

A decade in movement in contemporary Arab Cinema

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Introduction

My first time attending the Berlin International Film Festival was in February 2007. I was at the time working with a Lebanese association that supported Arab independent cinema. Our objective was to screen new Arab films at the European Film Market with the aim of raising the interest of distributors and festival programmers to pick up these films. While going through the program of this edition, I was stunned to see that there was not any single Arab production in all sections of the festival¹ and that the sole Arab films to be seen in Berlin were the ones we were promoting at the Market.

Nine years later, the landscape looked very different. The Tunisian feature HEDI was in competition. Its director, Mohamed Ben Attia, took home the Best Feature Award and its main actor, Majd Mastoura, collected his Silver Bear for Best Actor from the hands of Jury President Meryl Streep. In the shorts competition, Palestinian filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel won the Silver Bear Jury Prize for his short film A MAN RETURNED. In the Forum section, the Egyptian feature fiction IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY by Tamer El Said won the Caligari Film Prize, while the Lebanese feature documentary A MAID FOR EACH by Maher Abi Samra received the Peace Film Prize.

It's not a pure coincidence that 2016 was such a memorable year for Arab cinema in Berlin. One might argue that there have been sporadic Arab films screening at the A festivals lately and that there is genuinely more interest for Arab cinema on an international level. But where did this sudden attention come from? And are Arab films only more visible because of global festival exposure? Are there particular topics that have been evident in the last ten years? Are there newer trends emerging?

Before trying to answer these questions, let us try to briefly address what Arab cinema is. Where does the terminology come from and what does it represent? What makes a film an Arab film? The American-based Arab Film & Media Institute answers that by "generally referring to films made by Arab filmmakers, produced in the Arab World and/or depicting Arab stories."²

And that leads us to talk about the Arab World, a geographical entity of individuals who share a common first language (Arabic). One has to differentiate the 'Arab World' from the 'Middle East' terminology.³

The Arab World as an area is composed of very diverse communities, with different histories and various ethnic minorities. And although Islam is the official religion in most states of the region, there are several other religious communities that live in the Arab World, including Christians, Yezidis, Druze and to a lesser extend Jews, to name a few. Therefore, it is important not to look at the Arab World as a single entity with one common history and one religion.

¹ berlinale.de/en/archive/jahresarchive/2007/02_programm_2007/02_programm_2007.html

² <https://arabfilminstitute.org/learning-about-arab-film-and-cinema/>

³ The first refers to the 22 countries that are part of the Arab League and that predominantly speak Arabic, covering North Africa and parts of both East Africa and Western Asia. The second covers parts of the Arab World, but not only. It includes Western Asia (except Southern Caucasus), Egypt and Turkey, therefore encompassing a large majority of Arab countries, but also countries that do not speak the Arabic language, including Turkey (Turkish), Israel (Hebrew) and Iran (Farsi).

In this paper, we will be referring only to films made by Arab filmmakers, some of whom might no longer be based in the Arab World, but whose films are still very much about the Arab World. As such, we won't be exploring the Arab World as one geographical entity but rather dig into themes and topics that have strongly emerged in the last decade in this particular region. All film titles in this document will be used in their English version.

Emergence of Arab Funds

One has to acknowledge that the rise in films produced in the Arab World in the last decade is partly because of the recent emergence of Arab funds, particularly in the Gulf region. The four above-mentioned winners at the 2016 Berlinale were all recipients of the Sanad grant. Sanad, meaning "support" in Arabic, was established in 2010 in Abu Dhabi, providing grants for films in development and in post-production. It was initiated to go with the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, which was launched in 2007.

This platform in the Emirati capital was very much seen as a direct retaliation against the counterparts in the rival city of Dubai, which had initiated its own film festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, in 2004, its own co-production market, the Dubai Film Connection (DFC), in 2007 and its post-production and production support funding program Enjaaz in 2009.

Dubai had a rough start, with Arab filmmakers branding it completely detached from reality and that of its Arab surrounding. Yet with time, it proved capable of handling the criticism. The creation of the DFC was a move in the right direction. It aimed at fostering ties between Arab filmmakers and international players and encouraging co-productions with the Arab World. Notable successes of the DFC include the Palestinian feature documentary *GHOST HUNTING* (2017) directed by Raed Andoni (winner of the Glashütte Original Documentary Award at the 2017 Berlin International Festival) and *WADJDA* (2012) the feature debut of Saudi filmmaker Haifaa Al-Mansour.

The main awards granted by the DFC and those granted by Enjaaz are all attributed by the festival itself or its direct sponsors, affiliated to the state of Dubai. Same with Sanad at Abu Dhabi, which, like the Dubai International Film Festival, is state-run. The side awards of the DFC were however attributed by Arab and international sponsors and partners,

Alongside Dubai and Abu Dhabi emerged a third force, the Doha Tribeca Film Festival in Qatar. Just like the two initiatives presented above, this is also a state initiative. Launched in 2009 by the Doha Film Institute, in partnership with the New York-based Tribeca Enterprises (that run the Tribeca Film Festival) and with the support of Robert De Niro, it played a key role to support Arab but especially Qatari filmmakers.

These Gulf festivals ended up setting their own rules in the region, challenging the smaller existing cultural platforms, entities and festivals in the Arab World. The festivals would invest substantial amounts of money to acquire the rights to screen the films, therefore competing against each other to ensure themselves the prestige of having Arab premieres and to lure the filmmakers to their festivals.

