
Untold Stories

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Keywords: Arab cinema, co-production, film-funding, international cooperation, misunderstanding, new colonialism

Abstract

Since the mid 1990s the European Union (EU) and its member states, most prominently France and Germany, have encouraged cinematic co-productions between Europe and the Middle East. A large number of films were completed within various EU support and cooperation programmes, ranging from special interest documentaries to Oscar-nominated movies like *Paradise Now* (2005) or *Ajami* (2010). As Arab Middle Eastern countries do not have a cinema-funding system of their own, the film-makers depend on cooperation with Europe. While the European partners pride themselves on the success of supported films, the Middle Eastern side is increasingly denouncing a 'new colonialism'. The displeasure derives from the assertion that the subjects of supported films are limited to Western stereotypes of the Middle East, as well as the fact that a core condition of nearly all financial support is the employment of European crews. Within this scope, how can stories be told, and which ones remain untold?

An increasing number of films from the Arab Middle East have entered the international film festival circuit over the past years. Some major works like *Paradise Now* (*Al-Jana Alan*, Hany Abu Assad, NL/D/F/IL 2005),¹ *Caramel* (*Suker Banat*, Nadine Labaki, F/LB 2007) or *Ajami* (Scander Copti and Yaron Shani, IL/D 2009) also have theatrical releases in some European countries. There they are often read as documents and authentic insights into Middle Eastern culture, though most of the films released are fictional.

Due to the extremely high production costs of cinema movies² and a lack of funding in the region of origin, most of the financing is provided by European public film funds. The monies are allocated as loans to European private production companies that either function as the main producer for an Arab author/

¹ For Arabic film titles I adopt the transcription used in the press material of the production, for the names of directors the spelling they themselves use. Following the director's name are the countries involved in the films' financing.

² Even so-called small fiction films of international standard usually exceed budgets of €1 million.

director or cooperate with an Arab production company and act as co-producer. The reason for this arrangement is the European partner's liability for the loan.³ There is great pressure to repay loans through exhibiting the film and through sales, and the scarcity of screens in the Middle East limits exhibition and sales mainly to the European market.⁴

In the media, in academic research and even in the industry itself, a completed film is usually defined and analysed as art. Films from Arab countries are thus read as an expression of Arab identity and culture. Yet, as the above indicated procedures suggest, cinema movies are also a commodity. Their making is a highly industrialized process in terms of technical work flows, division of labour, financing, marketing and distribution. Often only the executive producer accompanies the whole making process.

Looking at Middle Eastern films from an economic perspective demands the reformulation of the question as to what stories the films tell or what they represent: what subjects do they *need* to deal with and how do the stories *have* to be told in order to meet the requirements of the market?

Most of the communication in the film industry is informal. There is noticeably little flow of information, or summings-up, using the written word. For instance, rewrites of filmscripts and treatments of documentary films for funding applications or for TV editors⁵ are usually not discussed, and the different versions of the required reworking are never published.

To develop questions that help to uncover patterns of telling and un-telling stories nevertheless, I will reflect on three situations I witnessed or was involved in as co-producer, distributor or curator of films from the Middle East. They deal with the production, exhibition and reception of films in a transnational Middle Eastern–European context, and mirror the three main elements of cinematic narration: image, sound and time. On that basis I will ask about the motivation for cooperation and the reasons for misunderstandings and imbalances.

³ See World Cinema Fund (2010) or Fond Sud (2008, section 3d) as examples of film funds that address projects from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and South East Asia and insist on spending the monies – apart from the payment for the German/French producer – in the director's country of origin. All other film funds accept applications by companies registered in the film fund's region only (see below).

⁴ Usually at least a Letter of Interest from a distributor is asked for, even when applying for project development, to guarantee that the film will be exhibited, that is, to justify the funding (see Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg, 2008a).

⁵ Most film funds ask for at least one TV station to be involved in the production of a film. In the application guidelines this is less obvious. One or more TV channels is to be found in the credits of nearly all non-Hollywood studio films released in cinemas.

Image/Exhibition

The organizers of Freiburger Film Forum, a biannual ethnographic film festival in the south of Germany, had asked me to moderate the Q&As for their Middle Eastern films in the 2009 festival. After the screening of *Je Veux Voir/Badi Shuf*, by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (LB/F 2008), about the aftermath of the July 2006 war, a gentleman in the audience commented on the film's selection for the festival. He introduced himself as Lebanese, who had lived in Germany for many years and owned a travel agency running tours to Lebanon. He complained that in Germany we only see images from Lebanon that deal with war and never show the beautiful side of the country. He was upset. Not to my surprise the politically aware audience, and myself, started to justify such programming. I forget my exact argument: it was something like the film-makers in Lebanon choosing these stories as kind of an opposition to the official discourse of silencing.

