CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

CINEMA AND MODERNITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Post-colonial newness and realism

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The historiography of Middle Eastern cinemas differs in at least one key way from its Western cousin. In the Middle East – mainly the Arab World, Iran, Turkey, and Israel – cinema as a practice has always been associated with modernity. The medium is viewed as part of the paradigm of the modern, regardless of the specific content of films. By contrast, in the West – particularly Europe – the fortuna of the labels modern or modernist in cinema is different. The early moving pictures from the nineteenth century in Europe and America were perceived as yet another instance of technological progress echoed in the realms of entertainment and art, and therefore modernist by default (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007).

But Western cinematic practice was soon to be institutionalized and integrated in a larger history of the arts where different genres and eras bore diverse generic labels (Bordwell and Thompson 2010b). ‘Modern’ came to designate a specific genre of cinema, particularly around the 1920s and 1930s, which has equivalents in painting and sculpture. For example, Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927) and Un chien andalou (1928) are visually associated respectively with abstract painting and surrealism, both of which are artistic currents subsumed under the label modernism in art history. Both films are sometimes labelled as representatives of modernism in cinema (Natter 1994). Apart from that instance, the adjective ‘modern’ is used on cinema in Western literature to suggest some kind of newness – usually in the sense of contemporariness – as in the phrase ‘modern Iranian cinema’, used in the 1980s to refer to post-revolutionary cinema in Iran. In the Middle East, the aesthetic and technical order of the modern is repeatedly associated with the labels ‘new’, as in ‘new Israeli cinema’, or ‘new realism’ in Egypt (Dabashi 2001; Shohat 2010; Farid 1992). Sometimes, the label ‘modern’ implies newness performed by contradicting older aesthetic values and generic conventions, and is often replaced by the label new, as in the Italian neorealismo or the French new wave (Bordwell and Thompson 2010; Marcus 1986; Sellier 2008). This use of ‘modern’ is the one most often replicated in the literature on modern Middle Eastern cinema, by critics and historians from the West and the Middle East itself.

However, beyond ‘newness’, modernity is strikingly associated with the medium itself and is explained, advocated for, negotiated and/or conjured in the cinemas of
the Middle East. The conceptual triad of modernity/modernization/modernism remains a valid way to frame cultural production in its relation to time, particularly in the Middle East and, more specifically, in its cinemas. Modernity in this context can be conceived of as (a) an era; (b) a state of mind or a disposition to critique – even break with – tradition, or at least an older paradigm; (c) a social process; or (d) a conceptual constellation. Modernity will be addressed in the following within these four parameters: epochal modernity, whose starting point is usually considered to be the French Revolution, and which seems to be still ongoing; the conceptual constellation called ‘modern’, and organized around reason as a central subject; modernity as modernization: a series of rationalizing universal, social, and technological processes (including bureaucratic centralization, secularization, and capitalization); and lastly, modernity as an intellectual disposition to distance oneself from a certain tradition. Modernity is thus the constellation of values and ideas that break – in theory – with the Middle Ages around the principle of legitimization and evaluation of ‘truth’, whether based on church and religion or humanist philosophy. Modernization is the process of universalizing rationalization by creating institutions and implementing technology which are deemed modern, as in implementing universal suffrage or creating railways. Modernism, therefore, is reserved to describe a genre or series of generic characteristics in cultural production: visual arts, literature, theatre, etc. (Habermas 1987). Because it is part of the technological innovations of the nineteenth century, cinema as technology and industry illustrates the process of modernization as experienced at various speeds in Middle Eastern societies. Early twentieth century newspapers in the Middle East are quasi-unanimous in hailing the advent – rather the importation of – cinema into the region as yet another sign of the integration of the region into the ‘modern world’ (Hadary 1989; Maghazi 1975).

In terms of the debates it sparked because of its narrative content as well as the shift it introduced in culture, cinema was the primary locus of negotiation with modernity. It typically advocated modern ideas of secularism and of westernization, or created a space where the distress caused by the shift in value systems and symbolic references could be expressed and assuaged.

NAMING THE MODERN

A brief survey of the concepts used to express the idea of modernism in the Middle East strikes the observer by the diversity of Arabic words, none of which accurately translates ‘modernism’: hadatha (modernity), moa’assara (contemporariness), and jadid (new). The recurrence of these concepts in the course of Middle Eastern history is also striking. Every two decades or so a new trend, idea, current, or practice is labelled ‘new’ or ‘modern’ in many disciplines in the Western literature on the Middle East. Because of the scope of this chapter, I will focus mainly on this phenomenon in Middle Eastern cinema.