Unfortunately, the lifespan of all three festivals was short. Doha Tribeca was only held between 2009 and 2012, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival was officially canceled after eight years in 2015 and Dubai, the most established out of the three, was last to fall, and was scrapped in 2018, leaving the industry in disbelief. Very little has been officially communicated as to why these initiatives have ceased to exist. All statements remain very ambiguous. On its Twitter account, the Dubai International Film Festival has tweeted in April 2019, “The industry is changing fast, and so are we. The organizers of DIFF will be adopting a new approach with the festival taking place every 2 years, the 15th edition of DIFF confirmed for 2019,”⁴ an edition that has never seen the light. Much can be however speculated about these cancelations on both the political and the economical levels.⁵

What remained is a fund initiated by the Doha Film Institute, the Doha Film Institute Film Grants, which has been established alongside the festival and is still operating today, supporting short and feature-length projects in development and in post-production by first and second-time directors of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This state-funded initiative became a key fund for emerging filmmakers alongside the fund launched by AFAC, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture.

AFAC, initiated in 2007, is independently run from Lebanon, and funded by Arab and non-Arab contributions, were they institutional or private sponsors but never governmental,⁶ to preserve a certain autonomy. It supports cinema through two programs: the AFAC Cinema Funding, dedicated to short, medium and feature narrative, and the AFAC Documentary Program, launched in 2013, to support documentary filmmaking in all of its forms.

Alongside these two funds, various film festivals all over the region have stepped up their models to propose industry platforms to keep up with filmmakers and their projects over the last ten years. These include the Cairo Film Connection of the Cairo International Film Festival and CineGouna Springboard of the El Gouna Film Festival in Egypt, the Beirut Cinema Platform of the Beirut Cinema Days in Lebanon, Chabaka and Takmil of the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage in Tunisia, les Ateliers de l'Atlas of the Marrakech International Film Festival in Morocco and Qumra of the Doha Film Institute in Qatar. In 2019, the cultural association Beirut DC has produced the Yeloguide, a Funding Guide with funds and platforms available to Arab producers working on Arab films and seeking international co-producers, compiled by German film producer, distributor and curator of films from the Middle East, Irit Neidhardt.⁷

These platforms proved to be of crucial support to filmmakers to push their projects forward, offering mentoring sessions, consultancy and financial awards. But that comes with a prize. There is always the possibility that it's the same projects touring these platforms. More importantly, it takes filmmakers much more time to produce their films, having to travel from one festival to another to finish their financing, at the risk of losing the immediacy of their project.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/dubaifilm/status/986662654826729473>

⁵ A political decision from higher authorities? Changes in the region related to growing recession? Or a shift in priorities, with the emirate of Dubai aiming to invest more in the World Expo 2020 that it was supposed to host? Any official answer to these questions remains to be seen.

⁶ <https://www.arabculturefund.org/About/Donors>

⁷ <https://www.beirutdc.org/guides>

Filming beyond the Arab Spring

December 18, 2010 marked the beginning of the first series of popular street protest to erupt in Tunisia, following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in a suburb of Tunis. Inspired by this wave of protests, the Egyptians followed suit on January 25, 2011, the Syrians on January 26, and so did many other Arab populations.

Soon enough, and throughout 2011, the whole Arab World was witnessing protests, from Yemen to Algeria, from Iraq to Sudan, in what has since then been known as the Arab Spring.⁸ These gradually violent protests would have different longevity and outcomes. In Tunisia and Egypt, these demonstrations would dethrone Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011 and Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak 18 days later. Yet no matter the consequences, the origins were, to a certain extend, very similar. The youth took to the streets massively to demand an end to the existing tyranny and corruption through political reforms and more opportunities for the youth through social change.

Many filmmakers from the region embraced the protests, documented them and integrated them into their stories. Tunisian filmmaker Hamza Ouni started filming his feature documentary EL GORT (2013) before the events of 2011. He portrays the lives of two Tunisian teenagers, who have to work day and night to make a living. For them, like many other Tunisians, it's either being overexploited or being unemployed, again. While the filmmaker filmed Tunisia before and after the rebellion against Ben Ali, for his protagonists, these changes and the first free elections had little impact on their lives. In her documentary IT WAS BETTER TOMORROW (2012), Tunisian filmmaker Hinde Boujema follows the life of Aida, a poor Tunisian who goes from one neighborhood to the other to find shelter, while the Tunisian protests are ongoing.

But it was also the aftermath of the protests that many filmmakers focused on, from the initial jubilation to the first disillusionments and moving on to the failure to achieve something. In the documentary THE SQUARE (2013), director Jehane Noujaim follows the events on Cairo's Tahrir Square through four protagonists, beyond the 18 rough but exuberant days that overthrew Mubarak and until their first frustration with the first elections that soon followed. Viola Shafik's documentary ARIJ – SCENT OF REVOLUTION (2014) also has four characters but is set in very different places in Egypt. Through them, the filmmaker tries to connect the dots between the failures of the current present and those of the past.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian protests took a very different turn the following summer. The violence against protesters morphed into an ongoing cycle of violence within the whole country. In the nine years since the beginning of the conflict, over 586,000 people lost their lives according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights⁹ while 5,550,440 have been displaced, as per the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR.¹⁰

The initial films were clear to denounce the brutality of the regime, creating a very harsh

⁸ More information on the Arab Spring in German: <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/afrika/arabischer-fruehling/>

⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/157193/>

¹⁰ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

but also unflinching view of the conflict. In THE RETURN TO HOMS (2013), Talal Derki follows the young and well-known goalkeeper Abdul Baset Al-Sarout, who has to trade his football for arms to lead the fight against the regime as his hometown, Homs, is turning into a ghost town. A completely different approach produced the documentary SILVERED WATER, SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT (2014). Kurdish schoolteacher Wiam Simav Bedirxan has also shot the destruction of the city of Homs before contacting filmmaker Ossama Mohammed, exiled in Paris. Alongside her footage, the film was made using only cellphone recordings and YouTube clips of 1001 Syrian men and women, according to the filmmakers, in this harrowing tale about the atrocities taking place in Syria.

