books reviewed here are part of this trend; dozens of other publications on Middle Eastern cinema have been authored in English alone in the new millennium. Explanations for this (re)ignited interest go beyond the obvious political currents in the Middle East and include, *inter alia*, the increasingly common practice of co-productions, mainly between Europe and the Maghreb, where the terms of the co-production often result in availing Middle Eastern films to international markets and in the inclusion of these films in prestigious film festivals worldwide. The launching of new international film festivals in the Arab world/Middle East furthers the cinematic dialogue between this region and the rest of the world. Concurrently, even a cursory survey will point to the significant surge in courses on Arab/Middle Eastern cinema since

the early 2000s in institutions of higher education in the United States and beyond.

It should come as no surprise that the four books reviewed here pay special attention to issues of political dissent, social justice, human rights, and the roles women play as filmmakers and characters in the films of the Middle East. Considering together the increasing exposure to the cinema of the Middle East and scholarship on this endeavor evokes well-rehearsed dilemmas of the relations between production, spectatorship, and international audiences' and critics' expectations vis-à-vis the cinema of the "other." More specifically: are the critically acclaimed Middle Eastern filmmakers obsequious to the tastes of Western audiences and critics? What is left out when scholars study mostly those films that reach Western audiences? Is the intimation, particularly in Gugler's and Armes's books, of the contrasting correlation between Middle Eastern "art house" cinema and success in international film festivals and local cinema (in terms of production and audiences) strictly with a popular or commercialized one too facile, uncritical, and ultimately untenable? What is at stake in reading the films of the Middle East and, particularly, the "cinéma engagé" that is often showcased in international film festivals, as national allegories? Arguably, as some of the contributors to the edited volumes reviewed here imply, while this national allegory hermeneutic framework and the search for "emancipatory aesthetics" (Hamid Dabashi in Devi and Rahman, 32) may be understandable given the socio-political realities in the Middle East, this interpretive proclivity might tell us more about our expectations as (Western) film viewers and critics than about the films themselves. This allegorical reading is salient in Gugler's and Armes's works with their emphasis on subversive themes typical of the Arab "art house" cinema, but is also rather widespread in contemporary scholarship on Middle Eastern film in general where readers are encouraged to identify subversion and dissent even when (or, precisely because) the textual surface seems rather innocuous.

As Gugler suggests in the preface to *Ten Arab Filmmakers* (xi), this edited volume complements the author's previous edited volume *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (2011). The new book consists of ten chapters, each of which is dedicated to one distinguished Arab filmmaker. Most of the ten, like Youssef Chahine (discussed in chapter 5), are renowned powerhouses—they are critically acclaimed in international cinema circles and have earned comprehensive scholarly attention over the years. (Having been asked to write about Chahine for Gugler's *Ten Arab Filmmakers*, Shafik admits that she originally refused, given the extensiveness of writing

about him over the years [Gugler, 99]). Others, including Egyptian director Daoud Abd El-Sayed (discussed in chapter 6), are mostly unknown beyond their countries of operation. The book offers its readers an important entry not only into the works of individual filmmakers but into the context of production in the Arab world, the benefits and costs that result from European support of Arab cinema, and into the social ailments that have marred the communities of the respective filmmakers. The relatively short space dedicated to each of the filmmakers results in an emphasis in some chapters, most noticeably those on Mohamed Chouikh and Merzak Allouache, on storylines and career development while attention to aesthetics, stylistic innovation, and analysis is scant.

Armes's book title *New Voices* resonates with the subtitle *Political Dissent & Social Critique* of Gugler's edited volume. But whereas both books foreground the filmic challenges to established social order, political power, and religious fundamentalism in Arab countries, Armes's focus is on "new voices," films that have been made since the turn of the millennium. Armes's vast research results in a book that addresses dozens of filmmakers and films in the various film-producing Arab countries. The author's extensive work over the years on Third World cinema is manifested here in a deep understanding of Arab cinema and, particularly, the forces that have led to the filmic new voices of the 2000s. This long-view allows the author to maintain that what distinguishes the new voices cinema of the 2000s from its predecessors is a shift from anticolonial critique to the expression of disenchantment with internal socio-political conditions (8). Each of the book's two main chapters—3 ("Documentary") and 4 ("Feature Filmmaking")—is divided into sections by country. A list of filmmakers and their works then appear within each country section. The encyclopedic feature of the book is also its Achilles' heel as the body of the book reads at times as a film catalogue where films and filmmakers are listed in quick succession.

