Undoing Stereotypical Representations in Arab and Muslim Cinemas: Challenges, Interruptions, and Possibilities

Imed Ben Labidi[•]

Abstract

Troubled by a history of misconceptions on Western silver screens, Arab and Muslim filmmakers have kept their cinematic productions thematically close to the reality of their postcolonial cultural and social conditions, while trying to represent their communities in complex ways. In many efforts of artistic excellence, the films they make aim to reverse the frisson of alterity upon which the conception of their disgraced images have been historically predicated; in the process, the films aspire to alter these images and representations. Rarely however does the work of these Arab and Muslim filmmakers reach a global audience. This article locates themes and creative forms in many cinematic narratives of representation, and recommends their interpretation and mediation to a global audience. The article responds to a recent "intellectual turn" in contemporary debate on Arab and Muslim films, calling for the invention of a category called "Muslim Cinema". The article contextualizes this turn within the contours of Western institutions as sites of epistemological authority and examines its epistemological, racial, and ideological implications and underpinnings in connection to representation.

Introduction

Like most Third Cinemas' post-independence era productions, Arab/Muslim films are known for the cultivation of a realist aesthetic and a commitment to national struggles and identity discourses. Historically, however, filmmakers in Arab and Muslim societies have addressed domestic issues and censored themes often considered too sensitive and beyond national meta-narratives. Civil wars, Shi'a/Sunni entanglements in proxy wars, religious fanaticism and terrorism, irregular migration, the heterogeneous composition which characterizes Arab and other identities in the region, gender politics, and the haunting verisimilitude of the Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation, have all been persistent themes for filmmakers and audiences. Never have these filmmakers been unified over a particular configuration of alterity, or collectively endorsed one specific representation of otherness in the

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[•] *Assistant Professor of Media and Cultural studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.*

same manner that Hollywood had their disfigured images molded and frozen over time as villains and terrorists. Aware that their identity has been "represented by others, mediated by Hollywood, Dan Rather, or *The New York Times*… [deploying misconceptions of] lazy Mexicans, shifty Arabs, savage Africans, and exotic Asiatics…" (Stam 1984: 51) on their movie screens, Arab/Muslim cinematic productions have been consistently exploring different strategies to speak for themselves.

In light of rising anti-Muslim and right-wing sentiments across Europe and the United States, there is an increased investment in artistic productions from the Arab world (Khoury 2005: 1). Many of these films contest harmful stereotypes, the conflation of Arabs, Muslims, and Islam, and the sanctioning of anti-Muslim racism in multicultural states. Through a brief survey of carefully selected films, the article demonstrates the wide scope of Arab/Muslim productions, and examines enduring stereotypes and their contestations, meanwhile critically explaining evolving visibility of these contestations in Arab and Muslim transnational films that aim to attract Western critics and viewers' attention. Using an intertextual approach guided by the insights of postcolonial theory and critical race scholarship, the main goal is to show how these cinematic productions attempt to subvert negative images of Arab and Muslim identities and cultures without claiming to speak for all Arabs or Muslims. In this context, the article maps out details of representation and self-criticism, and responds to a recent intellectual turn towards the creation of a category of "Muslim Cinema".

For the last decade, a group of film scholars, postcolonial theorists and critics, and other researchers in Europe and the United States, whose work deals with different aspects of film studies, have been exploring ideas about creating a category for cinemas. This category would include works produced by Arab or Muslim filmmakers and directors, from Muslim geographies or minoritized groups from Iran, India, Palestine, Pakistan, Turkey and many other locations. The inquiry is driven by the need to highlight cultural transformations and the artistic creativity of Muslim cultures in a time of heightened Islamophobia. Drawing on the work that these scholars accomplished, this research is invested in searching for possibilities of more complex representations of Arabs and Muslims in cinema. But in considering this scholarly inquiry into reading and categorizing Arab and Muslim films for the goal of subverting stereotypes, it raises the following questions: what exactly is being conceptualized as the object of study, Islam, Muslims, or their cinematic productions? Who gets to draw the parameters of such category? How would this category destabilize existing forms of representation that are heavily bolstered by an architecture of exceptionalism to develop better alternatives? What role can filmmakers and critics play in mediating and making new meanings and representations? What might a category of Muslim Cinema open up or foreclose? By asking these questions, the research engages both its possibilities and limits.