Immediately after the festival I had to work on a film-programme for a cinema in Bonn, portraying Beirut and using only Lebanese films. The condition was that *Caramel* by Nadine Labaki would be part of the selection. This film did not fit my programming ideas either thematically or cinematically. Remembering the gentleman in Freiburg, I began to appreciate the challenge though. How could the German audiences know what exactly the *auteur* film-makers in Lebanon oppose? What do they imagine when they think of opposition? While the vast majority of Germans know Lebanon from the media only, the Lebanese artists reject political and social visions promoted by their media. These media images *about* Lebanon and *from* Lebanon do not yet match.

Caramel director Nadine Labaki is a star all over the Arab world. She gained fame as a director of video clips, especially creating the clips of Nancy Ajram, who is sometimes described as the Arab Britney Spears. Since in Arab TV the credits for each 3-minute video clip are shown, everybody reads Labaki's name several times a day. Nadine Labaki's videos differ from other works of this massively shown genre in the Arab world because they are not (obviously) sexist. She tells small stories rather than shooting female flesh. The naked skin displayed in *Caramel* is very minimal compared to Lebanese video clips broadcast all over the region, but surprisingly much with respect to the expectations of European viewers. *Caramel* tells the story of five women – friends, who work and meet every day at a beauty salon in Beirut. They share their worries about beauty, ageing, marriage and love; they remove hair with the help of caramel, make-up, wash hair or organize issues that are always focused around men: such as arranging a party for the secret lover in a hotel room or exercising the body.

Some find the film escapist, others say it has social or political implications, namely questioning the freedom of modern women. Asked by a US journalist whether *Caramel* is a political film, the director responded:

That wasn't my intention when I wrote it. But now, because of the events [the July 2006 war, IN], I would say yes. In Lebanon, everything has become a political act, politics slip into the most intimate areas of our lives! I thought I could get away from it but the reality of the war caught up with me. Today, with the tensions that reign in Lebanon, *Caramel* contains a message nonetheless: in spite of the opposition between the different religions, reactivated by the war, cohabitation and coexistence are natural. At least, that's how we should live. (in Doshi, 2009)

The question of whether an Arab film is political if it is not talking about or showing politics in an obvious way is not unusual. It can be found in the press kit of *Atash* by Tawfik Abu Wael (Pal/IL 2004) for the Cannes Film Festival (Momento!, 2004) and was discussed in respect to Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (*Yadon Ilabeyya*, Pal/F/D/Morocco 2002) at many receptions and informal meetings. The press kit for *Atash* contains a map of Israel and the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as a photo of the film's location in Um El Fahem. Um El Fahem is a Palestinian town inside Israel; parts of its land were confiscated by the Israeli army and used as training ground for a long period of time. Due to strong protests of the town's residents the army had to return the land to its Palestinian owners (Momento!, 2004, 13). It is exactly this territory on which the film was shot. The information the map gives (ibid., 17) reconfirms that Israel is occupying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, yet it does not show where Um El Fahem is located nor does it show the returned land. It does not reveal anything new, though most probably not many people have heard about the success of the people of Um El Fahem in liberating some hectares of their soil. Yet this political information, ironically, is not necessary to understand the film, which is deliberately set in an undefined place. The information of the press kit is rather misleading in terms of the expectations of the viewer.

How can films' meanings be read if the viewers relate them to news magazine knowledge only? If their spectators lack points of reference and have no idea what the images or narrations oppose? What they support? Where the work is positioned in its place of origin? What gets lost, what remains untold, if audiences do not know how to read the work or might not open up to its multiple layers? No definite answer can ever be given to these questions. They should rather be asked and reflected on in the context of any programming or transnational cooperation and might help to balance the power between the partners.

While in Europe the film's image plays an important role, Arabs focus more on sound. At a conference in Beirut on 'The Image of the Real and the Verity of the Image', organized by French and German cultural organizations, I was asked to present a paper on 'The Image of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict'. After my presentation the Arab host of the panel asked me: 'Ms Irit, you spoke so much about the image, but why? We Arabs are interested in what we hear.'

Sound/Reception

Simon El Habre's *The One Man Village/Semaan Bil Day'ia* (Lebanon 2008) reflects on memory and amnesia after the Lebanese civil war. In the first place it is a story about healing. Mainly because of the beautiful images, the film was quite successful at festivals all over the globe. As one of the producers and as international sales agent of the film, I had countless conversations about it with colleagues, festival programmers, audiences and journalists in various countries. Some audiences and critics missed outspoken statements about the war, while others praised the work because of its elisions and moments of silence. Those who wanted information about the war referred to the past, whereas others liked the reflection on how wars shape biographies and places. *The One Man Village* spoke to people on different levels: it moved, opened eyes, entertained.