Hamid Naficy’s encyclopedia of Iranian cinema testifies to the modernizing role played by the moving pictures in the country since the inception of the project of westernization and secularization at the turn of the twentieth century, not unlike the experience of Arab societies. Hamid Dabashi, in his own historical account of Iranian cinema, insists on the epistemological agency of cinema as access to (conceptual) modernity that visualizes, and therefore historicizes, characters who otherwise may
acquire an eternal dimension, as in the written medium of the Muslim’s holy book (Naficy 2011–12; Dabashi 2001).

The history of Iranian cinema offers, however, an interesting case study of the paradigm of newness as a conceptual attempt to define modernism in the seventh art. Often, historians of Iranian cinema identify some bold aesthetic experiments compared to or associated with neorealism and with European art cinema in the 1960s as ‘Iranian new wave’. They also often refer to the cinema produced in the wake of the Islamic revolution in 1979 as ‘modern Iranian cinema’, but since then most agree with Naficy on using the label ‘new Iranian cinema’ to describe post-revolutionary Iranian film production (Tapper 2002; Chaudhuri 2005).

In both these examples, the adjective ‘new’ signals a break with a previous or a dominant aesthetic order. The late 1960s and 1970s Iranian new wave, sometimes referred to as Motefavet, departs from the predominant entertainment-based escapist musicals, comedies, and melodramas known as Film Farsi (Boughedir). Therefore, this trend is ‘new’ in the sense of breaking away from the commercial escapist cinematic rhetoric. It is also new inasmuch as it copies a European trend with no prior equivalent in Iranian cinema: in this case, Italian neorealism. For example, The Cow (1969, Iran) by Darius Mehrjui is one of the most critically acclaimed Iranian films from the pre-revolutionary era, and is almost unanimously labelled the flagship of Iranian new wave or new realism by Iranian and Western critics and historians (Jahed 2012; Sadr 2006; Tapper 2002).

However, a close examination of The Cow problematizes the characteristics associated with these labels, as defined in Europe. There is a vague correspondence between the film’s theme and that of The Bicycle Thief (1948), the Italian neorealismo masterpiece by Vittorio De Sica: in both films, the poor man descends into despair then degradation after losing his livelihood (the cow in one case, the bicycle in the other). The unusually long shots (much longer than those in commercial films), the post-sync, and the depiction of rural poverty put The Cow in the neorealism category. But the film has a heavy expressionist component: the contrast between and the play with light and darkness, as well as the establishing shots and long takes of the village line where the view is blocked by dark houses, are almost an allegory of the spectral nature of rural life, of the shadow of the past, or of tradition dominating the village society. The acting style, whose theatrics emphasize the madness of the peasant and his gradual transformation into his own cow, decisively underscore the expressionist nature of the film. It is precisely this combination, the insertion of the film in the world cinema paradigm because of its release at the Venice Film Festival, and its affinity with some European trends of art cinema, that constitute the newness of the film and the wave it started.

**Thesis I: In the Middle East, for many decades, making movies in itself meant practicing modernity.**

If discussing modernism in the ‘Western canon’ of cinema makes sense, it is much less obviously so in the history of Middle Eastern cinemas. In the West, the labels ‘modern’ and ‘modernism’ may have been used to refer to alternative artistic cinematic productions in the 1920s and 1930s, describing films such as Berlin: Symphony of a
Great City, The Man with a Movie Camera, or Le sang du poete. There is no equivalent to such productions in Middle Eastern cinemas, certainly not in the 1920s and 1930s.

Michael Rowlands argues that in the Southern hemisphere, multiple temporalities often coexist – those of traditions and modernities – in the same national space. He thus underscores the desire of being modern in the historic experience of the twentieth century:

Defined as perhaps the key value of the historical experience of the twentieth century the desire to be modern became for much of the world an aspiration to achieve through emulation rather than the working out of an indigenous history. How to become modern and remain the same became more or less the equivalent of how to develop without becoming dependant.

(Rowlands 1995: 23)

This post-colonial understanding of the desire for modernity in the colonial and post-colonial realms applies accurately to the cinemas of the Middle East, particularly – but not exclusively – within the melodramatic mode. Melodrama in Middle Eastern cinemas in general has always been a privileged space for negotiating with modernity, where various discourses, ethical positions, and political attitudes about tradition and modernity confront one another, and where modern subjectivities are exposed to different modes of subjectivization or objectivization of the individual. Middle Eastern cinematic melodramas act essentially as agents of modernity, even if sometimes they attempt to conjure, neutralize, or render it inoffensive.

The literature on the role of cinema in promoting and at the same time conjuring modernity in the Middle East is not abundant. But a few scattered insights refer to this connection. Yves Thoraval laconically states that in Egypt, between the 1950s and the 1970s:

c’est plutôt la vie quotidienne, les mœurs d’une société (citadine) en mutation qui retiennent l’attention des réalisateurs de films: mœurs matrimoniales, relations entre jeunes et vieux, entre filles et garçons, entre riches et pauvres, tout cela dans une optique souvent moralisatrice et teintée d’un soi-disant traditionalisme islamique.