What propels my objection to a singularized "Muslim Cinema" are concerns about enabling an essentializing and fetishizing discourse that inadvertently reproduces

neo-Orientalist narratives and conceals the documented and nonhomogeneous history of the American entertainment industry's antagonism towards Islam and Muslims. More specifically, the research paper argues against such a category based on the necessity to keep religious identifications and art separate. It also engages this debate by explaining that Arab/Muslim films have already been involved in subverting Hollywood's misrepresentations and therefore it would be more meaningful to study their strategies of subversion and place them in their social and political contexts.

To accomplish these tasks, the research paper is divided into two parts. Part one examines representations in Arab/Muslim cinemas from different stages of their development over the last fifty years with samples from a variety of genres and ideological influences: nationalism, realism, resistance, and more recent transnational films. The second part critically analyzes the epistemological, racial, and ideological implications evoked by singularizing Muslim cinema. The analysis builds on Talal Asad's critique of the "idea of a Muslim anthropology" and the racialized approaches used to conceptualize it; finally, the ideological argument discusses the shifts that have been enabled by global culture and the way they shape artistic productions, linking the evolving nuances of the signifier "Muslim" to the central feature of global culture today, using Arjun Appadurai's critique of modernity and globalization. The following section lays out details of the methodology, and explains the reasons for selecting these samples and their relevance to the problems a category called "Muslim Cinema" would pose.

A note on methodology

In this endeavor to understand that Arab/Muslim Cinema as a heterogenous aesthetic enterprise and keep the analysis centered mainly on the segments and tropes employed to transform the (in)visibility of Arabs and Muslims, the research does not present an elaborate analysis of the films themselves. As each one could be a separate article itself, the intention is rather to focus on the evolving themes and forms that emerge from the films, showing continuity or ruptures in the ways filmmakers have pushed forward cultural development with their methods of addressing enduring political and cultural issues at home and beyond. The purpose is to illustrate how their engagement plays out in moving images to reconfigure more sobering alternatives. Hence, the emphasis is on this function that ties all these examples together; namely, the attempt to forge a sense of self-awareness of an Arab/Muslim history with a self-reflexive understanding of its pluralist identity and multicultural composition and renew it against Hollywood's cemented habit of essentializing Arabs and Muslims. Against such a challenging hegemony, the films were carefully selected based on three factors: a) thematic focus associated with representation, self-criticism, and contestation of stereotypes; b) stylistic characteristics showing the use of transnational elements to target a global audience; in this context, exploring with the use of form to impact meaning is very relevant; and c) works that show the complications which the category of a "Muslim

Cinema", if constructed, poses and why it ought to be resisted in spite of its organizing potential.

Looking specifically into fictional and documentary stories that disrupt myths conflating Arabs (collectively perceived as Muslims), Islam, and Muslims as a contested and contestable paradigm pertinent to questions of cultural identity and negotiation of power with the West; the selection focuses also on directors whose productions adopt transnational styles and storylines that could be accessible to a global audience. For example, Dahna Abourahme examines the exceptional hardships of disrupting gender hierarchies under occupation in her documentary *The Kingdom of Women* (2010); Ayman Jamal's animated film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (2015) presents a pointed critique of racism and highlights Islam's clear position against discrimination. The former drew on an old tradition of oral history by interviewing a group of Palestinian women refugees; the documentary is presented in Arabic with English subtitles while incorporating animation. The film utilizes the animation functions as an iconographic element that extends the visual terrains for viewers by mapping out and drawing images of the camp before it got built since the shooting of real footage. The latter is an animated film entirely in English.

Even though these films are grounded in the experiences of Arab or Muslim characters, they expand beyond narrow cultural specificities to engage with a global spectatorship's interests, anxieties, and aspirations. Both have managed to ensure a successful distribution in Western markets and received positive media coverage. Both films are transnational on thematic and technical levels, and are very useful examples to this discussion of representation in two ways; firstly, they provide cultural material which represents the creators' own voices and enables filmmakers and critics to speak about evolving cultures and artistic productions, thus changing the positionality of Arab and Muslim artists. Secondly, they construct a counter-narrative discourse to Hollywood's dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims. Collectively, these works exceed binaristic and limiting representations and categorizing as will be shown with the analysis of more examples after a brief contextualization.