In Lebanon it was censored. An entire scene had to be cut because it could threaten the social peace in the country. This took many people around me by surprise. They saw the film as harmless, with beautiful pictures where people did not say much. The camera of *The One Man Village* stays in Ain El Halazoun, the village of the director's family. The place is in ruins since its destruction in the civil war (1975–90). Apart from one uncle, Semaan, nobody returned after the official reconciliation.⁶ The former villagers visit during the day, look after their lands and always leave before sunset. For the first 30 minutes of the film, the audience stays with Semaan at his farm. The soundtrack is full of life – the sounds of a busy small-holding. When the camera goes out to the village for the first time the silence is heavy. It seems as if the village has stopped breathing. Suddenly there are sounds of life from one of the ruins. During the film three former villagers, all uncles of the director, are interviewed at what was their home. What they still call their home. They don't say much, decide to keep silent, avoid giving answers, smile, laugh. One uncle then speaks. He says that his house was destroyed by an earthquake, so he rebuilt it. When it was destroyed again, by war, he did not build anew. Hesitantly, he answers his nephew's questions about whom he holds responsible – quite vaguely for a foreigner but very clearly to the ears of a Lebanese.

When the film was shown in Lebanon for the first time at the Ayam Beirut al Cinema'ya Festival in October 2008, this was the sentence that was meant to be censored. In the end *The One Man Village* could be shown in the original version. For the theatrical release, though, the censor decided differently – the whole scene had to go. The uncle, Milhem El Habre, continues reflecting how public spirit, how love has gone. 'God save us from the future', he concludes (El Habre, 2009).

⁶ In 1994 the Christian and Druze leaders in this area of the Lebanese Mountain formally declared a reconciliation between their two confessions. Due to a general amnesty for all fighters in the Lebanese civil war, truth or fact-finding commissions were never established.

Back at Semaan's, the family arrives for the Easter meal. They cook together, break open Easter eggs, share a barbecue, toasting each other with arak. The scene has a utopian element. It seems like being out of time as it melds the director's memories and longings. Yet there is no future. The toasts and the relaxed voices of his family mingle with chants, while the village church is shown in ruins. Showing the dead church at the same time is moving because of the soundtrack comprising the life it once carried. The far-away family's cheering voices have lost their resonating body.

In a country like Lebanon, with no official historiography and a ruling class that insists on forgetting and carrying on regardless, the different sounds of a missing future can't be anything but threat.

Time/Production

'Dear Irit, I am confronted with the big question of how to continue the project. Two criminal lawyers said that I cannot tell my father's story in my film; neither the story of the struggle for freedom – only if made anonymous. I did not develop a concept yet that allows me to tell the story.'

This is an email I received from a young director whom I am advising with regard to her project development. She is working on a documentary on her father and his friends, Palestinian exiles in Germany. In the 1970s, like millions of others, they were politically active students struggling for political and social freedom. Their revolution, like all the others, failed. While some prominent individuals like Yasir Arafat or Nelson Mandela moved from being labelled as terrorists to freedom fighters, then became presidents and Nobel Peace Prize winners, a number of other activists stuck to their ideas from their youth and they remain listed as terrorists: yet they have been forgotten. They fell out of time. They cocooned their memories and sometimes themselves. Their children are unfamiliar with the codes of their parents' revolutionary past and unable to distil information from what is said and what is silenced. Armed with today's tools of documenting, of spelling everything out, illuminating the whole picture and discovering all the secrets, they fall into the traps of their own time.

Another young film-maker I advise in parallel is working on a similar story, yet he is placed in Palestine. He discovered the father's heroic past, reflects on why it was silenced and intends to proudly tell the whole story. His project is energizing. It's fun. He has a wealth of materials, contacts and optimism. After receiving the email above, I remembered that the market for this energetic film is Europe, maybe the USA. Due to limited exhibition spaces, the Middle East is not a considerable place for showing such films. I had no choice but inform him that he or his protagonists

might face legal consequences in Europe due to the fact that the political group portrayed in the film is still registered as terrorist here. He needs legal advice consultancy and has to understand that potential major interviewees might not agree to take part in the movie for fear of legal consequences.

Browsing my bookshelves and festival catalogues, the obvious became evident: all biographies published and films made about revolutionaries talk about the dead, (ex-)prisoners or collapsed states. They are made by directors who are foreign to their story's world, like Steven Soderbergh's two-part biopic *Che* (USA 2008), Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (*Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, D 2008), or Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck's *The Life of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, D 2005), to name just three prominent examples.