International film festivals immediately took notice of the political events rocking the region, especially Syria. THE RETURN TO HOMS screened at Sundance in January 2014 after premiering at the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam IDFA in November 2013. SILVERED WATER, SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2014 (as the sole Arab film in the festival that year), HAUNTED (by Liwaa Yazji) at FID Marseille in July 2014, THE IMMORTAL SERGEANT (by Ziad Kalthoum) at the Locarno Film Festival in August 2014 and SULEIMA, a short animated documentary by Jalal Maghout, at DOK Leipzig in October 2014. It feels like every major festival was hunting for the next Syrian film.

These first films paved the way for works that took longer time to be produced, and in which a different kind of financing was needed. Investors were able to bet on the epicness of some stories. For instance, the British Channel 4 produced the feature documentary FOR SAMA (2019), directed by Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts. Al-Kateab tells her newly born daughter, Sama, about the hardships she endured in Aleppo during the uprising. Meanwhile, National Geographic took a chance on Feras Fayyad's second feature THE CAVE (2019), after the Academy Award nomination of his previous film, LAST MEN IN ALEPPO (2017). THE CAVE is a documentary of an underground hospital in Ghouta, which has been besieged for five years. Dr. Amani Ballour has to fight for the survival of her patients as well as her own survival as a female doctor within a very patriarchal society. FOR SAMA and *The Cave* both scored nominations for Best Documentary Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards.

Many of the Syrian filmmakers cited above have left Syria and continue to produce their stories in European exile. Talal Derki for example moved to Berlin early on where he settled, before it became a hub for Syrian filmmakers: "In 2014, a lot of Syrian filmmakers started to come to Germany. They came to Berlin because it has a long history of being a refuge for artists and people with political problems."¹¹"

The stories told from the exile or from the journey to that exile can be as harrowing as the ones told under the bombs. In the German/Syrian documentary PURPLE SEA (2020), Syrian filmmaker Amel Alzakout almost drowned as the boat she was escaping with capsized near the coast of Lesvos. She lost all her belongings, but the waterproof camera attached to her wrist managed to record the agonizingly long and traumatic timespan underwater, waiting for rescue. The film is the documentation of this painful journey, before reaching Berlin to reunite with co-director Khaled Abdulwahed. "It was a year before I could watch the footage. It was very hard to work with it, to be honest. But I wanted

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/keeping-syrian-cinema-alive-exile-160222081530849.html>

to talk about my experience. I didn't want to make a film about refugees – who we can see everywhere in the media from different perspectives – because I insist that we are individuals, we have our own lives. The media can't see this, they see us as a group,¹²" says Alzakout.

New territories on the cinematographic map



The Arab Spring has also introduced stories from countries that were not necessarily present on the cinematographic map before. Like Syria, the civil protests that started in Libya have rapidly morphed into violent clashes between security forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi and anti-Gaddafi rebels. The capture and killing of Gaddafi in October 2011 did only accelerate the fall of the country into a civil war, shattering the original dreams of the protestors. Filmmaker Naiha Arebi decided to follow the paths of three Libyan women, united in their wish to play football and their resistance against their male-dominated society. Arebi's documentary *FREEDOM FIELDS* (2018) views Libya through the personal perspective of these three women. The film is essentially a co-production between Scotland (SDI Productions) and Libya (HuNa Productions). Yet Arebi managed to raise enough attention in the Arab World and beyond, and her film got supported by the IDFA Bertha Fund (The Netherlands), the Sundance Film Institute (USA), Hot Docs Blue Ice Group Documentary Fund (Canada) as well as the Arab World's AFAC and the Doha Film Institute. This only proves there is interest to stories from an unfamiliar country like Libya.

¹² <https://newint.org/features/2019/12/09/who-do-you-save>

Yemen has also witnessed very violent protests, after protestors took cue from the events in Tunisia and Egypt. Yemeni-Scottish filmmaker Sara Ishaq was filming her feature documentary *THE MULBERRY HOUSE* when the tragic events of March 18th 2011 occurred, where around 50 peaceful protesters were killed by snipers and security forces in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a¹³. In her short documentary *KARAMA HAS NO WALLS* (2012), Ishaq decides to retell the story of these attacks as they unfold, through the accounts of two fathers. Soon after, she completed *THE MULBERRY HOUSE* (2013), a personal documentary in which the revolution outside is witnessed from Ishaq's own house. Her family cooks for the protestors outside while the filmmaker broadcasts the news internationally as the events are unfolding.

KARAMA HAS NO WALLS has been nominated for the Academy Awards in 2014 (for Best Documentary – Short Subject as the first Yemeni film to ever be nominated) alongside Jehane Noujaim's *THE SQUARE* (Best Documentary – Feature) and Hany Abu Assad's feature fiction *OMAR* (Best Foreign Language Film, Palestine). Ishaq believes this is a true sign of change: "The fact that three Arab films are nominated for an Oscar this year in itself is historical and it says a lot about the changing perception of the Arab World and that the films emerging from the region are of high-caliber and worthy of being represented and celebrated internationally. That is a very positive thing that came out of a very negative situation."¹⁴"

In Sudan, major protests erupted in January 2011 and lasted around two years. Yet it wasn't until 2018/2019 that the Sudanese revolution regained the streets, overthrowing Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir in a coup-d'état by the army on April 11, 2019. Under the transitional rule of the army, a massacre took place on June 3rd 2019: The Rapid Support Forces killed over 100 peaceful protesters, threw their bodies into the Nile River, and raped around 70 women, according to local doctors¹⁵. Another kind of revolution was happening alongside the political one: films from Sudan started to surface, after decades of darkness that followed the suppression of cinemas and filmmaking since the military coup of 1989. Hajooj Kuka presented his documentary *BEATS OF THE ANTONOV* (2014) at the Toronto Film Festival, winning the People's Choice Award. In the film, Kuka evokes the power of music in bringing together the traumatized community in the Nuba Mountains and the Blue-Nile following endless brutal armed conflicts and displacements. Soon after, he directed his feature debut, the humorous *AKASHA* (2018), which also deals with the conflicts in the region.