Heterogeneity and complex representations

A focus on representation has been a shared theme among Arab and Muslim filmmakers; however, as Viola Shafiq explains in her seminal book *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (1998), each filmmaker approaches it from their own cultural location, political constraints, and experiences. Each one is also subject to the shifting postcolonial state's politics and governed by its interests, sponsorship, and censorship regulations. Therefore, many of the earlier productions starting at the time of independence were grounded in "so-called Arab-Muslim culture and what are known as traditional or native arts" (Shafiq 1998: 4), and ideologically aligned with the politics of Arab nationalism. What is interesting about Shafiq's study is how she contextualizes the transformation and development of Arab cinemas as they gradually emerge out of merely copying and learning from Western

production styles and adjust their objectives to be commercially successful and attract Arab and foreign viewers.

In her historical analysis and periodization of films, Shafiq also dismisses essentialist assumptions that render Arab and Muslim regions as homogenous geographies. Furthermore, Shafiq confirms the co-existence of religions, intersections of different powers of colonialism that exposed the region to foreign influences and languages, hybridization of indigenous and regional cultures, encounters of different ethnicities, and competing intellectual currents including Marxism, socialism, and postcolonialism. By doing so, Shafiq aims to make clearer the patterns that complicate Arab and Muslim cinemas and points out that "the countries of North Africa and the Middle East have never formed a closed and secluded cultural environment, showing how the history of the region is one of polyglot empires, mixing together peoples, cultures, religions, and languages." (Shafiq 1998: 6)

This idea of a postcolonial and contemporary heterogenous culture and peoples was already present in Youssef Chahine's work thirty years before. His 1963 film, *El Naser Saleh El Dine*, also known as Saladin, tells the tale of the 12th century Muslim victory over the Christian crusaders and showcases the rich diversity of the Arab region's social and ethnic fabric, the harmony between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and the determination of all to protect the Holy Land from foreign aggressors. In this fictional narrative, Chahine emphasizes the interstices of pluralism and its significance in constructing a postcolonial Arab identity while highlighting the belonging of Arab Christians in the region.

This same idea of representation as a theme collectively adopted by Arab filmmakers is brought up again in the work of Roy Armes. Referring to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia among other African nations, Armes argues that "filmmaking in Africa by Africans is fundamentally a postcolonial activity and experience." (2006: 3) In his analysis of African productions in general, he explains the limitations of what he calls a simplistic approach of examining these films "in terms of realist/modernist dichotomy" (2006: 67). Asserting the function of films as mediating the constantly transforming and fluid character of the postcolonial subject, including the way the colonial experience shapes how colonized people view their own cultures, Armes describes the beginning of a socially committed cinema produced in North Africa. He states that "the first significant film is IDHEC graduate Abdellatif Ben Ammar's first feature, *Such a Simple Story/Une si simple histoire* (1970), which anticipates the approach of many 1970s directors. Ben Ammar commented that he wanted to 'reflect on our civilization, which we have often looked at through the gaze of the other: the West.'" (2006: 82) Armes thus situates North African film productions within a dialogue between East and West that seeks to challenge Western representation of the Arab and Muslim Other.

Taking this notion of self-reflexivity and the exteriority of representational practices further, Walter Armbrust, who worked extensively on Arab media and Egyptian

films, discusses specific cases of Western political impact on film production and explains the way its influence seeped into Egyptian scripts and politics. He compares two Egyptian films about terrorism: *The Terrorist* (1994), directed by Nadir Galal, and *The Closed Doors* (1999), directed by Atef Hetata. Armbrust identifies a triangular connection between American hegemonic power, Egyptian politics, and film production. He explains that *The Terrorist*, as a propagandist story aiming to vilify Islamists, was privately financed by Adel Imam, one of Egypt's mega stars, who also plays the lead character. The film was produced within the context of the Egyptian government's campaign against terrorism in the mid-1990s and its "overall effect was to associate Islamists and violence in a way that U.S. audiences would find familiar, though such a characterization does not adequately capture complex realities." (Armbrust 2002: 924) In this case, instead of dissolving false claims, decontextualization, and misrepresentations of political violence, the film comfortably reproduces the same rhetoric and troubling generalizations. *The Closed Doors* had access to foreign funds and was seen as a blueprint for "Islamist recruiting tactics in a lower-middle-class milieu." (Armbrust 2002: 928)

On first glance, both films appear to trade in stereotypic and decontextualized understandings of the region. But, as Armbrust notes, if "properly contextualized" in their cultural and socioeconomic conditions, and understood within class structure, poverty, and ideological manipulation of impoverished and desperate Egyptian youth, these films can provide insights to both Arab and Western audiences on the roots of terrorism and help devise solutions based on meaningful understanding rather than stereotypes.

