

Mainstream Film and the Middle East

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JAN 21 2017

With a title like that above, anyone who has read Edward Said might expect a rather scathing, tongue-lashing critique of the Western media and its contributions to negative imagery about the Middle East during this period of conflict. It is with some pleasure that I can report the opposite.

The primary reason for this change within the film industry seems to be four-fold: (1) a pattern of collaboration among international directors and production companies; (2) directors who are new to the Western landscape and who are often Middle Eastern in origin; (3) Western actors of Middle Eastern origin, many of whom have lived in the West for decades, but who seem to be taking on Middle Eastern roles more assiduously in the last decade or so; and (4) and actors of Western origin who are willing to take on Middle Eastern roles with the same seriousness and cultural sensitivity that they use to embody Western characters.

One of the new directors on the scene, who works with Canadian, British, Irish, and Western-Francophone production companies, is Ruba Nadda, a woman director born in Montreal to Syrian and Palestinian parents. She began directing films in 1997, and she began receiving awards for her films in 2009. Her 2009 film, *Cairo Time*, was nominated for a number of international awards. Two recent films of note, *Cairo Time* and *Inescapable*, take on themes of Middle Eastern politics in very specific and localized terms (*Inescapable*, an action film, is situated in Damascus and uses a personal story to unpack a bit of what it was like to live under the Assad regime, even for the well-to-do). They also take on themes of Middle Eastern romance, something counter-intuitive as a theme at all if one is focused on the parameters of discourse about the Middle East typically set by the news media (e.g., ISIS, fundamentalists, and bedlam). These films address the local contexts with nuance and local detail.

One might expect movies such as *London Has Fallen* (2016) to provide, by title and by topic, the more stereotypical terrorist swashbuckler. However, Iranian-born Swedish director, Babak Najafi, together with U.K., U.S. and Bulgarian collaboration, presents a story that is more nuanced and interesting if one pays attention to the cultural signals and characterization of the range of Middle Eastern and South Asian characters presented in the film – amidst the din of fire, bombs, and shelling. The Middle Eastern and South Asian characters – many of whom are, in fact, presented as engaging in acts of terrorism – are allowed more humanity, more of their own motivation, the presentation of a wider social and cultural contexts, and more cultural and political autonomy than a typical “terrorism flick.”

In a similar genre, British spy-thriller television programs such as *Strike Back: Origins* (the series with Richard Armitage, not the later Cinemax version, which is quite different and less authentic), and *MI-5* (in Britain called, *Spooks*) often offer all-out tugs-of-war between characters substantially representing very different parts of the political spectrum. See, for example, *Strike Back: Origins* episodes 1, 2 (dir. Daniel Perceval, 2010), 5, and 6 (dir. Edward Hall, 2010); and *MI-5* season 2 episode 2 (dir. Bharat Nalluri, 2003), and season 7 episode 4 (dir. Peter Hoar, 2008).

The French film, *Le Grand Voyage* (French-Moroccan dir. Ismaël Ferroukhi, 2004) offers a deeply-nuanced and wonderful account of father-and-son deliberation, representing also traditional vs. modern discourse and debate, as a father and son travel from France by car across Europe, Turkey, and, ultimately, to Saudi Arabia for Hajj. For those who have never seen footage of the Hajj, it offers beautiful imagery.

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Other genres emerging from mainstream film include fairy tales, and historical war flicks reaching, sometimes, to the Ancient period. Several earlier U.S. productions have effectively made Middle Eastern fairy tales available to the Western public: *Arabian Nights* (dir. Steve Barron, 2000); *The Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (dir. Mike Newell, 2010); *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* (dir. Stephen Sommers, 1999 and 2001), and *The Scorpion King* (dir. Chuck Russell, 2002); and, more recently, *Gods of Egypt* (dir. Alex Proyas, 2016, U.S. and Australian collaboration) stand out as examples. While these films necessarily include over-dramatic elements, that is typical of the fairy tale genre and likely necessary to that form. What these films do that is positive is make Middle Eastern-derived fairy tales available to the Western imagination, giving Westerners a door into some of the more romantic aspects of Middle Eastern cultural conventions.

The Kingdom of Heaven, *Troy*, and *300* all present a Middle Eastern and Mediterranean landscape centered on war in different historical periods. *The Kingdom of Heaven* is a refreshing treatment of the Crusades that falls neither in the trap of caricaturing Crusaders, nor that of caricaturing local peoples in the Middle East. In *Troy* and *300*, the wars in question revolve around conflict between powers newly imagining themselves as Western, and Middle Eastern powers in the Ancient period.

Films coming out of the Middle East, too, are expanding in number and availability with English subtitles. The Iranian film industry has been well known in the West for a long time. Poignant recent films such as *Wajma: An Afghan Love Story* (dir. Barmak Akram, 2013) and *The Black Tulip* (dir. Sonia Nassery Cole, 2010) offer films out of Afghan-French or Afghan-U.S. collaboration that are powerful and locally grounded. Several recent films created in collaboration between Israeli, Palestinian, French, French Canadian, and/or German filmmakers have produced powerful new images of locally grounded social and cultural relations in that context of conflict, notably: *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea* (dir. Thierry Binisti, 2011); *The Other Son* (dir. Lorraine Lévy, 2012, a French production); and *Ajami* (dir. Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, 2009). Likewise, a robust film industry emerging from Morocco is providing films often available with French subtitles but not English, including such films as *Zero* (dir. Nour Eddine Lakhmari, 2012), which I hope will be available soon with English subtitles so that I can show it to students!

Several actors of Western and/or Middle Eastern origin are notable in creating grounded and nuanced Middle Eastern characters, including: Alexander Siddig, Marissa Tomei, and Rufus Sewell; and, locally, Haji Gul Aser, Mahmud Shalaby, Hiam Abbass, and Younes Bouab. Some Western actors have taken roles in which their characters regularly engage with Middle Eastern characters (as enemies and/or as friends), including: Richard Armitage and Gerard Butler. And it must be said that one actor on the vanguard of this movement was none other than George Clooney in *Syrianna* (dir. Stephen Gaghan, 2005). These films are dramatic and adventurous and some are action-based; they are meant for mass consumption. What they achieve that is new and productive, to my mind, is bringing to Western audiences a more grounded Middle East; characteristically Middle Eastern genres (e.g., the Middle Eastern fairy tale); and Middle Eastern characters who are both more human and more authentic across a range of social, cultural, and political perspectives.

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