[rather, it is everyday life and the mores of an (urban) mutating society that capture the filmmakers’ attention: matrimonial customs, the relations between youth and seniors, boys and girls, or rich and poor, all in an often moralizing perspective, with a hint of a so-called Islamic traditionalism] (my translation).

(Thoraval 1985: 234).

Thoraval argues that as of the mid twentieth century, Egyptian cinema was observing the rapid social changes resulting from urbanization, such as gender and class relations. He attributes the moral tone of the movies to a pseudo-Islamic traditionalism. I would frame this as cinema’s attempt to dispel the distress caused by the challenge to the ethical order and the hierarchy of values within society that comes with modernization. In other words, cinema operates as an agent of modernity, by
promoting products and values associated with modernization, but cathartically, it simultaneously voices the concerns of traditionalist discourses.

*Strangers* (1972, Egypt) by Saad Arafa is an extreme example of the negotiation of modernity as a value system intertwined with modernization’s bundle of rationalizing processes. *Strangers* approaches modernity in terms of a conflict between religiosity and atheism, which are clichéd, salient aspects of tradition and modernity, respectively. It does so through allegory; the film casts two of its roles as allegorical opposites: one, a character who represents the modernist, and the other a religious fundamentalist who ‘refuses’ modernity (El Khachab 2003). At the centre of the film is a young woman who hesitates between her loyalty to her atheist professor – a staunch preacher of a radical faith in scientific progress – and her close relation with her Islamist brother. She may be considered to be an allegory of Middle Eastern societies perplexed by the predicament of a choice between a modernity based on extreme westernization (associated here with atheism and scientism), and extreme conservation of tradition (associated with religiosity and righteous piety).

The film proposes a compromise between the two extremes, advocating that the middle ground is moderate, therefore safer. Throughout the film, the atheist professor suffers from spiritual and existential anguish, due to his loss of faith in meaning. In the end, he articulates this despair in a suicide note read in a voice-over. The Islamist brother is a victim of a different dilemma that plays out during the film; he believes in a fundamentalist interpretation of his faith, both austere and rigid, but is tortured by a sexual desire for his young neighbour. At the end, he experiences a breakdown after ‘succumbing’ to the temptress neighbour.

The last frames of the film follow the young woman reiterating in a monologue her perplexity and undecidenedess between the two extremes: radical atheist modernity and radical religious revivalism. The film partakes of the allegorization of characters, particularly female ones (who often stand for the nation), which occurs frequently – or is perceived to occur frequently – in Third World cultures, particularly in Middle Eastern cinemas (Williams 2013; Baron 2005). Moreover, the voice-over heavily contributes to the production of the modern female subjectivity, thus illustrating Roy Armes and Lizbeth Malkmus’ observation about the functions of voice-over in Arab cinemas. The authors argue that in these cinemas – particularly its melodramas – the voice-over expresses female feelings and desires (Armes and Malkmus 1991: 99–100). The debate over modernity in the film is not restricted to the semiotics of the narrative. It trickles down to the film’s materiality at many levels, such as that of the image’s ‘feminization’: the medium shot framing the conservative brother sobbing after losing his virginity is reminiscent of dozens of similar frames in Arab films where a young woman cries after her first intercourse outside of marriage. The ‘modern’ here is self-consciously produced through the reversal of gender roles, which challenges the patriarchal framing of the woman regretting her sexual transgression.

**THESIS II: MODERNISM IS OFTEN A SYNONYM FOR REALISM IN MIDDLE EASTERN CINEMAS.**

The underlying assumption here is that early films in the Middle East – even though part of modernization by the very fact of their existence – lacked a seminal dimension
of modernity, namely the serious engagement with social and political issues. The heroic age of Middle Eastern cinemas (roughly, the 1930s–1950s) is dominated by escapist pseudo-Hollywood aesthetics (Egyptian Lokoum movies, Iranian Film Farsi, Turkish Yesilcam). The common wisdom in the historiography of cinema in the Middle East is that the more emancipated from these aesthetics cinema becomes, the more realistic, i.e. modern, it tends to be.

However, an irony makes the case for this argument even stronger: the labels ‘new’, ‘new wave’, and ‘neorealist’ are far more widely used in the literature than the simple label ‘realism’ to depict an aesthetics that is assumed to break with non-realism or to construct a discourse on reality that critics accept as ‘realist’. I argue that this is due to the critics’ and theorists’ preoccupation with modernity subsumed under the notion of newness. In other words, the insertion of a film in the narrative of modernity as realism is better achieved when this modernity/realism is underscored as ‘new’, especially when the adjective ‘new’ implies – and at times explicitly refers to – aesthetic categories and generic labels that are Western, as in the case of ‘neorealism’ and ‘new wave’. This politics of naming includes Middle Eastern films in the Western narrative of the history of cinema as well as in the canon of Western aesthetics. The constant rewriting of post-colonial history in the Middle East results in the periodic ritual resurfacing of the concern with modernity, under the guise of the concept of newness.

