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Cinematic Cities: THE CITY DEPICTIONS IN MODERN ARAB CINEMA

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Abstract.

Films are produced on several Arabic countries and have proven international success for decades. However, Film is more than a medium for drama, comedy or action narratives. As most of the Arab's population now lives in cities, there are growing number of films that take place in urban settings, where a large number of those cities' social and physical challenges are clearly exposed. Commercial film, then, could play a significant role in determining how such issues can be seen through the lenses of their different countries and cultures. That is, solution to urban challenges must be specific to its context. This article, then, aims to review some of Arab urban focused films, 16 films throughout the Arab world were reviewed briefly, and these films were categorized into 3 categories: the informal city, the divided city and the cinematic biographies of the city.

Keywords: *Cinematic urbanism, Arab cinema, Arab City, Urban challenges.*

1. Introduction

Home to 357 million people in 2010, 56% of Arabic region population lives in rapidly urbanizing cities, post-colonial and emerging social, economic and political challenges are major urbanization drivers. Total population is still expected to double by 2050, which will place continued pressure on the already fractured urban management, urban governance, housing and social, economic services. The spreading of informal settlements is the result of serviced land scarcity and affordable housing options. Especially in countries that have experienced continuous civil wars, poverty and political instability - such as Lebanon, Sudan and Iraq. As a product of the 2011 uprisings, some countries are aiming to adapt new transparent and inclusive governance systems or in some cases build new institutions from scratch. In order for cities and countries to reposition themselves as global economies, to attract foreign investment. (United Nations Human Settlements Programme ,2012).

With such interconnected tapestry of urban issues, urban planners who deal with such cities must tackle issues sensitively in various ways depending on the cultural context of the particular city. Physical problems may have physical solutions, but social problems rarely do, this article aims to show the power of cinema and its significance role in promoting new ways of understanding the urban reality of the cities in the Arab region and therefore providing innovative solutions for the existing and future challenges. Film itself is considered an unprecedented golden opportunity for urban researchers to represent their ideas and problems in unconventional media, Films have the power to represent and simplify the city in a distinctive way and reflect it as actually is (Kracauer, 1995).The urban film rich visual media discuss these themes and generate open discussion about them in inclusive, accessible and clear way to those of all ages, educational levels, cultures, religions, social-economic structures. Cinema aims to both inform and entertain, provides the ideal form to expand the understanding of the complexity. (Edelman,2016).

2. Cinematic Urbanism: Literature review

Throughout the last century, film and city have become increasingly interconnected, cinematic portrayals of the city shows symbols of identity, culture, urban reality and power. Through time and space, the borders between real city and its cinematic counterpart become more and more eroded. City cannot be viewed independently of its cinematic experiences. Films do not only depict the society but influence the way we see and imagine the world. (AlSayyad , 2006)

Using film language, new layers of emotions, social interactions, colors and sounds are added to the city cinematic portrait (Demir,2015). The images and sounds of the city found in films are believed to be the sole experience that many people will have of cities they never visit. (AlSayyad , Safey Eldeen,et al.,2022). Watching a film is compared to a city street walk. Where the actors are the city residents surrounded by a fictional built environment. (Odin ,2008). The city image construction and its everyday experiences are built by its physical built environment (Lynch, 1960). Thus, consecutive sequences and multiple images of film can be compared to the way people experience and see their cities in real life (Russell, 1992).

In Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Urban Modernity from Reel to Real, The rich cinematic scenes of Cairo were used as an example for the interrogation between the real city and its cinematic counterpart in the Arab world. With focus on rising challenges of the region such as: gender equality, soaring religious fundamentalists, urban inequality and neoliberalism. (ALSayyad , Safey Eldeen,et al.,2022)

3. Arab cinema: Historical overview

Despite its inception as an imitation of European cinema, Arab cinema continues to evolve and change throughout the 20th century and the start of the 21st century including productions mainly from Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon. Egyptian cinema is dubbed as The "Hollywood of the Middle East" with the most productions and impact in the region.