In the subheading "Questions of Identity" in chapter 2, "The Filmmakers," Armes asserts that, outside of Egypt, Arab cinema of this millennium is a nomadic one, due to the sources of film funding and immigration and exile (and, one may add, the setting of films in more than one country). He states that the issue of the Arab filmmakers' "nationality is complex" (14) and all these factors add to the difficulty of "defining precisely a film's 'national' identity" (19); as an example, the author cites Annemarie Jacir's *Salt of This Sea* (2008) as a film that was co-financed by production companies from eight different countries (19). It is therefore puzzling that the author opted to structure his two main chapters around national criteria that are based on the filmmakers' countries of origin. Similarly, while Armes informs his readers

that some filmmakers he discusses have produced both documentary and feature (fiction) films (22), the dedication of one chapter to documentaries and documentary filmmakers and another to feature films and its filmmakers results not only in various discussions of documentaries in the chapter on feature filmmaking (see, for example, 100 and 111), but this design overlooks the possibility of aesthetic or genre-related ambiguity within a singular work (e.g., mockumentary) and the filmmakers' effort to challenge rigid categorizations that one might expect to find in "new voices" cinema.

In *New Voices* and *Ten Arab Filmmakers* the authors foreground auteur filmmakers. Tracing the distinctive fingerprint of a certain filmmaker over the *longue durée* provides the reader with a useful broad historical and socio-political context for the continuities, breaks, aesthetics, and funding not only as they pertain to individual filmmakers, but oftentimes, to Arab cinema in general. However, Armes's book and Gugler's introduction and the selections he made of the ten Arab filmmakers smack of an outdated fascination with auteurism. At times, this captivation with auteurism results in approbations that seem less suitable for an academic study than a popular film review. For example, in reference to Maryse Gargour's *The Land Speaks Arabic* (2008), Armes maintains, "this is documentary filmmaking of the highest quality" (29) and he concludes his brief discussion of Hanan Abdalla's *In the Shadow of a Man* (2011) with "this is a very impressive documentary debut" (71). Likewise, under the heading "Auteur Directors in Poor Countries" where Gugler addresses the need for some of the auteur filmmakers to engage in all aspects of their films' pre-production, production, distribution and marketing, he provides a terse assessment—"They are truly filmmakers" (2).

It is refreshing then to find occasionally that, alongside the allure of auteurism and the authors' praise for Arab cinema, Armes and some of the contributors view the auteur Arab filmmakers more ambivalently. Tim Kennedy's "Michel Khleifi: Filmmaker of Memory" (in Gugler, 53–74), problematizes the construction of a gendered nation and the circulation of trite stereotypes in the Palestinian film *Wedding in Galilee* (1987) and expresses some misgivings about the style and discourse of, respectively, Khleifi's *Canticle of the Stones* (1990) and *Route 181* (2004, co-directed with Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan). Armes addresses the inadequate innovation (12) and limits of the organic nature or, at least historical continuity, of the "art house" Arab filmmaking of the 2000s—"there is no sense in which [the new voices of the 2000s'] filmmakers are shaped by the history of Arab cinema" (20).

However, at times Armes's reservations about Arab filmmaking are misguided. Twice within a couple of pages into his discussion of distinguished Tunisian filmmakers the author dismisses their possible impact on Arab

cinema; assessing Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013), Armes maintains that [the film] "is in no way a contribution to Arab cinema" (172), and as for Karim Dridi's *The Last Flight* (2009), it is deemed a film that "contributes nothing to Arab cinema" (174). These pithy statements are not only curious, but are also misplaced given the broader transnational context of contemporary cinema, in terms of both production and audiences, and they stand in stark contrast to the author's own emphasis on the porous cinematic-artistic borders between North Africa and Europe or, more specifically, within the Francophone world.

