

CINEMA AND REVOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SPRING 2007

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‘Cinema and Revolution in the Middle East’ has several aims. The first is to offer students an introduction to the traditions and modes of filmmaking that have emerged in the Middle East in the past fifty years. The second is to place these traditions and modes in their political and social contexts, tracing their development as responses to three revolutionary moments — 1952 in Egypt, 1962 in Algeria, and 1979 in Iran. Students will analyze images of village poverty, colonial violence, family discord, and the subjugation of women. They will consider the possible links between these images and such state priorities as eradicating ‘backwardness’ and ‘superstition,’ pacifying the ‘social body,’ and consolidating ‘modern’ forms of subjectivity — among them, the companionate spouse, the productive worker, and the patriotic citizen. ‘Cinema and Revolution’ aims neither at comprehensiveness nor at theoretical or methodological uniformity. Given the uneven state of the literature and the limited availability of film prints, the course will serve as an exploration, at times speculative, of this perhaps least studied area of world cinema.

Evaluation:

Presentation	30%
Term paper	50%
Class participation	20%

Texts:

- Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)
- Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)
- Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998)
- Richard Tapper, ed. *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004)

Prerequisite: HIST 151

Presentation: Each student will give a fifteen-minute presentation during one of the seminars. At the beginning of each seminar, one to three students will be expected to analyze scenes from the film screened the previous Wednesday. They will have received copies of the film from the professor the week before and, upon initially viewing the film, will inform the professor of which scenes they have selected for analysis. The point of

the exercise is NOT to assess the historical accuracy of the décor or the dialogue. Rather, the professor expects students to undertake an exercise in interpretation, informed both by the readings for the week and by previous class discussions — interpretation of the filmmaker’s aims or intent as to a particular scene, within the historical context in which the film was produced. That is to say, what was the scene intended to accomplish within the broader context of the film? Further, how would audiences, at the time of the film’s production, have interpreted various facets of the scene? Immediately after the presentation, students will provide the professor with a five-page summary of their discussion.

Class participation:

- In preparation for **five** seminars of their choice (**not** including that for which they are preparing a presentation), students are expected to prepare a 500-word response to the film screened the previous Wednesday. This response need not be formally organized in essay format, but should nevertheless be well written and engage seriously with the themes of the film under scrutiny.
- Oral participation in all of the seminars is essential to adequate performance in this category, and repeated absences from class will lead to a failing grade in the course as a whole. Please consult the instructor should you have to miss classes for health or family reasons. Lateness and poor preparation for class will be heavily penalized.

Term paper:

- This is a 15-page analysis of a Middle Eastern film **not** screened during the course. Students may choose from among the films on reserve in the library’s media collection (listed at the end of this syllabus), or may draw upon the instructor’s extensive library of films. This choice should be made in consultation with the instructor by the beginning of February. Generally speaking, in the paper, the instructor expects the sort of detailed, scene-by-scene analysis undertaken in the seminars, with a particular eye to ‘reading’ the film in the particular historical context within which it was created and initially viewed.
- Term papers are evaluated for clarity, organization, insight, and originality. Faulty grammar, spelling, and syntax reduce clarity, and will thus reduce your grade. Grades are final and not subject to negotiation. Term papers submitted after the deadline receive a penalty of ten percent for the first day late; for each additional day late, a further five percent will be deducted. The instructor will not accept submissions beyond a week from the given deadline. Extensions of deadlines will only be granted in the event of a documented health or family crisis.

Course regulations:

- I will not tolerate cheating or plagiarism. These are extremely serious academic offences. If you are having trouble with a concept or assignment, meet with the instructor well before the relevant deadlines. Keep in mind that poor, but legitimate, performance in a given assignment is far preferable to jeopardizing your academic career through fraud.

- All students in this class are to read and understand University policies on plagiarism and academic honesty. Ignorance of such policies is no excuse for violations. In student papers, it is essential that there be correct attribution of authorities from which facts and opinions have been derived.

Term schedule:

[The film descriptions below were edited together from various promotional materials.]

10 January screening of *Life or Death* (Egypt, 1954, 90 minutes)

Life or Death is considered the masterpiece of Kamal al-Sheikh, the Hitchcock of the Egyptian screen. After a young girl buys medicine for her father, the pharmacist discovers he has accidentally given her poison. In a race against death, city agencies are mobilized to track the girl down before her father takes the medicine. Kamal tries here, amidst genuine suspense, to suggest a positive symbiosis between citizen and state. The film marks the first extensive use of location shooting with a rare, realistic look at Cairo in the 1950s.