Each country in the region has its own unique characteristics and identifiable brand of cinema. Film production was scarce until the late 1960s and early 1970s when filmmakers began to receive state financial assistance .Most films produced at that time were state funded and contained a nationalistic dimension as they were shot during the post-independence era. (Shafik, V. ,1998). Arab cinema has discussed several topics including politics, modernism, civil wars and socioeconomic challenges.

Recently there are several emerging filmmakers from the gulf countries such as: UAE and Saudi Arabia. It is worth mentioning that several Arab films have won critical acclaim in Cannes film festival and other international film festivals worldwide, Notable Arabic filmmakers include: Youssef Chahine(1926-2008,Egypt),Shadi Abdel Salam(1930-1986,Egypt),Moustapha Akkad(1930-2005,Syria),Merzak Allouache (1944-present,Algeria),Nouri Bouzid(1945-present,Tunisia),Elia Suleiman(1960-present,Palestine),Haifaa Al-Mansour(1974-present,Saudi Arabia) and Nadine Labaki (1974-present,Lebanon).

4. Urban issues of the Arabic city

4.1. The informal city

Informal settlements scenes have always been considered to be a catalyst for social impact within any society, aiming to provoke individuals' perceptions in an attempt to call for reconsidering living conditions for those areas. (Abdel-Ghani, Taher, 2016).

Nadine Labaki's third feature film, the Oscar nominated Lebanese film **Capernaum**, shows a brutally honest portrait of Beirut slums, The film tells a story of poverty and survival in Beirut's underclass, The Beirut shown here (Figure.A)is a decaying, dilapidated, maze-like metropolis. Families live in inhumane apartments with lack of basic services. It is the story of a Beirut street kid who has run away from his unhappy, abusive home. He is befriended by an Ethiopian woman working as a cleaner without legal papers and gets to stay with her in return for minding her baby while she is out at work. But when she is picked up by

police, he has to head off back to the streets, taking the baby with him – and is confronted by some terrible choices. The city serves as a backdrop for the events in the film. The film shows the impact of poverty, illegal immigration and decades of civil war on the built environment of Beirut. While Hind Meddeb's (**Electro Chaabi**) is a documentary exploration of the Egyptian slums and the new musical movement : electronic chaabi music. Featuring interviews with the DJs and footage of the raving nightlife in the underworld of the slums and the effect chaabi music has on the people, The film attempts to present a rare insight into the slums of Egypt (Figure.A), a way to provide a voice for the disadvantaged teens that inhabit them, Electro Chaabi highlights the social inequalities of Cairo especially after the revolution . (**Heena Maysara**) (2007), shows the urban inequality between rich upper-class lifestyle and poor informal shanty towns, where residents suffer from numb physical and mental life as they are totally ignored by the state officials and the regime , they do not have the right to participate in the decision making process for their deteriorated built environment . The film depicts the darkest side of spatial injustice, a place that encompasses no local officials – except the police station – lack of accessibility to developed infrastructure because of its total isolation from the rest of the city, lack of appropriate basic needs, facilities and local public services.



Figure A

1. Overview of Beirut slums as seen in *Capernaum* (Lebanon, 2018). Directed by Nadine Labaki.
2. Street children of Casablanca slums as seen in *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (Morocco , 2000). Directed by Nabil Ayouch
3. Informal housing units in post-revolutionary Cairo as seen in *Electro Chaabi* (Egypt , 2013). Directed by Hind Meddeb.
4. Shaky units viewed as the birthplace for Islamic fundamentalists in Morocco, *Horses of God* (Morocco /Belgium , 2012). Directed by Nabil Ayouch.

One of the most internationally acclaimed Moroccan films, Nabil Ayouch's **Ali Zaoua**, introduces a new ground in presenting the world of street children. In distinct contrast to that offered by classic representations coming from other regions. Ali, Omar, Kwita and Abobakr are street kids in Casablanca. They inhabit the shanty streets. With nowhere to go, and nowhere to hide, survival in the city becomes an everyday problem. Ayouch succeeded in portraying harsh street life with the decaying infrastructure of the city in the background (Figure.A). (Shafik, V., 1998)