It's however the year 2019 that has witnessed an unprecedented showcase for Sudan's emerging film industry. *TALKING ABOUT TREES* (2019) premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival, winning the Glashütte Original Documentary Award as well as the Panorama Audience Award. Filmmaker Souhaib Gasmelbary brings together four veteran filmmakers in their almost impossible quest to reopen a cinema under the dictatorship of al-Bashir. At the Berlinale Forum, Marwa Zein was presenting *OFFSIDE KHARTOUM* (2019), diving into the world of a group of young women striving to form a Sudanese team for the FIFA Women's World Cup, defying financial, religious and societal hurdles. Several months later, Amjad Abu Alala was awarded the Lion of the Future for

¹³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2011/09/yemen-violence-surges-protesters-are-killed/>

¹⁴ <https://www.mironline.ca/the-human-side-of-the-yemeni-massacres-an-interview-with-sara-ishaq/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/sudan-troops-protesters-attack-sit-in-rape-khartoum-doctors-report>

Best Debut Film for You WILL DIE AT TWENTY (2019) at the Venice Film Festival. The film, one of only a handful fiction features produced in the country, is a fable on modern Sudan.

Modernity and tradition are also put forward in DHALINYARO (2019). Set in contemporary Djibouti, it's the story about the emancipation of the youth: three teenage girls are torn between staying at home or leaving to study abroad. Directed by Djibouti-Canadian filmmaker Lula Ali Ismaïl, the film is the first feature fiction film produced in Djibouti, a country that has almost no cinematographic infrastructure whatsoever. "The industry really does not exist in Djibouti," says the filmmaker. "It's a country where there are plays, poetry, but not really a local film industry. Amazingly, both my short and feature films were supported financially by the Djiboutian public and private sector. As such, even if it is a very nascent industry, Djiboutians are happy to support it."¹⁶

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has never had a proper film industry at all. The conservative kingdom has allowed a commercial cinema to open only in 2018, lifting a ban that lasted over three decades. There were some shy attempts to produce films in the beginning of the 21st century, but it's only WADJDA (2012), the feature debut of filmmaker Haifa Al Mansour, that marked the first feature fiction to be completely shot in Saudi Arabia, and is the first feature of a female filmmaker in the country. The film follows the determination of a 10-year-old girl to raise enough funds to get herself a bike, in a time when girls should not be riding bikes in the country. Filmmaker Mahmoud Sabbagh also addressed social issues in the comedy BARAKA MEETS BARAKA (2016), a love story that brings together two protagonists from different social classes. The now-established Al Mansour made her third feature and her second shot in Saudi Arabia with Berlin-based production company Razor Film, THE PERFECT CANDIDATE (2019), premiered in competition at the Venice film festival. But 2019 saw two other very different voices coming from Saudi Arabia, showcasing a new generation of independent filmmaking emerging from the country: LAST VISIT (2019) by Abdulmohsen Aldhabaan, brings together father and son on a trip to the countryside and *Scales* (2019) by Shahad Ameen, which we will discuss a bit later on. Both feature debuts address patriarchy and its effects on the conservative society very differently. As opposed to THE PERFECT CANDIDATE, both films are produced without European funding. LAST VISIT is a full Saudi production, SCALES is an Emirati/Iraqi/Jordanian one.

Female stories

Just like many of the filmmakers we have addressed above, a strong generation of female filmmakers is emerging all over the region, addressing the hardships of being a woman in the Arab World of today: distinct voices telling their own stories through singular perspectives.

One topic that has been put forward is motherhood, or the lack of it. In Egypt, the societal pressure on women to have children is colossal, especially in the rural areas. When one is not able to carry a child, she has to deal with the wrath of her surroundings. Hanan, also called "Um Ghayeb" in her village, meaning MOTHER OF THE UNBORN (2014) because of her infertility, is one of them. In her documentary, filmmaker Nadine Salib accompanies Hanan as she struggles to keep her fading dream of having a child thriving while trying to

¹⁶ <https://www.okayafrica.com/how-to-watch-dhalinyaro-djibouti-french-film-director-lula-ali-ismail-interview/>

find a place for herself within society. In Morocco, children born out of wedlock are considered illegal. They need to be recognized by their fathers to be legitimate. Filmmakers Maryam Ben'Mbarek and Maryam Touzani have created their feature fiction films, *SOFIA* (2018) and *ADAM* (2019), around that subject, a dire reality that ends up marginalizing a number of women every year.

Societal pressure in many conservative Arab societies also plays a role on young women transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Leyla Bouzid's feature fiction debut *As I OPEN MY EYES* (2015) is set on the eve of Tunisia's protests, back when Ben Ali's regime was still in place. Farah is a top student, who's expected by her family to pursue medical studies. Yet Farah is only interested in music. She has to deal with the pressure from her family, but also has a political system on her back that follows each of her steps because of her band's music lyrics. In Kaouther Ben Hania's feature fiction *BEAUTY AND THE DOGS* (2016), Mariam lives her worst nightmares after she is being raped after leaving a party. What follows is her excruciating journey overnight to report her rape, running back and forth from the hospital to the police station. The filmmaker doesn't shy away from addressing the many rules set by a very patriarchal society especially when it comes to dealing with law and justice.

The patriarchal society is also at the core of the documentary *NEARBY SKY* (2014). Emirati filmmaker Nujoom Alghanem draws the portrait of Fatima Alhameli, the first Emirati woman who owns camels and manages to enter her animal in a camel competition, facing a ruthless opposition from the male-dominated sector, but also her own community.

But female filmmakers are not just addressing themes that are strongly connected to women. Some are digging into the dark shadows of their collective history to give a meaning to their current present. In her documentary *SLEEPLESS NIGHTS* (2012), Lebanese filmmaker Eliane Raheb, confronts an ex-intelligence officer who has committed atrocious war crimes to a mother whose son went missing during the Lebanese civil war. Sofia Djama's *THE BLESSED* (2016) deals with a different confrontation. In her feature fiction debut, the Algerian filmmaker portraits two generations, the first has lived the Black Decade¹⁷, the second is witnessing its future crumble because of it.