Trapped between hyper visibility and invisibility, Edward Said explains the binary place that Palestinian cinema inhabits. Said says, "Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the kufiyya, the stone-throwing Palestinian - a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence." (quoted in Dabashi 2006) Since Said's important insights on the precarious position that Palestinian cinema occupies, Palestinian filmmakers have made enormous cinematic contributions that push against the binary of hyper visibility and invisibility which Said rightly identified. *Paradise Now* (2005) by Hany Abu Asad and *5 Broken Cameras* (2011) by Emad Burnat, and more recently *Mai* Masri's *3000 Nights* (2015) all present complex views of Palestinians that refuse "invisibilization" or stereotypic representation. Importantly, the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the plight of Palestinians remain one of the most dominant themes in Arab and Muslim cinema.

The trouble with a category

Collectively, these works show that Arab and Muslim cinemas deal with a range of issues and their films clearly engage deeply complicated political, social, and historical issues in multiple and fluid ways. While certain issues (such as the Palestinian struggle) are dominant in Arab and Muslim cinematic productions, it is impossible to

reduce these works into one, especially because each of them reflects the local political and socio-economic context from which they emerge. No category can thus properly contain these works without risking homogenizing diverse filmic contributions under a singularized and limiting definition. So rather than invent a narrow category, the article suggests leading and guiding a discussion about Arabs/Muslims' artistic contributions to cinema, shifting the debate's foci, and bringing to the forefront questions about their cultural developments. In this context, Youssef Chahine and Mai Masri's work are read as examples of cinema produced by filmmakers who engage issues pertaining to the Muslim and Arab world in interesting ways that complicate and altogether refuse singular categorizations.

Youssef Chahine's *Saladin, The Victorious* (1963) and Mai Masri's *3000 Nights* (2015) are illustrative of ongoing experiments with different framings of life and culture that accord importance to everyday life and national concerns of Arab societies. The works rewrite decades of Arab history. In *Saladin*, Chahine and his leftist writers imagine a new reading of the battles that defined the 12th century Crusades. In this tale of victory and just war, Chahine constructs the conflict between Muslims and Christians as a crisis of leadership that Saladin overcomes with his wisdom and military skills, power of negotiation, commitment to religious pluralism and equality between peoples of all faiths. Chahine, an Arab Christian filmmaker, allows us to see how Islam and Muslim identity are discussed in ways that emphasize peaceful coexistence among all different religious affiliations under Saladin's "just" rule in the Arab/Muslim world; he also highlights the participation of Arab Christians in defending Jerusalem with the character of Issa (the name is Arabic for Jesus) who plays one of Saladin's closest high ranking and trusted officials.

While Chahine revisits the East/West collisions and tips the balance in Arabs and Muslims' favor, Masri's *3000 Nights* denounces the brutality of occupation, Palestinian intragroup violence, and the impact of multiple oppressions on women. All these topics are packed in the story of the wrongful imprisonment of a married Palestinian teacher named Layal, accused of aiding a teenager who attacked an Israeli military check point. She is sentenced to eight years in prison, abandoned by her Palestinian husband, and shortly thereafter finds herself pregnant. She gives birth to her child in jail.

Directed both to an outward audience and focused inward, these films carry strong didactic messages addressing morality, national belonging, resistance against occupation, commitment to the community, and questions of personal and collective responsibility. Both films advocate the value of self-criticism and explore ideas of good citizenry, rupturing misrepresentations of a collectively passive Arab or Muslim public through the behavior of their characters, the decisions they make, and the overall messages of their films. Both films are made for a diverse Arab/Muslim viewership, but through their focus on humanist themes that explore personal and collective struggles, they are able to reach a global audience.

Other filmmakers have also worked hard to humanize Arabs and Muslims to Western spectators. For example, Syrian-American filmmaker Moustapha Al Akkad in his epic historical drama, *The Message* (1976), focused specifically on correcting misperceptions about the beginning of Islam. With the aim of humanizing the Prophet Muhammad for Western audiences, the film took seven years to complete and was the endeavor of an international, Hollywood-caliber cast, including Egyptian writer Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Greek actor and singer Irene Papas, Broadway favorite Rosalie Crutchley, and celebrated Mexican-American star Anthony Quinn.