In his fifth feature film, **Horses of God Ya khayl Allah, 2012**, adapted from Mahi Binebine's novel, in the initial sequences of the film, Ayouch uses a wide crane shot to establish a cityscape view of the shantytown in 1994. The second crane shot depicts Sidi Moumen in 1999, showing the significant expansion of the slum and the explosion of garbage surrounding it. With no state services such as education, running water, or urban planning, the shantytown is abandoned and cut off from civil society. The state intervenes in Sidi Moumen only through the police, who are depicted as brutal and corrupt. (Gugler, J., 2015), **Horses of God** depicts how young people can be transformed into Islamic terrorists as a result of their inhumane built environment. The film shows terrorism as a social construct, resulting from the complete absence of the state in the shantytowns, and the lack of dignity and future for young people. (Figure.A)

In his critically acclaimed films, Nabil Ayouch calls for the integration of marginalized figures into Moroccan society. He has attempted to provoke public debate around painful city challenges and traumas, Ayouch has used cinema as a vehicle not only for self-expression but also as a tool to bring exposure and dignity to those abandoned and rejected by traditional elements in order to foster a more inclusive society. (Gugler, J., 2015).

4.2. The Divided City

With the rising of the civil war in the 1970s, it has become a central topic for Arabic film makers especially the Lebanese, the Palestinians and recently the Syrians, this war focused films are centralized on showing the resulted social fragmentation, sectarian challenges, class divisions and the urban decay of war-torn cities.

Jocelyn Saab's experimental narrative **ONCE UPON A TIME, BEIRUT (1994)**. Follows two young women, Yasmine and Leila, on a cinematic journey through Beirut, Lebanon. The film opens with a taxi driving through Beirut's postwar city streets, surrounded by bombed-out buildings. In this devastated landscape, Beirut was portrayed as a playground of consistently fantastic and surreal narratives.

Representing Palestine by nomination for the first time in the academy award for best international feature film, **Omar** directed by Hany Abu-Assad, starts with Omar climbing the wall of separation in order to visit his friends and his secret love Nadia in the other side of the city, the Israeli west bank barrier lengthens about 708 kilometres upon completion. (see Figure B) this barrier was built by the Israeli government after waves of political tensions with Palestinians during the second intifada starting in 2000. According to the Israeli security, lower number of suicidal bombs were registered since the construction of

the wall. but according to the Palestinians it is just a hated structure in the Palestinian urban landscape and within the hearts and minds of all the residents of the city including the film characters themselves.

In the present day of the divided historic city: Jerusalem. Abu-Assad's film interconnects personal and political elements. with glances of romance, thriller, coming of age dramatization of the city. the multiple reversals and plot twist with chases and action sequences reveal a documentary -like portray of the everyday family life and their long staying political struggle with the city scenes in the background seen clearly as gloomy and wistful city.

The movie mirrors the Arabic-Israeli conflict but in much smaller scale and also portrays a loving couple separated by the politics. The film not only shows the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also portrays frustration of the people under the occupation, as Omar himself mentioned in the master scene "every day we wait is another day of occupation." Although the film is portrayed in an individual scope, it certainly creates a larger issue for the viewers to think about.



Figure B

1. the main character climbs the Israeli west bank barrier in order to meet his friends, Omar (Palestine, 2009). Directed by Hany Abu-Assad.

2. Homs decaying streets as seen in Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait (Syria, 2014). Directed by Ossama Mohammed.

3,4. El Tahrir square in Cairo under the control of the 25th January revolution demonstrators, 1/2 Revolution (Egypt , 2011). Directed by Omar Shargawi and Karim El Hakim.

With the inception of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010, filmmakers immediately took to the streets and began filming demonstrations and a new wave of documentaries and dramas have been screened through film festivals and populated the Internet.

In **1/2 Revolution**, emerging film-makers Omar Shargawi and Karim El-Hakim record their raw personal experiences of the 18 days of the revolution while staying in a flat in central Cairo. The documentary captures the demonstrators who controlled much of downtown Cairo around Tahrir Square. (see Figure B)

The outbreak of Syrian Civil war violence in 2011 saw an estimate of 500,000 video clips being uploaded making it one of the first YouTubed revolutions in history, there is a handful of films and documentaries where filmmakers capture the present and dynamic realities of war where one finds a possibility of truth.