Female filmmakers are also starting to be recognized as driving forces of the industry. They make films that both the festivals and the general public want to see. After winning the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and snatching an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film, Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki's third feature fiction *CAPERNAUM* (2018) became the highest grossing Arabic-speaking film worldwide, with a worldwide box office of over 64 million dollars¹⁸. Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir has been making films for twenty years now, in which the Palestinian conflict takes the central stage. Each of her three features celebrated its premiere at a major festival (*SALT OF THIS SEA*, 2008, at the Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival, *WHEN I SAW YOU*, 2013, at the Berlinale Forum and *WAJIB*, 2017, in competition at the Locarno Film

¹⁷ "In 1991, the FIS was on the verge of winning Algeria's parliamentary elections and defeating the country's ruling National Liberation Front (FLN). But after the first round of polls, the government cancelled the elections and banned the FIS. Shortly thereafter, a civil war broke out pitting the government against Islamist rebel groups. About 200,000 Algerians lost their lives in what became known as the Black Decade."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/3/the-black-decade-still-weighs-heavily-on-algeria>

¹⁸ [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Cafarnaum-\(Lebanon\)-\(2018\)#tab=international](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Cafarnaum-(Lebanon)-(2018)#tab=international)

Festival) before touring extensively. Her acclaimed *LIKE TWENTY IMPOSSIBLES* (2003) was the first Arab short in the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival. She recently served as a jury member for the competition of the 2020 Berlinale.

Queer voices

Queer protagonists are certainly not new to Arab Cinema. They were mostly used stereotypically for comical purposes in the Egyptian cinema of the 60's and the 70's. But some filmmakers decided to change this perception such as Youssef Chahine in *THE PEOPLE AND THE NILE* (1972), *ADIEU BONAPARTE* (1985), and in his celebrated Alexandria trilogy: *ALEXANDRIA WHY?* (1979), *AN EGYPTIAN STORY* (1982) and *ALEXANDRIA AGAIN AND FOREVER* (1989) and Youssry Nasrallah in his dark comedy *MERCEDES* (1993). Writer Adham Youssef says, "Chahine makes it clear that unrequited love, passion and heartache are equally present in same-sex relationships as in heterosexual ones. His characters' struggles and development are not based on their sexuality. Some prosper, some fall into depression, others pass away."¹⁹

However, for their portrayal in Egyptian films, these characters mostly need to have a "psychological validation,"²⁰ as writer Joseph Fahim notes it. In Marwan Hamed's *THE YACOUBIAN BUILDING* (2006), "gay protagonists had to deal with a painful childhood sexual molestation, to justify the sexuality of their characters," says Fahim, while the lead of Hany Fawzy's *FAMILY SECRETS* (2013), "eventually undergoes therapy and is miraculously cured from his gay "disease"."

Yet because of the Arab Spring, a new generation of voices emerged dealing with sexuality in a much more direct and personal way. And while homosexuality is technically still illegal in most states of the Arab World, these filmmakers sought to express but also expose themselves, challenging the common norms but also reaffirming their identities through film. In addressing the personal, they also address the political.



¹⁹ <https://madamasr.com/en/2017/10/05/feature/culture/constructing-and-echoing-social-perceptions-gay-characters-in-egyptian-film/>

²⁰ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/arab-queer-cinema-emerges-break-taboos>

"After decolonization, Arab leaders tried to convince their citizens they're nothing. But now, and after the Arab Spring, and despite what happened afterwards, people are finally standing up to their governments to prove they're not nothing,"²¹" said Moroccan filmmaker Abdellah Taïa. In his autobiographical fiction debut *SALVATION ARMY* (2013), Abdellah, feeling rejected by his family and society because of his sexuality, decides to leave Morocco and settle in liberal Switzerland. But there, he'll have to adjust to a very different environment that doesn't feel like his own.

Emirati filmmaker Abdulla Al Kaabi tackles the themes of gender and sexual identity in his self-funded Iranian/Emirati drama *ONLY MEN GO TO THE GRAVE* (2016). Al Kaabi was very much aware that the topic he was dealing with was far from being an easy one when it comes to his society, yet he says, "When I made this movie, my intention was only one thing - if I raise a taboo subject or something that's a bit controversial, it's to open up a dialogue."²¹"

Lebanon has seen a fair share of LGBTIQ films produced in the last five years. Mohamed Sabbah's addresses the personal and the political in his experimental fiction debut *CHRONIC* (2017), a German/Lebanese coproduction, as he talks about living in an oppressive city as Beirut and constantly dealing with loss. Lebanese filmmakers Roy Dib and Lara Zeidan have both won the Teddy Award for Best Short film at the Berlinale, respectively for *MONDIAL 2010* (2014) and *3 CENTIMETRES* (2018). In the first, Dib takes us on a virtual car ride in Ramallah, with a Lebanese gay couple, which, in reality, is an impossible task due to closed borders. In the second, Zeidan accompanies four teenage girls stuck on a Ferris Wheel ride, revealing intimate topics and resulting in unexpected confessions.

But it's through documentaries that Lebanese filmmakers are truly opening up on their sexuality, addressing their daily struggles and unveiling their lives on the screen. In his feature documentary *ROOM FOR A MAN* (2017), Anthony Chidiac invites us to his own house, which he shares with his mother who does not approve of his personal choices and his queer lifestyle. Selim Mourad directly confronts his parents with his sexuality in *THIS LITTLE FATHER OBSESSION* (2016). Raed Rafei discusses his long-distance relationship in *HERE I AM...HERE YOU ARE* (2017) and the hardships of having a normal life as a couple.