Viola Shafik, "The History of Arab Cinema," *Arab Cinema*, 9-45.

17 January discussion of *Life or Death*
 screening of *The Nightingale's Prayer* (Egypt, 1959, 126 minutes)
 [PN 1997 N5224 2004]

Based on the novel by the great Egyptian novelist, Taha Hussein, *The Nightingale's Prayer* stars the first lady of the Arab silver screen, Faten Hamama. This compelling tale of love and betrayal, set in the upper Egyptian countryside, follows the story of Amna (Hamama) as she plots her revenge on the engineer (Ahmed Mazhar) who destroyed her family's honor. A gripping portrait of a courageous young woman's rebellion against tradition and poverty, this film is an undiscovered masterpiece of world cinema.

Roy Armes, "The Social, Cultural, and Economic Context," *Third World Film Making and the West*, 5-49.

24 January discussion of *The Nightingale's Prayer*
 screening of *I Am Free* (Egypt, 110 minutes)

Part of Salah Abu Seif's women's empowerment trilogy, this classic film is about a girl who takes her destiny into her own hands in spite of a rigid and conservative society. A bold film with profound political and social insights. Superbly acted by Lubna Abdel Aziz.

Armes, "Theory and Practice of Third World Film Making," *Third World Film Making and the West*, 51-100.

31 January discussion of *I Am Free*
screening of *The Land* (Egypt, 1969, 130 minutes)
[PN 1997 A317 1969]

Youssef Chahine's classic film, adapted from Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's well-known novel of the same name, was eight years in the making. Chronicling a small peasant village's struggles against the careless inroads of the large local landowner, *The Land* shows why political oppression does not necessarily lead to a sense of solidarity among the disinherited. This contemplative, epic film about feudalism in rural regions was named the best Egyptian film ever made in a recent poll of Egyptian film critics.

Armes, "Youssef Chahine," *Third World Film Making and the West*, 243-254.

7 February discussion of *The Land*
screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (Italy/Algeria)
[PN 1997 B347 1993]

Shot documentary style, in grainy, newsreel quality *The Battle of Algiers* is a powerful, often shocking cinematic experience. The film portrays the 1954-1962 Franco-Algerian conflict. Specifically, *The Battle of Algiers* recreates the pivotal events that took place in the city of Algiers, where, in an attempt to end French colonialism, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) began a war of liberation, using terrorism. In response to the escalating violence in Algiers, the French government sent in paratroopers to crush the uprising with whatever force necessary.

Roy Armes, "Beginnings in the 1960s," *Postcolonial Images*, 15-22.

14 February discussion of *The Battle of Algiers*
screening of *The Silences of the Palace* (Tunisia)
[PN 1997 S5452 1995]

Alia, the protagonist of Moufida Tlati's debut film, is born to serve men. Her mother is a servant in the palace of the Bey, dispensing food, and her body, to the princes of Tunisia. In post-colonial Tunisia, Alia looks back at her childhood in the palace and must come to terms with the meaning of her mother's life and the tradition of bondage she is attempting to escape. Director Moufida Tlatli powerfully conveys the opulent and oppressive atmosphere of the palace, and the resilience of its servants: the women are sensual, strong, and full of humour, despite their servitude. Tlatli's quietly observant eye records the beauty, the decadence, and the horror of this stifling, now vanished world.

Armes, "The 1990s" and "A New Future Begins: *Silences of the Palace*," *Postcolonial Images*, 55-73 and 159-168.

21 February discussion of *The Silences of the Palace*
 screening of *Living in Paradise* (France/Algeria)
 [PN 1997 V567 2000z]

Set in France in 1961-1962 during the Algerian War, *Living in Paradise* is a thought-provoking examination of the lives of North African immigrants trying to find a place in the social system of Western Europe. The film focuses on Lakhdar, an immigrant construction worker living in the Nanterre shantytown. When he can no longer bear living without his wife and children whom he has left in southern Algeria, he brings them to live with him in France. Once there, Lakhdar's relationship with his wife deteriorates as she joins with other immigrants in a political movement to resist French oppression, while he increasingly begins to identify with French attitudes and lifestyles.

Shafik, "Artistic Roots of Arab Cinema," *Arab Cinema*, 47-120.