One prominent example is BAFTA Film Award 2020 Best Documentary, **For Sama**, is a raw vlog-style documentary, shot and narrated by Waad Al-Kataeb over five years covering her own personal experiences of the Syrian conflict.

The film documents her journey from being an incoming student at Aleppo University, the city known as the prime site of anti-government dissent in Syria, following by her fall in love, marriage and giving birth to her first child, Sama, all whilst living through the uncertain times of war-torn city. The film as suggested by its title is considered a cinematic letter to Al-Kataeb's daughter, who she names Sama, (meaning sky in Arabic) as she explains why her parents made the conscious choice of staying back in her city and rebuilding it in the post-war era.

Built on first-hand video documentation of civil war on modern-day Syria, **SILVERED WATER, SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT** is a visual essay of raw pain from exiled Syrian director Ossama Mohamed, the director used over 1000 images including shaky shots from mobile phones as filmed by activists in the besieged city of Homs, the city dubbed as (the capital of revolution). The film shows an unclear and harsh vision of the city under heavy attack with grainy unedited real footage. The violent images onscreen varies from destroyed buildings and gloomy streets to the bodies of dead children. (see Figure B)

The soldiers navigate the unsafe streets crawling through deserted homes, the film documents the fragility of society in the ruined city in staggering scenes. The director walks through a series of abandoned houses (the safest way to travel through a sniper-ridden neighborhood).

4.3. Biographies of the city

Written and directed by Ahmad Abdulla, **Heliopolis** is an independent Egyptian film about a day in the lives of several young people, whose stories intersect in the cosmopolitan but decaying Heliopolis suburb. Rather than showing a catchy vintage picture of the suburb that was once flourishing, Heliopolis shows a multi-dimensional depiction of the neighborhood; following the lives of people with various social backgrounds, occupations and classes. The film shows the distinctive architectural style of the 19th-century suburb that mix between Islamic and European architecture. The common point connecting the film characters is the daily struggle that each person endures; whether it relates to ambition, love or companionship.

Jocelyn Saab is one of the female Arab filmmakers who have paid close attention to depicting the city life in both her feature and documentary films. She made three documentaries on Beirut: **Beirut, Never More (1976)**; **Letter from Beirut (1978)**; and **Beirut My City (1982)**. Her main interest is to search for beauty in the city despite of the destruction and impacts of the civil war.



Figure C

1. The main character with the historical suburb in the background, Heliopolis (Egypt , 2009). Directed by Ahmad Abdalla.

2,3,4. Jocelyn Saab is one of the female Arab filmmakers who have paid close attention to depicting the city life in both her feature and documentary films, images show realistic portrayal of the city during and after the war.

Saab's three feature films on Beirut can be seen as a trilogy. They present the stories of her female characters as integral to Beirut's story over a period spanning close to thirty years: **A Suspended Life** is set in 1982 while the civil war was at its peak, followed by **Once Upon a Time, Beirut** in 1994 after the end of the civil war, and lastly **What's Going On?** in 2010, fifteen years after her last feature in Beirut. In this way, each film captures a certain image of the city at a particular historical juncture by creating female protagonists who reflect the city's characteristics, as if each of them is looking in the mirror to see Beirut from her own perspective. Saab articulated her cinematic aesthetics with a focus on the relationship between the city and the experiences of her characters (particularly the female characters), while depicting their search for freedom and beauty in the space of Beirut. Saab's cinematic "trademark" lies in how she interweaves the plight as well as the dreams and aspirations of the women in the films into the fabric of the city. (Gurgler, J.,2015).

5. Conclusion

Despite surrounding production, lack of fund and censorship challenges, Arab cinema retains its vital significance as an art form that shows distinctive and interconnected urban lives of the Arabic city .

It is proven that film can explore the city through both maintain a story line and explore a social, political, cultural or human issue .It is a complex and challenging art form that reflects its urban context and it is one that spans the globe. It has a special role in exploring urban issues, and generations of film makers have kept that function alive as they have redefined the medium to fit their time.

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