Small steps in animation

The Arab Spring has also influenced the work of animation filmmakers. Tunisian animator Nadia Rais offers a direct attack on the regime in her fiction short *THE GLASSES* (2011). Boum is obliged to wear glasses since his birth as all other inhabitants in Tunisia. When he decides to remove them, he initiates a rebellion against the system. The final section in the film is a statement on the revolution that took place in the country in January 2011. In his animated documentary *SULEIMA* (2014), Syrian animator Jalal Maghout also weighs on the aftermath of the peaceful protests that started in his country and moved into uncharted territories. He draws the portrait of an ordinary opposition woman leading the fight against an unjust society and a powerful regime to stay true to her beliefs.

²¹ <https://www.theculturist.com/home/interview-with-abdulla-al-kaabi-director-of-only-men-go-to-t.html>

Filmmakers from Palestine also went political, addressing the occupation in different ways. In the Palestinian-Canadian stop motion feature documentary **THE WANTED 18** (2014), directors Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan reimagine the story of 18 cows who became Israel's primary enemy and a source of pride for the Palestinians during the first Intifada. In his stop motion short **AYNY - MY SECOND EYE** (2016), Ahmad Saleh recreates a personal trauma, putting forward two boys playing in a warzone playground.

In his documentary essay **ERASED_ASCENT OF THE INVISIBLE** (2018), Lebanese animator and artist Ghassan Halwani digs into the ghosts of the past to understand what happened to the 17,000 Lebanese who have disappeared during the civil war. In one section of his film, he attempts to bring them back to life through animation, keeping their memory alive. But animation is not only a conveyor of political thoughts. It is also used as to speak about social issues. Artist Nicolas Fattouh dissects racism against foreign workers in the Lebanese society in his short fiction **HOW MY GRANDMOTHER BECAME A CHAIR** (2020), while filmmaker Ely Dagher discusses his troubled relationship with his hometown Beirut and what belonging truly means in **WAVES '98** (2015).



Arab animation has also been gaining recognition on the international level. Dagher has won the Palme d'Or for Best Short Film for **WAVES '98** at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. The aforementioned **AYNY - MY SECOND EYE** by Ahmed Saleh has won the golden Oscar at the 2016 Student Academy Awards in the foreign animation category.

Animation in the Arab World has benefited from a major boost in funding, through the support of the Film Prize of the Robert Bosch Stiftung. Since 2013, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has issued three Film Prizes every year to emerging German-Arab film teams to co-produce a film project together, including short animation films.

Together with the Stuttgart Festival of Animated Film, the Film Prize has initiated the Arab Animation Forum, a yearly platform, taking place during the festival, in which Arab directors had the chance to meet with German producers for an opportunity to collaborate and receive consultations from worldwide animation industry professionals. In a talk with film Prize curator and coordinator Karin Schyle, she commented on the above, stating that: "since its beginnings, we have witnessed an increase in applications, peaking in 2015 with 46 animation submissions." **AYNY - MY SECOND EYE** was a former Film Prize nominee, while **HOW MY GRANDMOTHER BECAME A CHAIR** has won the Film Prize in 2018.

Experimenting with genre cinema

In the very recent years, experimenting with genres in Arab cinema has been a bit more pronounced, even though the attempts remain singular experiences that are breaking in. Historically, genre cinema has had some glow in the 50's and the 60's, particularly under the craft of Egyptian filmmaker Kamal El-Sheikh. With around 30 feature films, El-Sheikh mostly experimented with suspense as a genre, stating, "It isn't necessary for suspense to be a vessel of violence and blood, for human emotions should also have their place. Human emotions, rather, are my protagonist."²²

Tunisian filmmaker Abdelhamid Bouchnak did not shy away from blood and violence in his feature debut, DACHRA (2018), considered to be the first Tunisian horror film. Leading a group of teenagers to investigate the strange killing of a woman some 25 years ago, Bouchnak explores the themes of witchcraft, black magic rituals and cannibalism, basing his script on true events. As such, the filmmaker directly denounces some traditions in rural Tunisia. "Of course, these macabre rituals are rarely practiced these days, but they do still exist,"²³ he says.

In his medium-length fiction, KINDIL EL BAHR (2016), Algerian filmmaker Damien Ounouri draws a sharp critique of the patriarchal Algerian society. After a group of men forcefully drowned her at sea, a woman morphs overnight to become an underwater creature seeking revenge. Saudi filmmaker Shahad Ameen expands on the topic in SCALES (2019), her feature debut, a fantasy fable influenced by Arab myths and folklore, shot in black and white. Hayat, a teenage girl, rebels against the set of patriarchal norms prevailing in her fishing village.

In ABOU LEILA (2019), another visually striking feature debut, reality and fantasy blend together in this tale about Algeria's Black Decade. Through cycles of violence and childhood nightmares, filmmaker Amin Sidi-Boumédiène challenges his two characters in the vast Algerian desert, taking a closer look on the shattering effects of war that are still haunting Algeria's citizens today.

Palestinian filmmaker Larissa Sansour has reverted to science fiction to dissect the Palestinian reality and the set of conflicts around it, in true dystopian form. In the first short of her science fiction trilogy, A SPACE EXODUS (2009), a Palestinian astronaut plants the first Palestinian flag on the moon. The follow-up, NATION ESTATE (2012), brings the entire Palestinian population together in one gigantic vertical skyscraper. In the final installment of the trilogy, IN THE FUTURE THEY ATE FROM THE FINEST PORCELAIN (2015), Sansour uses archeology to address the future of a nation. She claims, "working with sci-fi is quite liberating because I work with difficult issues," and that enables her to "create my own world and my own vocabulary in which I can address the same issues." But even if her films are placed in a difference space and in a different time, they are by no means detached from their core identity: "It's quite important for me to discuss the Palestinian identity because it's an identity that's in trauma."²⁴

²² <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/32/359279/Arts--Culture/Film/Remembering-Kamal-ElSheikh-Egypt-s-pioneer-of-suspe.aspx>

²³ <https://en.qantara.de/content/tunisian-film-dachra-horror-meets-black-magic>

²⁴ <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/seeing-palestine-through-the-lens-of-science-fiction-1.932583>

International film festivals are very much embracing these films and the filmmakers behind them. DACHRA and SCALES premiered in Venice, IN THE FUTURE THEY ATE FROM THE FINEST PORCELAIN at the Berlinale, and KINDIL EL-BAHR and ABOU LEILA in Cannes, at the Directors' Fortnight and the Critics' Week respectively.