A return to the origins of Islam and reinventing moments of its glories continues to be a recurring theme motivating many adaptations. In 2015, Iranian director Majid Majidi produced *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* with a similar transnational team as Al Akkad's production, bringing together historians, archeologists, and multinational film industry professionals that included Muslims, secular and Western people, and others, further complicating the parameters of what constitutes Muslim Cinema. Majidi does not claim this production to be Muslim or exclusively about Islam and Muslims. According to Alissa Simon who reviewed it for *Variety* magazine, "the film's main takeaway is that Islam, Judaism and Christianity share similar values and roots." (Simon 2015)

Unlike Al Akkad's and Majidi's transnational scripts, the popular Turkish production directed by Serdar Akar *Valley of the Wolves* (2006) is all about settling scores. The story is grounded in a true incident of aggression against Turkish soldiers by American invaders and is no different than James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994), William Friedkin's *Rules of Engagement* (2000), or Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) - except that the roles are reversed. In *Valley of the Wolves*, it is the Americans who are portrayed as villains and barbaric killers - and American actors were hired to play the evil characters. Billy Zane plays Sam William Marshall, a Christian fundamentalist assassin who serves his God by ridding the world of Muslims; Gary Busey plays a gruesome and heartless Jewish doctor who cuts open his patients and steals their organs - playing into anti-Semitic tropes. Deeply rooted in a sense of national pride, and an ideological underpinning of Americans as ruthless aggressors, this Turkish action script draws a parallel between violent and insolent Americans and brave heroes and protectors, not only of Turkey, but also as rescuers of other Muslims.

The significance of these films lies in the absence of a collective consensus about religion as the source for everything artistic which is totally the opposite of what the naming "Muslim Cinema" might suggest. If *Valley of the Wolves* speaks from a very strong sense of nationalist ideology, thematic concerns of most Turkish productions reflect a robust awareness of the necessity to separate religion from other cultural domains and creative artistic endeavors. So to further limit the risk of unintentionally confirming the assumptions of mainstream and Hollywood's essentialism, the category for cinemas by Arab/Muslim societies must be carefully considered; multiple cinemas must be kept in mind as well as the need to highlight the diversity and intersectionality of Muslim identities, the need to validate the separation of

religion and culture, and the need to encourage cinematic productions made out of transnational cultural fabrics.

Whereas Akar's *Valley of the Wolves* subverts the vilification of Muslim men in its fictional account, yet offers a misguided vilification of Christian men as violent religious fanatics and justifies the killing of all imperialist invaders, Chahine's *Saladin*, creates a fictional historical account that emphasizes Muslim leadership, embraces differences, and enables a pluralist society to live in peace. In contrast, Dhana Abourahme's *Kingdom of Women* (2010), a rare true-life story, defies the discourses of Arab patriarchy, gender scripts, and claims about Arab/Muslim women as inadequate, passive and dependent on men. The film shatters orientalist assumptions that "the idea of an Arab and Muslim female political agency as only possible as explicitly Westernized" (Ibroscheva 2013: 872). Instead it shows how a group of women face incredible challenges, work together, and empower each other. This type of empowering narrative, placing men and women at equal levels in all functions and responsibilities, deconstructs assumptions about Muslim women as oppressed females and Muslim men as oppressors. A review of these works demonstrates the wide range of themes that Arab and Muslim cinema engages, showing how diverse Arab and Muslim cinema is and how it defies singular forms of categorization.

Back to the present: "the intellectual turn"

In April 2018, the Muslim Studies Program at Michigan State University organized a conference titled *Locating Muslim Cinema(s): The Politics of Culture and Identity*. The conference sought to problematize the representation of Muslims and Islam by exploring what the investigation of "a discrete and coherent esthetic enterprise" designated as "Muslim cinema" would entail. The conference aimed to explore what this category's unique and defining characteristics would be and how it would differ from other types of cinemas. It seems that the signifier Muslim was chosen by the organizers to convey the vast, rich, and diverse cultures of Muslim societies and to indicate the challenge of accounting for the large body of artistic contributions that arise from different historical conditions, dynamic cultural transformations, geographies, and shifting political platforms. Walter Armbrust was the keynote speaker for this conference and spoke against the category in terms of its current frame by focusing on the complexity, secularism, and aesthetic aspects of earlier Egyptian films as signs of the heterogeneity of cinema from Arab and Muslim societies.