Since the wide breadth of these two books provide a panoramic view of Arab cinema, the dilemmas of corpus and selection seem rather critical, and readers ought to reflect on the choices the authors made regarding their inclusion of certain films/filmmakers and not others. Whereas Gugler offers only cursory address of these dilemmas, Armes makes the culling of certain films from the 2000s for his book quite explicit. In his discussion of the Moroccan films addressed in the book, the author spells out his typical criteria—films that were "co-produced with an intended international audience in mind and hence available in subtitled DVD format" (3). Not surprisingly, he later adds, "this book is concerned, to a large extent, with a kind of 'art house' Arab cinema" (3). Likewise, the author admits to the partiality of his selection of Egyptian films since the majority of these films are low budget productions that do not receive international attention and are not released on DVD (199).

In the book's first paragraph Armes states, "The hundreds of films I have viewed basically adopt a single perspective: they are for understanding, liberty, equality, tolerance, and greater freedom for women. Not a single film I have seen—or even heard of—advocates jihad, war, violence, or oppression" (1). Later on this page he attributes this "uniformity of approach" to the Arab filmmakers' need to secure international (mostly European) funding, collaboration, and the release of their films. Clearly then, this alleged homogeneity and "single perspective" of "new voices" cinema derive precisely from the exclusion of the majority of contemporary Arab films from this study (e.g., most Egyptian films are not released on subtitled DVDs). Even as Armes admits to the limitations of his selections, what is left unsaid is whether, for the author, those local and low budget productions fall *ipso facto* outside the realm of "new voices." Attempting to answer this question one way will point to this study's problematic selection rationale and to reply the other way will reveal a conceptual drawback. If answered affirmatively, the selection raises the question of the justification for disregarding important local Arab films that express "new voices"—the book's title; answering that

question negatively would smack of vulgar orientalism. What might be even more troubling is the implication at the conclusion of this discussion where the author entertains the idea that the increasing availability of Gulf funding would alter “the nature of Arab filmmaking” (1) with the implication of the demise of “the uniformity of approach” where are filmmakers advocate liberty, equality, and tolerance. One wonders if what the author intimates here is that, left alone (as the case is in popular local cinema), Arab filmmakers, now no longer in need to “please European funding,” will adopt a less progressive and tolerant stand in their works.

The focus in Armes’s book on co-productions and works that are available in the West and Gugler’s selection of ten Arab auteur filmmakers provides useful information and perspectives on Arab “art house” cinema, but students and scholars of Arab/Middle Eastern cinema are likely to be as interested in other approaches where emphasis is placed on the rich and (again, in the case of Egypt) prolific local and popular cinema. Works on Egyptian cinema, such as those by Walter Armbrust (1995), Deborah Starr (2011), and Joel Gordon (2002), and Rebecca Joubin’s *The Politics of Love* (2013) on Syrian TV provide these alternative foci and perspectives that are largely lacking in *Ten Arab Filmmakers* and *New Voices in Arab Cinema*.

Against the more conventional thematic approach to Arab/Middle Eastern cinema that Armes and Gugler undertake, Devi and Rahman’s *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema* seeks to explore a mode that has mostly been left out of scholarship about that cinema—humor and its relatives irony, laughter, parody, and satire. Instead of a panoramic view of the region, the authors’ introduction and the contributors to this edited volume provide an insightful analysis of particular case studies of films, TV shows, and comedic genres in the Arab Middle East, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and, in a transnational context, also India. Although the introduction is rich in its survey of various theories of humor, laughter, and comedy (including those conceptualized by Plato, Aristotle, Bergson, Kant, Santayana, Freud, and Frye) and provides a useful context for discussions in the following chapters, the dense presentation of these theories is difficult to navigate and the introduction could benefit from better organization and flow. For example, Devi and Rahman state that “there are two rather diametrically opposed schools of thought on the nature of amusement as produced by comic events” (7); a reference to Kant’s “incongruity” school follows this statement, but it is never clearly spelled out in the introduction what precisely the oppositional school is. Incongruently with the introduction, in her discussion of *The Outcasts* (Masoud Dehnamaki 2007) in the chapter “Comedic Mediations,” Somy Kim lists the incongruent approach as one of *three* leading ways to theorize the comic (149).