History is one of the main subjects of film-making in general and of documentary film-making in particular. Isn't art a tool of historiography? Of reflecting what shall be collectively memorized for the future – and how? Of building national or collective archives? These two stories will not be part of it the way the young directors would want to tell their family histories. The two are experiencing a transgenerational passing on of silencing, exclusion and Othering. Instead of struggling over how to tell stories of another time that influenced their lives, arguing with their parents and searching for cinematic expressions, they have to find a way simply to ensure that the fact that they existed is remembered. At least the narrative of the Germany-based documentary film project will shift from reflection about the own history as Palestinian (exiles) to questions of belonging and the space given to Others in the own/host society. The story will squeeze through the windows of the possible rather than unfold in front of us.

What are the mechanisms behind the various forms of misunderstandings and exclusions? What are the intentions of cinematic cooperation between Europe and the Middle East?

One obvious answer is that there is a lack of financing for non-commercial films in the Arab Middle Eastern countries. Those who intend to make sophisticated films have to seek funding in Europe, thus cooperation is a necessity. That makes it difficult to ask if or how these same film-makers would want to cooperate if they had the choice. Some directors of high-quality documentary films can realize their works within Arab TV; the same is true for individuals in the field of short animation. Yet these cases are too marginal to be considered seriously here.

Another objective for cooperation is 'to provide an alternative body of representations and meanings of our countries' to Europeans, as internationally acclaimed Syrian documentary film-maker Omar Amiralay expressed it (Al Abdallah Yakoub, 2006, 116). 'I had hoped that in the medium or long term, they

[the films, IN] would serve to anchor the foundation for a more accurate and intimate understanding of what really goes on inside our countries' (ibid.), yet the director left Europe disillusioned.

Asking about the European motivation for film-funding and international cooperation there are two striking aspects: the economic and the democratic. Looking more closely at these two facets, I will restrict myself to using Germany as an example. Operating within the German system, I am much more familiar with the mechanisms of the film funds, producers, distributors, exhibitors and audiences of this country, which – together with France – is the main financier of co-productions with the Middle East.⁷

Economy

As a federal state, Germany has no national ministry of culture. Hence, most of the film funds are the responsibility of the respective federal state governments. Their film funding is usually directly connected to location marketing.

The Location Marketing Division handles profiling and positioning of Berlin-Brandenburg as a media region and a storehouse of shooting sites. Apart from promoting the region in publications, at events and through advertising campaigns, the division's responsibilities include supporting retention of existing media companies and providing guidance on how to attract new firms to the area. All of this requires intensive communication and coordination with the private sector, political organizations, government and business promotion agencies. The division also encompasses the Berlin-Brandenburg Film Commission (BBFC), which offers a location service and a copious media region database. (Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, 2008b)

In the 1980s and early 1990s Germany underwent a huge reorganization of the structure of economic development. Closing the coal mines of the Ruhr area in North Rhine–Westphalia caused massive unemployment in the region. The incorporation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the Federal Republic of Germany after the fall of the Wall, and the subsequent closure of state-owned enterprises left most of what is now called East Germany an economic wasteland. In the subsequent transformation from industrial economy to service economy, media played an important role. North Rhine–Westphalia (NRW), as the most populated federal state, and East German region Berlin-Brandenburg, as the new capital area, operate the largest film funds: Filmstiftung NRW and Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg. Filmstiftung NRW (founded in

⁷ Much is written about France's production support policy of the Francophone South, see for example Amres (2006) or Hoefert de Turegano (2004).

1991), as Germany's largest film fund, was the first to combine economic and cultural objectives.

Installed as tools to strengthen the local economy, the film funds support high- and low-budget films with the potential for refinancing at the box office through interest-free conditionally repayable loans and a very small percentage of subsidies. Both institutions operate as private limited companies (GmbH) administering public funds. One hundred percent of the money provided by the film funds has to be spent inside the respective federal state; in NRW the requirement is to spend 150 percent.⁸ Creative personnel, technicians, administrators and managers depend on this system. If business goes well, they keep unemployment statistics low and gather state income through local business tax. The film funds are eager to support international co-productions, as any film funded automatically turns over or brings money to their region and nurtures its economy.

If, for example, a Palestinian film-maker approaches one of the funds, s/he not only has to spend the 100–150 percent of the money in the respective German region, as far as Medienboard is concerned the money also has to be spent on production costs only, not post-production (editing and mixing). *Paradise Now*, by Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, about two suicide bombers, received such funding. Spending production costs in Berlin-Brandenburg⁹ while shooting takes place on location in Palestine is possible if the main crew members, such as the cameraman or sound-engineer, or maybe a leading cast member, join the production team, and if technical equipment is brought from the fund's region. The relatively high wages, as well as the hire and transportation of fragile technology, including the operating staff, insurance for regions of crisis or war, flights, hotels and meals, increase the production costs. Thus the costs of films produced in countries of the South sometimes exceed those of making a comparable European film by a fair amount.