This was not the first time that cultural studies and film scholars and other researchers whose work deals with different aspects of cinema have attempted to explore ideas about a category for Muslims. The academic debate goes back to 2008 when researcher and journalist Ali Nobil Ahmad edited a special issue of the journal *Third Text* on cinema and the Muslim world. He invited a select group of academics to discuss aspects of Islam and world cinema and many responded with interesting articles that conveyed the diversity of Muslim cultures. These scholarly contributions

thus moved the debate about "the representations of Islam - in scholarship, art, literature, music, and public discourse" (Said 1997: 51) beyond "the ideological commitment to the idea of a monolithic and unchanging Islam." (ibid: 98) Ahmad's work sought to invoke and showcase the cultural heterogeneity of Muslim peoples, their cultural development and artistic creativity, and the vast landscapes that comprise the Muslim world. A group of scholars would convene again in 2011 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London to continue this discussion. And eventually, pushing the debate forward, this special issue of *Third Text* was developed into an edited volume titled more carefully *Cinema in Muslim Societies* and published in 2016.

This section interrogates these intellectual efforts in relation to a number of theoretical texts and concepts; it discusses the epistemological implications of inventing the category of Muslim film and the complexity of Hollywood's role in sanctioning and fomenting anti-Muslim racism today by turning to the work of Talal Asad. In the spring of 2009, anthropologist and postcolonial theorist Talal Asad republished a 1986 paper entitled "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." Asad's essay discusses "a great industry" he terms "the anthropology of Islam" and explains it as a politically motivated social construct invented by anthropologists and academics who think they know Islam; Asad asks two questions: "What, exactly is an anthropology of Islam? What is its object of investigation?" (2009: 2) With these questions, he shifts the focus from studying Islam and Muslims to indicate the need for a more meaningful reconfiguration.

Building on Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a social construct that is in turn objectified, this part of the analysis engages with the epistemic effect of singling out Islam in the idea of a Muslim Cinema. Asad welcomes comparisons between Islam and Christianity or Judaism but indicates that comparative inquiries should develop with the understanding that "forms of interest in the production of knowledge are intrinsic to various structures of power, and they differ not according to the essential character of Islam or Christianity, but according to historically changing systems of discipline." (2009: 7) In addition to this power/knowledge dialectic, Asad states that he does not object to "anthropologizing" Islam, but points out "the scholar's 'narrative relation' to the tradition" (Lukens-Bull 1999: 2) which impedes objectivity. Asad highlights an artificial dual typology that continues to split Islam into great and little traditions and undermines the shifts of Middle Eastern political economy. In relating Asad's analysis to the category of Muslim cinema, it becomes clear that such categorizing cannot be expansive enough to include the multiple, distinct but sometimes overlapping groups, cultures, religions, ethnicities, and peoples who inhabit Muslim and non-Muslim geographies.

Asad defines Islam as a "discursive tradition" that represents a major part of Muslim identities, changing habits, evolving ideological differences; a tradition that is constantly contested by different generations of Muslims based on their understandings, interpretations, and practices. Therefore, he does not submit Islam

to a universal definition of religion that levels all differences. Without hesitation, Asad welcomes efforts to conceptualize Islam based on meaningful comparisons between the histories of Christianity and Islam's "configurations of power and beliefs." (2009: 3) On the other hand, he exposes this troubling binary that places Islam in the Middle East and Christianity in Europe, thereby establishing the former as a source of history and the latter as a source of civilization.

Asad further explains that this interest must be understood in connection with the intrinsic relationship between structures of power and knowledge production, in order to understand the trickeries of power; at different times, power dynamics are usually the main force that shape institutional curiosity and the kind of knowledge they develop. As Asad reminds us, "of particular note is the fact that Christians and Jews have usually formed an integral part of Middle Eastern society in a way that is not true of non-Christian populations in Europe." (2009: 5)

But to undermine this detail along with the diversity of beliefs and practices among Muslims serves again to configure and solidify an Islamic totality discussed earlier, or Islam as a *thing*, an odd entity that requires further scrutiny. Asad's theorizations relate to the discussion about the category of Muslim Cinema in showing how Islam can sometimes be used to reduce difference amongst Muslim populations and to separate Islam as a faith and a practice from other religions. Because Asad emphasizes the importance of linking the study of Islam to the political and economic context in which the anthropologist is located, it is crucial that any efforts to theorize the existence of Muslim cinema be linked to an analysis of the context from which such theorizations arise. Muslim cinema as a category risks further fetishizing and essentializing Islam and Muslims. This risk is compounded by the existence of Islamophobia. Rather than challenge such problematic representations, the idea of Muslim Cinema can potentially confirm assumptions about Islam and Muslim that inhere their cultures, identities, and practices and "invisibilizes" their complex artistic negotiations.

