

SAMIRAH ALKASSIM and NEZAR ANDARY. *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas: Visions of a Syrian Auteur* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018). Pp. 177. \$64.36 (hardback). ISBN: 9783319768120

Arab cinema has received short shrift in both Middle East studies and cinema studies. Much scholarship on Arab cinema has been confined to traditional film critical approaches that by and large ignore contemporary theory, which is longstanding within the discipline. Samirah Alkassim and Nezar Andary's *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas: Visions of a Syrian Auteur* is a rare exception to this tendency, as it not only engages theory but rearticulates it to the history and knowledge of Arab culture. For this reason alone, this book deserves to be read and discussed as a model for future scholarship.

*The Cinema of Muhammad Malas* is distinguished by its innovative, creative approach to the oeuvre of Syrian filmmaker and writer Muhammad Malas. "Designed to be read as a textual and visual documentary" (viii), the book is organized along four intersecting, overlapping hermeneutic axes: analyses of Malas's films; interviews conducted with Malas; photographs and diary entries produced during the making of Malas's films; and formal writings by Malas. Each of these axes marks an entry point into the volume's titular subject while serving as a vehicle of its cinematic intelligibility. The ensuing intertextual logic enables an unfolding of the authorial signifier "Muhammad Malas," as such performing rather than categorizing him, in turn resisting Western empiricism while remaining faithful to his belief that knowledge and passion are inseparable and that, apropos of Brecht, thinking is change and change is an effect of collective historical emergence and transformation based on a socially over-determined recognition of different, previously untried paths to truth.

The book's most substantial chapter, Poignancy and Memoir in Documentary, comes midway. In it, Malas is positioned as an ideal figure by which to critique prevailing approaches to Arab cinema. His aesthetic is described in terms both of epistemology—"Malas [accesses traumatic historical truths inaccessible in the verité sense] not to highlight the indeterminacy of truth but rather to emphasize how we look at and understand truth, history, place" (62)—and phenomenology—it marks "an attempt to pierce the veil of hyperbole and rhetoric, to gaze into the souls of [Palestinians] through the *medium* of dreams" (61). Thus does *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas* regard Malas in a most original way as an exemplar of the intellectual and artistic issues with which Arab

filmmakers grapple, in turn inviting us to consider the “defining wound” (3) of his oeuvre: the 1967 defeat, or *Naksa*. Whether focusing in *Quneitra 74* (1974) on the subsequent Israeli occupation and destruction of his hometown of Quneitra in the Syrian/Golan Heights, or in *The Dream* (1987) on the memories and hopes of Palestinian exiles living in Lebanon, many of them killed during the *Nakba* and since then, *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas* emphasizes Malas’s placement of Palestine at the center of an ongoing Arab liberation struggle.

From Alkassim and Andary’s interviews, we learn that Malas was educated in filmmaking at the renowned Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK, aka Moscow Film Institute). There he came to “believe that the vision that guided the Soviet society back then was pure, clear, and sincere” (24), while at the same time learning from master teacher Igor Talankin that “cinema is your choice and your expression” (*ibid.*). This apparent contradiction enabled Malas to appreciate as well as question the Syrian–Soviet relationship, whereupon he soon came to realize that his cinematic passion, which he describes as an agonizing “urge to express” (25) one’s passage “through the interior self to find the past” (10), lay at the core of his ability to work through and transcend his personal-political dilemmas. On this basis, Malas developed the painstaking, (self-)critical aesthetic for which he is renowned, and on which Alkassim and Andary bring Syrian cultural critic Adunis to bear. For Adunis, a cultural double-bind regulates “all cultural production between an old heritage that compensates for a failed ‘Arab present,’ and an addiction to and blind belief in all things European or New World” (69). For Malas, now in exile from a Syria that has become the site of yet another imperialist proxy war over Middle Eastern resources, the ensuing ideologico-political impasse is best challenged by “films of gratitude” (69) – cinematic works that help resolve historical divisions by projecting allegories of remembering and, just as important, forgetting. For Alkassim and Andary, this critical poetics recalls the function of the Barthesian *punctum*: it produces “a more reciprocal engagement” with viewers, which, insofar as divisions are always already political, “underscores [the connection of] the personal with the collective, micro with the macro, something which Palestinians . . . living in a forced expulsion as unwanted refugees in camps in host countries could not afford to ignore” (61). Accordingly, Malas’s films of gratitude implicate their viewers in the destructive enabling conditions of their spectatorship, reenacting a dialectics of modern Arab culture and calling poignantly for their overcoming. Such conditions include not only the abiding, technocratic

patriarchy and authoritarianism that continues to mar genuine Arab progress in the cynical name of neoliberal reform, but also the social and economic maldevelopment symptomatized by those tendencies and which, not least according to *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas*, has surely rendered vulnerable both Arab pan-nationalism and the Soviet experiment – and their supporting roles in the Palestinian struggle – to defeat by the capitalist West.

It would seem, according to Malas, to whom Alkassim and Andary give final word, that Arab cinema, too, has suffered under this yoke and will only experience liberation when it likewise renounces its enthrallment to the dangling carrot of commodification and commits itself unreservedly to the much-needed soul-searching offered by critical aesthetic experimentation. Apropos of his semi-autobiographical film-in-progress, *Cinema al-Dunya*, an excerpt from which – depicting a near-fatal car accident that occurred during the 1990 Gulf War – concludes *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas*, “we approach the surface of the oil tank, and just at the moment of impact, everything disappears.” ✂

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