The 30 percent equity ratio of the production costs which the producer has to provide according to the fund's contracts, either comes from deferred wages or, in rare cases, from pre-sales. Deferred wages are accepted by the funds as fictitious monies in the budgets. They are usually the salaries of crew members from the film-maker's country of origin and/or the film-maker him/herself, because their invoices are not tax relevant in the fund's region or, in the fund's language: 'they have no regional effect'. If a production is financed with the help of several funds, all bills and invoices are accumulated in such a way that they meet the funds'

⁸ The exact guidelines can be found on the German-language websites of the respective film funds. The English versions are less detailed, maybe because only companies registered in the fund's region can apply (see: www.filmstiftung.de and www.medienboard.de).

⁹ *Paradise Now* received support from various funds, but in order to explain the procedures that come into effect when funding is received I stick to the example of one funding institution.

requirements and pay for the devices needed for the production (i.e. tapes, cables). These bills usually exhaust the production's cash and deferred wages are rarely paid.

From an economic perspective, transnational film co-production is one player in *imperialist globalization* (see Amin, 2006). As shown above, the funding system demands that the South adapts to the North. Co-produced films need to fit European market demands according to funding guidelines. The same policies require technology to be operated by the European crews. In this way, the funding system accelerates dependency and fosters imbalances. Why should Palestinian companies own high technology if it has to be imported for the sake of funding? How can crews gain experience and generate a high profile if they never get employed? What stories have to be told to satisfy the market?

Democracy

As the three situations above suggest, Middle Eastern films exhibited in Europe either obviously deal with political questions or they are pushed into categories of occupation and war, as the examples of *Atash* and *Caramel* showed. The films in one way or the other shed light on problems in societies lacking democratic structures.

Like European media coverage of Islam, cinema co-productions and festival programming tend to reduce the complex realities in the Arab Middle East to the subjects of violence and conflict.¹⁰ In respect to German media, Hafez and Richter (2007) identified the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as starting point of this tendency, which intensified after 9/11/2001. As the majority of the population does not have direct contact with Muslims or the Muslim world, their image of Islam was shaped by mass media, they say. Polls showed that a large number of Germans are afraid of Islam. To maintain social peace in Germany the authors call for reflection and debate on the image of Islam propagated by the media (*ibid.*, 2). Decision-makers at film funds and European producers who are involved in Arab films usually belong to the majority who form their image of and knowledge about Islam and the Middle East mainly through mass media.

The forms of cooperation in the field of cinema we know today were implemented after the fall of the iron curtain in 1989. Europe accelerated its unification process. The MENA region (Middle East, North Africa), which was considered as being situated nearby only from the perspective of the Mediterranean European

¹⁰ See Hafez and Richter (2007). According to *The Guardian*, a study on British media coverage of Islam showed that 91 percent of articles in national newspapers about Muslims were negative (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/nov/14/pressandpublishing.religion>).

countries before the political upheavals in Europe, suddenly became the immediate neighbour of the newly created European Union (EU).

In this way, the Arab Middle East shifted into the EU's focus. At the Barcelona Conference in 1995, foreign affairs ministers from the EU and 12 Mediterranean states agreed to form the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to nurture closer economic and cultural ties between the MENA region and Europe. One result was the launch of the Euromed Audiovisual Programmes, which address media professionals in both regions.

The Euromed Audiovisual Programme, though functioning under the umbrella of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, is funded entirely by the EU. Euromed Audiovisual I (2000–5) sponsored six consortiums of EU and Mediterranean partners which conducted projects on the development of films, festivals and exhibition, as well as various historical subjects related to the Mediterranean.¹¹ Euromed Audiovisual II (2006–8) supported 12 projects, focusing on training and the development, promotion, distribution and exhibition of films from the MENA region.¹² Euromed Audiovisual III (2010–not yet known) is financed by EuropeAid, which published a two-candidate short list for the Euromed Audiovisual III Capacity-building Support Unit in July 2010: one consortium is led by German governmental development aid agency GTZ and consists mainly of European public TV stations as well as the Tunisian State Broadcasting Union as the only MENA partner. The other consortium is headed by private Belgian international project management and consultancy firm Transtec, joined by several European audiovisual institutions and the Royal Jordanian Film Commission as the only MENA partner (ENPI Info Centre, 2010).¹³ The Project aims to 'develop and reinforce cinematographic and audiovisual capacity in the Partner Countries, promote complementarity and integration of film and audiovisual industries in the region, promote the free movement of audiovisual goods and services in the sector' (European Commission: Culture, 2010).