In the next section, the analysis centers on how cinema by Arab and Muslim filmmakers address transnational audiences and works to challenge dominant misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam in highly globalized ways. This section of the article shows how cinemas of Arab and Muslim societies target global audiences and participate in ongoing conversations about world politics.

Cinemas of Arab and Muslim societies and global audiences

Filmmakers and directors located in different Arab and Muslim geographies- whether Cairo, Dakar, Istanbul, Jakarta, Tunis, or Tehran - are now involved with Western film institutions for vocational training, co-productions, participation in festivals, or exposure of their work on a wider and more profitable platform. As Westmoreland notes, "often times the common language with these artists is English or French, rather than Arabic" (2009: 44) due to the economic and artistic forces of globalization. As Appadurai proposes in *Modernity at Large*, the rapid movement of

people and circulation of artistic production and goods create "the possibility of convergences in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine." (1996: 8) Focusing on media's rapid transformation, Appadurai conceptualizes "mediascapes" and "ideoscapes" as landscapes about images. The former is a highly manipulated domain, organized based on the manufacturing and distribution of "large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world" (1996: 35) where the lines between politics, commodities, and entertainment are blurred. Filmmakers' main business is the production and dissemination of ideas that shape the imagination, popular/global culture, and everyday life. The latter is about ideology and counter ideology, states versus their opponents, and hegemonic versus subversive actors. This is the repertoire of universal values: freedom, sovereignty, and representation, which used to form a global and homogenous culture. But because ideoscapes are fluid and constantly shifting, they can be renewed - and under the most powerful homogenizing conditions, people are still creative in constructing their own worldviews in their productions and able to preserve their unique positionalities without negating difference. These productions can be understood to form what might be described as cinemas of Arab and Muslim societies.

To this end, filmmakers are meaning makers who are capable of negotiating, resisting, and subverting flows of information and representation. They are agents who participate in shaping this massive body of material and interpreting, fragmenting, and ideologizing its content. As Appadurai explains, this type of work indigenizes all sorts of art forms. Therefore, the more cinema is globalized, the less appealing the idea of the singularity of a product and its confinement to a specific culture or religious denomination becomes. Arab/Muslim filmmakers do not operate outside of these global flows and along with these shifting landscapes, they try to capture both the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular in their films. They rely on the universality of form to preserve and present a piece of the authentic. Some productions bring together plots and subplots that reflect upon aspects of human crises and struggles and coalesce into one moral lesson or message. Representation here is key to the particular, specifically through art and moving images reintroducing the history of discrimination, exposing the artificial layers of stereotypes, covering different aspects of latent and unchecked Islamophobia, and bringing debate about current anti-Muslim racism to the forefront of popular discourse. Nowadays, their messages can transcend cultural and national borders to reach a global audience they could not reach before. These works reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of Arab and Muslim societies and cultures, showing that artistic productions from the region are neither uniform nor separate from broader and global transnational conversations about style, form, and content.

With so many conversions of styles, transnational cooperation, and networking, many Arab/Muslim films' thematic foci aim to appeal to a global audience so that the films can access global markets. For example, *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (2015) is an animated film by Saudi producer Ayman Jamal about the first muezzin of Islam. *Bilal*

was the work of a global team; its production is a great example of transnational cooperation, bringing together people and talents from different corners of the globe. Director Khurram H. Alavi is a Pakistani national; art director Maha Al-Shafie is Jordanian; screen writers include American writer and documentarian Michael Wolfe and Egyptian Yassin Kamel; and the actors include British and American Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje, Ian McShane, China Anne McClain and many more. *Bilal* is a successful global, multinational, multicultural, accented, hyphenated, and hybrid animation. As *Variety* critic Jay Weissberg stated, the film "will likely be a welcome counterbalance to the disturbingly negative depiction of Muslims in the West" (Vivarelli 2016).

Unlike *Bilal*'s real story, this narrative is a modern take on slavery that spins together the stories of *Amistad* (1997) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). The film was edited to attract a global audience in general and specifically caters to American sensibilities about the perilous journey of a black man to freedom. The story also elevates universal values over any particulars that could be seen as too ethnic or Islamic. Although his role as the first muezzin in the history of Islam is central to his historical position as a Muslim hero, there is not a single scene where he performs the call for prayer in the English version. This decision is a critical response against Hollywood's abuse of the Muslim call for prayer as a dominant trope in most Islamophobic productions. Instead, the film gently addresses representations of Muslims without heavily burdening the plot, as the film speaks primarily to Islam's position on racial equality and engages with contemporary aspects of racial politics.