The nature of this ‘politics of naming’ is exemplified by the problematic nature of any attempt to see commonalities between different Middle Eastern trends that are labelled neorealist. Iranian neorealism – within the Iranian new wave – is an eclectic blend of neorealism and expressionism, with a preponderant allegorical dimension. Egyptian cinema has known two major periods of neorealism in the 1960s and the 1980s. The first period was so labelled by film critic Guy Hennebelle, the second by film critic Samir Farid. The same school of the 1980s is simply labelled ‘new Egyptian cinema’ by Rafiq Saban (Hennebelle 1976; Farid 1992; Saban 2001).

It is fair to compare both Egyptian trends to realism inasmuch as they depict challenges experienced by the working class or marginalized populations and they do not indulge in escapist entertainment. However, these so-called neorealist films are far from any connection to expressionism, do not use post-sync, and always rely on mainstream movie stars. Furthermore, many of these films from the 1980s bear obvious affinities to Martin Scorsese’s urban realism. In other words, they depart from the assemblage that constitutes their Iranian counterparts and do not correspond in all points to the aesthetics of the European canon of neorealism.

Other Middle Eastern cinemas further problematize ‘newness’ by simply associating it with contemporariness. ‘New Turkish cinema’ is used by Asuman Suner and Gonul Donmez-Colin to refer to Turkish films that enjoyed a successful commercial release and generated millions in revenue. What seems to be the loosely common theme in that cinema is the quest for identity, a problem coextensive with modern Turkish society since its shift from an empire to a modern nation-state in 1923. It is unclear what exactly is new in this cinema other than its breaking with the aesthetics of the older entertainment cinema (Suner 2010; Donmez-Colin 2008). Nevertheless, as in the Iranian example, the cultural specificity of the cinema industry brings in an eclectic combination that does not conform to the Western canon and that is problematic when compared with other ‘new’ Middle Eastern cinemas. Donmez-
Colin thus describes a landmark film of the New Turkish Cinema: ‘The originality of Somersault in a Coffin lies in the manner it alternates neo-realism, science-fiction and fantasy’ (Donmez-Colin 2008: 181). The film does not fit either in the Iranian trend or the Italian school previously alluded to, suggesting the difficulties inherent in both importing Western aesthetic terms to the Middle Eastern context and transferring them among Middle Eastern contexts as well.

It seems appropriate to conclude a brief discussion of ‘newness’ with the cinema of the newest state in the Middle East. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, cinema has been one of the major sites of the debate and the propaganda centred on modernity. The history of Israeli cinema is a dense version of Third World cinema’s history, where the fascination, preoccupation with, and anxiety because of modernization gives way to the promotion of modernity, and then to questioning its premises.

A few years after the establishment of the state, and in tune with other cinemas in the Middle East, Israeli cinema engaged in negotiating modernity. Some of the first Israeli films dealt with the melodramatic tensions between modernity and tradition: the tension between the traditional religious neighbourhood and the secular open city, and the tension between Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. Cinema in Israel presents a special case in its relation to modernity’s bundle of rationalizing processes: the major issue of modernization in Israel is that of the building of the modern state on the basis of the Zionist nationalist ideology. A major Israeli genre, Boureka films (melodramas and comedies) – which were criticized by Ella Shohat in her history of Israeli cinema – celebrate the modernity of Israeli society by casting the non-modern, backward Mizrahi (Arab Jew) as the Other, where the Self is the modern, civilized Ashkenazi (Western Jew) (Shohat 2010). The typical melodramatic plot evolves here around the mismatch between socially accomplished, educated, modern Ashkenazis and the uneducated, non-modern Mizrahis.

Only two decades after the inception of a national cinematic production, a trend in Israeli cinema emerged in the 1970s and was dubbed Israeli new wave, which makes it contemporary with other new waves in Egypt and Iran (Kronish 1996: 230–5). However, the Israeli version of new wave seems to be more in tune with European new wave aesthetics. This may be a confirmation of what I argued earlier about the rhetorical assimilation of the histories of Middle Eastern cinemas into a Western canon, or it may signal Israel’s greater integration with Western culture than any other society in the Middle East. Nevertheless, its overarching themes and the place of ‘newness’ labels in the history of its cinema exemplify – as in the cases of Egypt, Iran, and Turkey – the centrality of the modernity paradigm in Middle Eastern cinemas.

**WORKS CITED**