In parallel to the official economic and cultural initiatives mentioned above, some European countries were engaged in the coalition of the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq (followed by 12 years of sanctions on the country), which was strongly

¹¹ See the website of Euromed Audiovisual II, <http://www.euromediaudiovisuel.net/general.aspx?treeID=5&clang=en>

¹² See Euromed Audiovisual II Live! Trailer, <http://www.euromediaudiovisuel.net/general.aspx?treeID=8186&clang=en>

¹³ Although the trailer (see note 11), gives the impression that EuropeAid was involved in financing the Euromed Audiovisual programmes before, it is listed as the sponsor for the first time in the third generation of the partnership programme. Also, capacity building, which is a core aspect of the Euromed Audiovisual III, was mentioned in the second programme (see 'Foundations of the programme', <http://www.euromediaudiovisuel.net/general.aspx?anchors=1&treeID=3&clang=en>), yet it was not a point that was promoted like the fields mentioned above (as of August 2010).

opposed by large parts of the Arab peoples. Most Arab governments participated in or supported the war on the side of the US-led coalition against Iraq though. This antagonism within the Arab societies weakened the region to such a degree that it seemed uncontrollable to European politicians – especially as growing parts of the population turned to fundamentalist religious movements that hold Western interventions responsible for the region's instability.

In united Europe, promoters of cultural diplomacy, which was always regarded as conflict management – as well as a door-opener for markets¹⁴ – searched for ways to address peoples, cultures and states in the Muslim world with new forms of intercultural communication. '[F]or the Western paradigm in general there is an extreme need of an explanation in the Muslim cultural area, for instance. There and elsewhere we have to promote our moral concepts', wrote Hilmar Hoffmann, at that time president of the Goethe Institute and a main cultural strategist in Germany, in *Die Welt* in 1995 (in Hoffmann, 2006).

Against this background, the events of 9/11 might not be such a big surprise, at least retrospectively. Yet they came as a shock. For the first time the USA, and with it the Western community of values, was not the aggressor but the target. Suddenly Westerners felt like nearly everybody else: scared. The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC were instantly defined as a turning point. 'Arabs', or 'Muslims', were declared as committers of the crime, although – or because – no body claimed responsibility up to now.

An anti-terror-alliance was arranged within days and enormous sums of money were provided for defence measures at different levels, ranging from military to cultural mobilization. The cultural budget was minimal compared to the military budget, yet culture is extremely cheap in comparison with war machinery (Hoffmann, 2002, 54). The Goethe Institute, registered as association (e.V.) operating on behalf of German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, could reopen offices in Afghanistan from where it had withdrawn due to the civil war in the country.

'We have to oppose the strategy of terror by the dialogue of cultures and religions', then Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said (in *ibid.*, 56). In 2002, the Department for Intercultural Dialogue was founded, as the first such European initiative, by the German foreign office. On its website the Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduces this initiative as follows:

¹⁴ See for example Hoffmann (2002, 2006), whose work is more politically driven, and *British Council Arts Strategy: Connecting the UK with the world through culture* (British Council, 2008) which is an openly economy-driven paper.

Intercultural Dialogue. Achieving Greater Understanding Together

Relations between Western and Islamic societies are often dominated by misunderstandings and stereotypes. Moreover, in most Islamic countries, Islamism, an ideology aiming to imprint the laws of Islam on state and society, has become more popular in recent years. The political concepts of democracy, universal human rights and pluralism are often rejected as ‘Western’ and, by extension, ‘un-Islamic’.

The dialogue aims to promote understanding between the West and the Islamic world as well as pluralism in society and also tries to counter anti-Western stereotypes and prejudices in Islamic societies. (Auswärtiges Amt, 2009)

The strategy of the Goethe Institute, as the ministry’s main cultural player, is to be a place of cultural and spiritual exchange as part of the host countries’ public.

Reacting like a seismograph to changes in the respective society is part of the principle of trust-building strategies. This participation determines the unique position and role of a foreign cultural institute with its physical and personnel presence in another country. In Karachi, for instance, the Goethe Institute as German institution can be part of a critical public in Pakistan, due to its trust-building measures over the years. Thereby the foreign is not principally defined as something alien, as something where its connectivity to our culture could be denied. (Hoffmann 2002, 58, translated by the author).

All the efforts towards cooperation are made without ever mutually defining the notions war, terror, peace, cooperation, dialogue, opposition, democracy, turning point or support. Therefore the question of how cooperation is possible persists as long as we operate in structures of imbalance. If European public institutions support a ‘critical public’ or independent artists abroad, their partners are individuals or institutions. How can strategists talk about a ‘dialogue on eye-level’ if ambassadors of states negotiate with people who have no representatives on an equal administrative level? What does ‘eye-level’ mean if prejudices and stereotypes are remarked on only in Muslim societies and ignored in Western ones? What is cooperation about if trust-building measures are needed in order to support certain groups within other territories?