In their introduction, Devi and Rahman make it patently clear that humor can potentially rescue “films from being reduced to national allegories,” perhaps because of “humor’s inherently aporetic nature” (4). In line with much of the theoretical work about humor, most of the contributions accentuate the intimate connections of humor to power relations (e.g., “between the one who laughs and the one being laughed at,”13) and, relatedly, humor’s emancipatory aesthetics. Likewise, in addressing theorists from various historical eras, the book highlights humor’s engagement with society (in contrast to tragedy that foregrounds characters) not only in terms of theme, such as class issues and master-slave relations, but also regarding spectatorship. And yet, even the undergirding social dimension of humor does not exhaust its potential and possibilities. As Cyrus Ali Zargar demonstrates in “Space, Irony, and National Allegory on Iranian Television” (79–103) the hunger for an allegoric reading of third world literature (and cinema) and, one may add, the focus on the outward social effect, elide the affect of inward indulgent pleasures that are intrinsic to humor, irony, and satire (96–97). Likewise, Devi’s chapter on Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* (161–187) relates humor not as much to the social or political as to the sublime. Furthermore, the association of Kiarostami’s work with humor is rather daring and refreshing.

Rastegar’s *Surviving Images* tackles the trend in (Western) contemporary documentary filmmaking where works about trauma tend to focus on the colonizer-perpetrator as the victim of trauma “while the traumas of the colonized suffer from obscurity and conjecture” (30). For Rastegar, current scholarship on collective traumas only contributes to this unfortunate lopsided approach (30). Against this tendentious treatment of the (ex-)colonizer-perpetrator’s trauma, the book is dedicated mostly to exploring the traumas of colonized people in the colonial and postcolonial eras as these transpire in Middle Eastern cinema. But the ultimate drive behind this book is not “whether victim or perpetrator has a purer claim to traumatic memory...but rather how both employ the discourses of trauma in articulating their own cultural memories” (66). Rastegar’s main intervention then lies in proposing an alternative to the facile application of psychoanalytical trauma theory to the study of affected societies. For the author, the shortcoming of trauma studies in film analysis stems mostly from the aggregation and projection of the psychic dynamic of the individual’s trauma into a collective experience of a certain ethnic, national, or religious group (31). Put differently, Rastegar censures the view of trauma merely as a symptom and an inert resulting effect. Instead, the author offers “cultural memory” and “social trauma” as conceptual frameworks that allow us to

conceive the rendering of collective traumas in cinema in terms of sites of agency and production (4). “Trauma films” then do not simply reflect a given traumatic experience, but they also shape certain experiences into what eventually transpires as the cultural memory of collective traumas. Notwithstanding the importance of the framework Rastegar offers, to make the distinction between collective and personal trauma he implicitly assumes that the latter is unmediated, direct, and natural (33), namely, individual trauma as simply a symptom or a result of a horrifying experience rather than a construct (“metaphor”) that may also be generative. This clearly does not reflect faithfully the understanding of individual trauma in psychoanalytical theory.

The analytical model of cultural memory and social trauma affords Rastegar an insightful and nuanced analysis of trauma films. Employing case studies from the cinemas of Egypt (e.g., *I’m Free*, Salah Abu Sayf, 1958) and Tunisia (e.g., *The Silences of the Palace*, Moufida Tlatli, 1994) in chapter 3, the author argues that a singular event and its consequences—the struggle for decolonialization and independence—may be couched in nationally triumphant terms at one point, but over the years it may be construed as a trauma for the women involved in these struggles. As for Palestinian cinema (chapter 4), the generative power of social trauma in film undermines the national discourse that emphasizes linearity and proffers instead “an aporetic history of modern Palestine” (99). In his discussion of the ghostly trope in post-civil war Lebanese cinema in chapter 6, Rastegar suggests that the images this genre projects are not simply representative, but mostly productive as they aim to challenge the official amnesia about the war (158). For Rastegar, the lack of narrational closure and the “temporal irresolution” in post-civil war Lebanese cinema concur with some of the prominent features that characterize contemporary Palestinian cinema (158).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Surviving Images* and *Humor in the Middle East* engage closely with contemporary film and literary theory and criticism whereas *New Voices in Arab Cinema* and *Ten Arab Filmmakers* provide a compendious entry into the cinema of the Middle East/Arab world. All four books are generally free of the scholarly argot that often mar works in Cultural Studies, and the authors should be commended for making their texts accessible also to uninitiated students interested in the Middle East/Arab world and Film Studies.

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