28 February discussion of *Living in Paradise*
 screening of *The Apple* (Iran)

The Apple is the first feature by Samira Makhmalbaf, the 17 year-old daughter of the Iranian filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Based on a true incident and using the family involved, the film tells a bizarre but engaging story. A father imprisons his two children in his home for 11 years. By the time neighbors become aware of the fact and inform the Welfare Ministry to come and help, the children cannot talk and walk like girls their own age. The Ministry ultimately returns the children to their father on the condition that he does not imprison them again, but the father locks them in the house nonetheless. A social worker from the Ministry locks the father in the house, to enable to take the children to play in the streets. Once free themselves, the girls struggle to liberate their father. *The Apple* won the Sutherland Trophy for best first feature at the London Film Festival.

Richard Tapper volume chapters: Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update," 26-65; Agnes Devictor, "Classic Tools, Original Goals: Cinema and Public Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-97)," 66-76; and Hamid Reza Sadr, "Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When we were Children," 227-237.

7 March discussion of *The Apple*
 screening of *The Circle* (Iran)
 [PN 1997 D394 2001]

A woman gives birth to a baby girl. Little does she know, but she and her daughter are already unwanted. Three women are released from prison and their need for money leads them to take desperate measures. An unmarried woman seeking an abortion is rejected from her father's house by the violent threats of her brothers. Their crimes are vague, their guilt or innocence unimportant. Their paths cross, the suspense of their intrigues heightens. Their plights are often too tragically similar. Their world is one of constant

surveillance, bureaucracy and age-old inequalities. But this stifling world cannot extinguish the spirit, strength and courage of the circle of women.

Tapper chapter: Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema Since 1979," 215-226.

14 March discussion of *The Circle*
 screening of *The Day I Became A Woman* (Iran)

Director Marziyeh Meshkini's film relates the stories of three women and three generations. Meshkini's film may be read as a tribute to the courage of women, in Iran and the entire world, and the freedoms that must be won through struggle. Meshkini begins with the story of Hava, a young girl who awakes on the morning of her ninth birthday to find that her grandmother has forbidden her to play outside with her friend Hassan. In the story that follows, we find Ahoo, a woman we may perhaps imagine as Hava years later, in a bicycle race with dozens of other women. Her husband, chasing her on horseback, demands that she dismount and return with him or be divorced. Meshkini leaves us with the story of Hooraa, an old woman who arrives in town with enough money to purchase every possession she has been denied her whole life, with a string tied to each of her fingers to remind her of what to buy.

Tapper chapter: Azadeh Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema," 86-108.

21 March discussion of *The Day I Became A Woman*
 screening of *Secret Ballot* (Iran)
 [PN 1997.2 S44 2002]

Award winner at five international film festivals, writer/director Babak Payami's *Secret Ballot* is a satirical comedy that humorously sheds light on the universal discrepancies of the voting process and gender differences. It's election day on a remote island off the coast of Iran and a ballot box is parachuted to shore. An unnamed soldier is assigned to escort a female bureaucrat to gather votes. Together, they embark on a chaotic journey, turning the island upside down desperately seeking anyone's vote. There is more to the secret ballot than the two could ever imagine!

Tapper chapters: Ali Reza Haghighi, "Politics and Cinema in Post-revolutionary Iran: An Uneasy Relationship," 109-116; and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "Location (Physical Space) and Cultural Identity in Iranian Films," 200-214.

28 March discussion of *Secret Ballot*

4 April submit paper electronically to pdsedra@sfu.ca

Middle Eastern features on reserve:

- *Crimson gold* / Mikado Film and Lumen Films; produced, edited and directed by Jafar Panahi (Iran) [Media Coll 4hr res.dvd -- PN1997.2 T345 2004]
- *Dreams of Hind and Camilia* / producer, Husayn al-Qalla; director, Muḥammad Khan (Egypt) [Media Coll 4hr res.video -- PN1997 D74 1989]
- *Kippur* / MP Productions; produced by Amos Gitai (Israel) [Media Coll 4hr res. dvd -- PN1997 K5636 2001]
- *Nasser 56* / a film by Mohamed Fadel (Egypt) [Media Coll 4hr res.video -- PN1997 N37 1996]
- *Omar Gatlato = Omar it-kills-him* / O.N.C.I.C. presents (Algeria) [Media Coll 4hr res.video -- PN1997 O422 1976]
- *Satin rouge* / a film by Raja Amari; ADR Productions (Tunisia) [Media Coll 4hr res.dvd -- PN1997.2 S38 2003]
- *Waqā' i' sanawat al-djamr = Chronicle of the smoldering years* / O.N.C.I.C. presents (Algeria) [Media Coll 4hr res.video -- PN 1997 W3626 1990z]
- *West Beirut = West Beyrouth* / La Sept ARTE ; 3B Productions, Ciné Libre (Lebanon) [Media Coll 4hr res.video -- PN1997 W446 2001]