The question of representation comes up again in the Canadian-Palestinian animated documentary *The Wanted 18* (2015), directed by Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan. Narrated in English by Shomali, the documentary humorously tells the true story of peaceful Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation that took place in 1988, during the early years of the first Intifada. Determined to boycott Israeli products and oppose taxation without representation policies, the community of Beit Sahour bought 18 milk cows and launched a co-op project to produce milk for the whole town. The narration begins with autobiographical details of Shomali's childhood growing up in a refugee camp, occasionally interrupted by clips of talking cows in black and white comic-style graphics. The documentary also includes footage of interviews conducted with community leaders and members involved in the project, filling in different aspects of the story, as well as confessions by former Israeli officials who were ordered to eradicate the project and any civil disobedience by all means necessary. In the animated story, the milk cows, sold to Palestinians by an Israeli farmer, arrive with preconceived notions about Palestinians. For example, Ruth, the oldest cow and herd's leader claims that Palestinians "don't want to work; Palestinians would prefer to riot than work," and Lola, a younger cow calls them "rug heads."

But after getting to know Palestinians, their positions soften, and they even develop affection for Anton, a young Palestinian wanted by Israeli authorities. The choice of English is important because "while most non-American docs choosing Anglophone

dialogue do so to expand their distribution possibilities," writes Weissberg, "the effect here is to counter the usual news-channel depictions of Palestinians as nameless hysterics with articulate, distinctly middle-class men and women." (2014) When the milk project showed signs of success, thus confirming Palestinians' capacity to be self-sufficient, and the milk project further became connected to the political project of the nonviolent Intifada and resistance, the Israeli army declared the cow farm a threat to the security of the state of Israel and issued arrest warrants for the cows. As the details of the nonviolent resistance unfold, the documentary becomes a pointed critique of the occupation and its many oppressive strategies to prevent any form of economic independence for Palestinians.

This is a transnational film about the representation of Palestinians working together despite their differences. It is certainly another production that can belong to a category called "Cinemas of Arab and Muslim Societies," (as opposed to the foreclosed category of Muslim Cinema) if this category is understood to be inclusive of artistic works that exceed the neat or foreclosed geographies of the Arab and Muslim world and instead, engage transnational audiences who are part of a global conversation on the politics of Israeli occupation that impacts the lives of Palestinians regardless of their own religious affiliations. The two examples above gesture towards a new genre of artistic productions from Arab and Muslim societies that are not cohered around singular notions of Muslim identity and practice and that open up possibilities for conceptualizing, theorizing, and developing more diverse aesthetic and artistic works by Arab and Muslim artists whose identities and locations are very much in flux and constant negotiation.

Conclusion

This research paper argued against the inclusion of films produced by Arabs and Muslims under a foreclosed category of Muslim Cinema. It aimed to show why this category can be limiting and how it can essentialize diverse works, associating them with a religious identification that reduces the complexities of their identities, practices, and artistic works. The category also runs the risk of connecting between artistic production and Muslim identity in essentializing ways. The research paper suggested instead that cinemas of Arab and Muslim societies reflect an opening of artistic practice and an engagement with transnational audiences and global politics. This form of cinema is unmoored from identity-based categories that reduce Arab and Muslim differences and showcase new directions in filmic productions that traverse diverse geographies and that work to resist the framing of their communities in political rhetoric and popular culture as foreign or dangerous. Understood as a category that opens up possibilities of engagement with diverse artistic forms and formats, cinemas of Arab and Muslim societies invest their energy in devising ways to transcend limited Muslim representations.

Shortly after 9/11, Khaled Mattawa urged literature scholars to invest their energies in studying a new body of Muslim literature, written by Western Muslims in European languages and addressing the complexities of naming this new body of

work. As with cinema, this literature does not belong in the authors' Muslim societies of origin. In "Writing Islam" Mattawa states that it "could sound like a fundamentalist ploy to corrupt the thoroughly secular world of literature in contemporary Muslim societies," (2008: 1590) and suggests instead "to focus on writing Islam in the West" (ibid). In the same vein, cinematic productions of Arab and Muslim societies should not be labeled in religious terms; rather, the vast diversity of their origins, their universal and indigenous sources of inspiration, and their transnational audiences and locations should be emphasized, analyzed, and celebrated.

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