In December 2019, a panel discussion addressing genre films in the Arab World and Africa took place at the 2019 Marrakesh International Film Festival. Moroccan filmmaker Talal Selhami, director of ACHOURA (2018), winner of the Special Jury Prize at the 2019 Sitges Fantastic Film Festival, says, “Genre is a huge toy box. [...] We have a lot of urban legends, mythology, popular folk tales, and figures like the djinn that can be explored. It can take your imagination further. Genre is universal. Fear is experienced everywhere, in Morocco, Mexico and Japan. What makes each of us different is the interesting part.²⁵”



Since 2016, the Beirut-based production house Abbout Productions has initiated the Maskoon Fantastic Film Festival (which means “haunted” in Arabic), dedicated to showcase international genre films. It has a competition for Arab shorts, pushing forward new genre projects from the region. Maskoon remains the first platform of its kind in the Arab World and is a member of the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation.

²⁵ <https://variety.com/2019/film/festivals/arab-african-filmmakers-genre-1203428775/>

Distinct auteurs



The Arab World has been witnessing emerging talents exploring their film ideas in innovative ways, whether in the format or in the content. There are filmmakers, now very esteemed, who have abandoned behind traditional filmmaking for more creative approaches, leaving their marks with every film they produce and creating a body

of work composed of films that can only resemble their author.

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman for example has a singular cinematographic language, giving the bitter Palestinian reality under Israeli occupation a satirical comical and yet absurd approach, clearly showcased in his acclaimed *DIVINE INTERVENTION* (2002). But his satire starts first with himself before it tackles his entourage. He has been playing a version of himself in all of his films. In His latest, *IT MUST BE HEAVEN* (2019), is no exception. In it, he is a Palestinian who leaves Palestine only to be surrounded by it wherever he goes.

Lebanese Filmmaker Ghassan Salhab has also experimented with genres in his vast cinematography. His feature *THE LAST MAN* (2006) is a vampire story without vampirism artifacts about modern Beirut. In the last 10 years, alongside several video works, he has produced a trilogy (*THE MOUNTAIN*, 2010, *THE VALLEY*, 2014 and *THE RIVER*, 2020) in which he also experiments with genres while maintaining his own distinct and very radical style, to depict a country ravaged by years of wars with no clear future on the horizon. Even though often austere and categorical, Salhab still manages to reinvent his own codes with each film he produces. The platform Aflamuna, which is proposing an online retrospective of his work, says about Salhab's work: "It is an oeuvre in which characters evolve from one film to the other, rebuilding our collective memory, our city and our country in the aftermath of war. An oeuvre and a city haunted by the ghosts of our worst nightmares. [Salhab's] intention might not be to keep us stuck in our past, but he will not allow us forget.²⁶"

The cinema of Tunisian filmmaker Ala Eddine Slim is equally atypical, very broad and hard to frame. His two enigmatic feature films, *THE LAST OF Us* (2016) and *TLAMESS* (2019) can be seen as companion films, even though each piece stands out on its own. The first, a very sensorial piece with no spoken words, is the journey of a migrant who gets lost in a forest and ends up facing his own demons but also his own self. The second is a diptych that brings together two detached journeys, in which the two main protagonists get to communicate telepathically through their eye gaze. While his protagonists do not speak much, the filmmaker prefers to let his impressive image do the necessary talking, addressing poignant issues such as illegal migration, oppression, gender roles and seclusion to name a few.

²⁶ <https://www.aflamuna.online/ghassan-salhab>

One also has to mention the work of Egyptian filmmaker and producer Hala Lotfy. Her acclaimed feature fiction debut *COMING FORTH BY DAY* (2012) is unlike any other film conceived since the revolution in Egypt. A meditation on life and death, but more so on the living dead in the decaying city that is Cairo today. Lotfy films the harsh and crude reality as it is, far from any embellishments. The reality of a society that dreams of change but is incapable of producing such.

Syrian documentary filmmaker Sara Fattahi filmed her household in Damascus. In her debut *COMA* (2015), she documents her conversations with her mother and grandmother, as the war is raging outside. She has no interest in presenting the factual events ravaging her country but rather focuses on how these events are shaking the inner feelings of the three protagonists in this house. In its follow-up, *CHAOS* (2018), Fattahi had already left Syria. And while she broadens the perspectives of her questions, the very core remains the Syrian war and its effects on her protagonists.

While Fattahi's *COMA* is a film about war in which you don't see any physical violence, Hassen Ferhani's *ROUNDABOUT IN MY HEAD* (2015) is a film about a slaughterhouse in which you don't see any trace of blood, except for one shot. The Algerian filmmaker is interested in the human nature. As he follows the workers in their daily work routine, their conversations give a very singular perspective on today's Algeria. Ferhani, who's also the cinematographer, masterfully composes every shot of his film, something he also enjoys doing in his follow-up feature *143 SAHARA STREET* (2019). His lead protagonist, Malika, lives in a small hut on Route Nationale 1 that bridges Algeria's northern part to its southern desert. Ferhani does not only dress her portrait, but also brings forward the stories of Algeria's past and the realities of its distant future.