As far as cinema is concerned, most of the co-produced films are not shown in the Arab region apart from in one-off events, if at all. The few local cinemas often cannot afford the fees asked for screenings by the distributors. Ownership of a film is bound to financing, thus most co-produced films have shared European ownership only and international distributors are based in Europe, mainly in

France.¹⁵ Also, the DVDs of the co-produced films have to be imported from Europe and hence they are costly. Not many Arab–European co-productions attain the privilege of being pirated, which would make the works accessible for a larger number of viewers. Films like *Paradise Now*, *Caramel* and *Under the Bombs/Tabt al Qasf*, by Philip Aractingi (LB/F 2007), are rare exceptions. *Caramel* was successful because of Nadine Labaki's fame in the Arab world, despite her being unknown in the US and Europe. In a way, the payoff in both Europe and the Arab world can be regarded as accidental, as Labaki never talked about her status at home in non-Arab media. It is not known in Europe and the USA who she is. On a panel in Beirut in October 2008 about cinema production she made it clear that she does not relate the two fields of her work, directing video-clips and directing cinema movies.

Paradise Now represented Palestine at the Oscars, and was nominated. For the first time a Palestinian submission was possible. Two years before, Elia Suleiman had tried to submit *Divine Intervention* as Palestinian entry and was rejected because Palestine is not a state. There is much more to discuss about *Paradise Now* as political issue than in terms of cinema. Of course such a film is exhibited to some extent, and is pirated, in Arab countries. While many Arab colleagues I talked to were quite upset about the film giving the impression that Palestinians blow themselves up out of boredom, they took pride in the fact that a Palestinian work attracted so much international recognition. Nobody in Europe could tell me why s/he regarded the film as important. The only answer I received was 'because of the subject'. But isn't film about *how* it deals with a subject rather than *what* the work talks about? Discussing *Paradise Now*, the authors of *Filmheft*, an educational brochure for schools edited by German governmental education centre Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, state that the viewers are introduced to the world of terrorism from an inside perspective (Hennen and Rüssel, 2006, 11–12). If Abu Assad was such an insider with regard to suicide bombing, surely he would be locked away in prison rather than travelling to film festivals. Moreover, do two fictional future suicide bombers shown on screen represent Palestine? Due to a lot of protest the *Filmheft* was withdrawn from the market. The reason was that it talked about Palestine only and did not consider Israel (Kloke, 2005). The deep racism and the dangerous confusion between reality and fiction, reflecting and reporting, were never mentioned in that debate.

¹⁵ The high screening fees for films with no local distributor are a general problem and make a huge number of films invisible. At the moment between €1000 and €1500 is the fee for a single screening, even from cinemas with only 100 seats. If the average ticket costs €7, a sold-out screening could not recuperate even the screening fee, not to mention the international shipping of the film print, personnel and advertising. When it comes to the Middle East, where an average cinema ticket at the few art house cinemas costs €2.30 and the transportation of the print from France to the region is even more expensive than inside Europe (about €350), showing such a film is impossible. In this sense, European ownership of Arab films is preventing people's access to their own art.

Cooperating and Un-telling Stories

Right after 9/11 the region was regarded as 'hot' and many colleagues hoped to make money with films by Arab film-makers. When it turned out that these co-productions are not profitable, the wave ebbed away. Most of the people I know in Europe who cooperate with the Middle East now, or organize film-programmes of Middle Eastern films, do so out of curiosity, interest, a certain adventuresomeness, or because they feel a rather undefined necessity. They are upright, and generally ignorant about the mechanisms behind the system they operate in.

Much is said about representation in a hermeneutical sense and little in a political-administrative sense. Do films from the Middle East, the festival selections and the special film-programmes represent life in that region? To a certain degree, of course, some films are told exactly in the way the directors wish. Some are told in a way the directors can live with. Some are never told. They remain a script in some decision-makers' inboxes.

All collectives have to make some effort to be seen, to be heard, and to claim space for self-representation. In her work about popular Egyptian cinema, Viola Shafik (2007, 4) preferred to use the term 'negotiation' rather than the more materialist 'struggle', dealing with this genre as a space where social or political conflicts are played out. Joseph Massad, on the other hand, states that 'negotiating the terms of cultural battles ... becomes crucial for strategies of liberation' because both suppressor and suppressed use culture as weapon (2006, 32). While Shafik's research is partly motivated by the question of why Egyptian mainstream film was never appreciated much outside the Arab world, Massad is referring to the Palestinian liberation struggle.

Hegemonies, of course, also exist within societies or states not just between them. Those who have representatives can, to a certain extent, negotiate about their place in society. They can also represent themselves on screen, whereas those on the margins *are* represented, usually stereotypically. They have to struggle for a change.

Egypt is the only Arab country with a commercial cinema industry and a considerable home market. With 22 Arabic-speaking countries and a population of about 220 million people, the entire region is a major export market. Film-makers from all other Arab countries (and non-commercial Egyptian directors) have to seek funding abroad. This forces them, in a way, to create sophisticated films. On the one hand popular films, which are generally commercial, never and nowhere get public subsidies in a direct way. On the other hand, these films are always local. The codes they employ are much more direct than those in individual films with quite psychologically developed characters. Whereas the latter are fairly universal, popular films refer to characters and situations that are dependent on the location.