Conclusion

Changes are occurring all over the Arab region. More personal stories are seeing the light, filmmakers are not shying away from addressing controversial themes and bringing forward thorny discussions. Yet the Arab World has still a long way to find and redefine itself. The Arab Spring, thought to be a liberation to the oppressed populations, turned out to be a major disillusionment, if not much more destructive for several nations. There is also a long way to go for Arab stories to be produced and to be seen. Some of the more personal ones don't end up connecting with their local public. Censorship is still playing a key role in most countries around the region. "The political, religious or sexual restrictions found in most Arab countries are absent in Beirut,"²⁷ says Jad Abi Khalil, director of the Beirut Cinema Platform, the industry branch of the Beirut Cinema Days. Yet many films in the end face the hurdle of censorship and don't meet their public. Abi Khalil believes censorship has always been there: "Things have always been bad. Every edition of Beirut Cinema Days had problems with the censorship. Every event in general always bumps into problems with the censorship," he said. Tamer El Said's film *IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CITY* (2016) took ten years to be made. A moving tribute to his home city, Cairo, the film extensively toured the world but has never been given the permission to be screened to its native Egyptian audience. And although censorship is for the most part governmental,

²⁷ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/freedom-and-censorship-collide-beirut-cinema-platform>

it can also be societal. After the screening of *SALVATION ARMY* (2013) in a festival in Tangier (Morocco), Taïa stated that: “the audience felt embarrassed. It was the first time they had a gay hero. They were laughing. The press conference was like a battlefield. It was extremely aggressive.²¹” It’s also a matter of openness and acceptance. There are topics that are still considered taboos and which the society at large is not willing (or wanting) to accept yet. Esteem Tunisian producer Dora Bouchoucha (of the aforementioned HEDI) says, “direct censorship has morphed into self-censorship as religion has replaced politics to become the biggest taboo subject in the country.”²⁸

Patriarchy and its venomous effects on women, their status and their role in a society is a major source of inspiration, as we’ve seen throughout the films discussed above. The rigged prevailing system in various if not most Arab countries is now actively addressed in numerous films from around the region, particularly (but not only) through female filmmakers who are fighting hard for equal rights in their respective societies. When discussing the challenges of women filmmakers in Morocco, Maryam Ben’Mbarek claims it’s still very tough: “The first thing we need to do is to put more women in key decision-making positions. We need to ensure parity in that part of the industry. Everything would become much easier. That’s the theme I also addressed in *SOFIA* (2018) – that patriarchy is dangerous not just for women but also for men.²⁹

But there is undeniably a new generation of filmmakers venturing into topics that address decades of tyranny, the society and its numerous problems, the sets of prevailing customs, archaic traditions and sexuality. There are stories produced today that bring a content that is rarely seen on Arab screens, more diverse, more inclusive and with fresher perspectives. Filmmaker Abu Bakr Shawky addresses several marginalized Egyptian communities in his feature debut *YOMEDDINE* (2018), through the story of an elderly leper who leaves his colony accompanied by an orphan boy. Both are looking for their roots in modern Egypt. Rabih is a young blind musician who also tries to retrieve his true identity by driving throughout his country, Lebanon, in Vatche Boulghourjian’s feature fiction debut *TRAMONTANE* (2016). Barakat Jabbour, who plays Rabih in the film, is a blind violinist and singer in real life.

There are therefore filmmakers who are pushing the envelope, carrying stories that need to be told, but also that need to be seen. As such, while one cannot still talk of a true cinematographic industry in the Arab World, when the cultural sector is quasi-nonexistent and the support still limited, the last ten years have surely witnessed a generation of very exciting and singular voices that are ready to open up new perspectives and steadily question the preexisting norms and the state of things in the Arab World.

Queer Voices

CHRONIC (feature fiction, by Mohamed Sabbah, LB/DE, 2017, 89') | *THREE CENTIMETERS* (short fiction, by Lara Zeidan, LB/UK, 2018, 9') | *SALVATION ARMY* (feature fiction, by Abdellah Taïa, MA/FR/CH, 2013, 84') | *UPON THE SHADOW* (feature documentary, by Nada Mezni Hafaiyah, TN, 2017, 80')

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210113-how-the-arab-spring-changed-cinema>

²⁹ <https://variety.com/2018/film/global/cannes-meryem-benmbarek-sofia-1203083904/>

Small steps in animation

THE WANTED 18 (feature documentary, by Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan, CA/PS/FR, 2014, 75') | WAVES '98 (short fiction, by Ely Dagher, LB/QA, 2015, 15') | SULEIMA (short documentary, by Jalal Maghout, SY/LB, 2014, 14') / ERASED_ ASCENT OF THE INVISIBLE | (feature documentary, by Ghassan Halwani, LB, 2018, 76')

Experimenting with genre cinema

KINDIL EL BAHR (medium-length fiction, by Damien Onouri, DZ/QA/USA, 2016, 41') | DACHRA (feature fiction, by Abdelhamid Bouchnak, TV, 2018, 113') | SCALES (feature fiction, by Shahad Ameen, SA/QA, 2019, 74') / ABOU LEILA (feature fiction, by Amin Sidi-Boumédiène, DZ/FR/QA, 2019, 140')

Distinct filmmakers

THE VALLEY (feature fiction, by Ghassan Salhab, LB/FR/DE/QA/AE, 2014, 134') | COMING FORTH BY DAY (feature fiction, by Hala Lotfy, EG/AE, 2012, 96') | THE LAST OF US (feature fiction, by Ala Eddine Slim, TN, 2016, 95') | 143 SAHARA STREET (feature documentary, by Hassen Ferhani, DZ/FR, 2019, 104')

New territories on the cinematographic map

YOU WILL DIE AT TWENTY (feature fiction, by Amjad Abu Alala, SU/FR/DE/EG/NO/QT, 2019, 102') | FREEDOM FIELDS (feature documentary, by Nazyha Arebi, LY/UK/NL/CA/QA/LB, 2018, 99') | LAST VISIT (feature fiction, by Abdulmohsen Aldhabaan, SA, 2019, 75')

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