Ironically, the European funds demand local stories from the Arab film-makers, but sophisticated films.

Yet what does 'local' stand for if the film's market is Europe and its audiences cannot decode the Arab Middle Eastern local stories? Against the backdrop of a long history of *orientalism* (Said, 1978), an ongoing '*War on Terror*', and the declared mission to 'promote our Western values in the Muslim cultural area', Arab film-makers barely have a chance to do anything except represent the Other. European funds, as well as spectators, expect individual film-makers to represent their national or cultural-religious collective and make its specific features comprehensible. The outcome can only be stereotypical.

There is no framework in which the film-maker could negotiate how s/he should represent her/his country. Moreover, representing her/his country might not be the film-maker's intention at all. This situation catapults film-makers originating from the Middle East into a kind of vacuum: their reflections at home become reifications abroad. There they have to negotiate the possibilities of a film's production within a framework that lacks the director's points of reference instead of struggling for self-representation. In this process, at the same time, crucial parts of the struggle at home are lost or neutralized.

Films are often seen to function as cultural ambassadors. If a country has a good film-infrastructure and the means to exhibit a variety of films in special series abroad, a film-programme can be representative. Maybe even beyond the official image. But film-makers coming from countries with no established cinema infrastructure cannot be part of an eclectic programming. If their work is misunderstood as representative of their country of origin by the foreign audience, the film contributes unintentionally to a further blurring of reality.

The production of *The One Man Village* was not funded. A basic agreement between us producers was that we do not re-write in order to get funding. Maybe the treatment was not perfect, a common – and often true – piece of feedback. Yet many poor treatments pass selection committees. A point all the potential financiers I talked to made was that we did not explain the war and gave no historical background. The war is visible in every frame of the film. The trauma is heard in every despairing laugh. The film talks about today, it reflects on collective amnesia. What could the use of archival material have added to the narration? It is the director's story that is told, that the audience listens to. We negotiated between us producers and chose to refuse certain requirements from outside. However, although we succeeded once, it will not be possible to go through an entire production process for a second time without funding.

The two young film-makers will tell their stories to dignify their fathers. Most probably the works will not tell about the constraints they faced. Those will resonate in the dark that surrounds the playful lights on the screen. Like all the other co-productions, these films will become part of Arab collective or national memory(ies) and archive(s), not European ones.

Conclusion

The analysis uncovered the patterns of the telling and un-telling of stories from the Arab Middle East. It showed that there is not even a framework in which the co-producing parties *mutually* agree on the parameters of their common work. Though programmes like the Euromed Audiovisual are passed multilaterally they are financed by one partner, the EU, only. Arab officials then disappear. Europe, as the three phases of the Euromed Audiovisual programme as well as the regional funds' financing guidelines exemplify, uses cultural cooperation to penetrate foreign markets.

Also, the politically driven initiatives of cooperation and conflict prevention are exploited economically, which is expressed most evidently in ownership regulations and the ignoring of Arab spectators. Moreover, as Joschka Fischer's claim that 'we have to oppose the strategy of terror by the dialogue of cultures and religions' (as quoted in Hoffmann, 2002, 56) and the successive intercultural dialogue initiatives by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggest, the Western partners of this dialogue declare the Arab partners to be the initiators of the conflict. Why growing parts of Arab populations reject attributes they connect to the West is a question that is not even asked, against the background of current European involvement in the war against Iraq, the UNIFIL Maritime Task Force deployed since October 2006 along the Lebanese coast, or the rejection of Palestinian election results in 2006 and the subsequent freezing of financial aid to the duly elected government.

The public financing of European personnel operating abroad recalls the idea behind recent 'land grabbing', that is, wealthy countries buying farmland in other territories in order to produce food for their own populations. While the latter is openly denounced as 'new colonialism' even by Western media (see Knaup and von Mittelstaedt, 2009; Sherife, 2009; Valley, 2009), no attention is paid to the economic structures behind the co-production of movies or other forms of cooperation in the field of the arts.

Quite a lot of academic research is done with respect to the link between culture and old colonialism (and sometimes decolonization) as well as postcolonialism. Yet in that research films are never looked at as commodity. Economic dependencies and their effects on the narration of the films are suppressed.

The absence of Arab representatives and mutually agreed definitions in the field of cinematic cooperation leads to an ambiguous European funding system, comprising forms of censorship as well as support. To understand and fight current forms of dependencies, domination and colonialism requires paying attention to economic mechanisms. These still need to be researched more carefully in order to create a substantial and urgent debate.

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