



## Loneliness/Unity | Essay by Irit Neidhardt

Many posters of Arab arthouse films of the past ten years show someone from behind or leaving, sometimes looking away. In rare cases where a character is looking at the camera there is still a distance, be it created by a curtain or by the person standing far afield. When the films show in Europe, the programmers usually do not use these posters. They look for a film still with the protagonist making eye contact with the viewer as is custom for the promotion of Western movies. As a distributor of several of these films, I first found this disturbing. Don't programmers see that the person needs protection? At the same time, didn't the director make the film to connect with the world? Looking at older Arab film-posters, it appears that protagonists of films dealing with loneliness are less hidden. What role does loneliness play in Arab cinema, and how did it change over time?

Loneliness, the mental pain of being isolated, always relates to the social. It seems to be specific to the Arabic language, though, that the word for loneliness, *wehda*, also means unity. For example, in English, French, or German, loneliness and unity are antipodes. Painful isolation has been integral to Arab cinema since its inception. Already the scenarios by Tunisian Haydée Samama Chikly Tamzali for the short fiction *Zohra* (1922, Albert Samama Chikly) and the feature *Ain al-Ghazal* (*La Fille de Carthage*, 1924, Albert Samama Chikly), the first films made entirely with an Arab and African cast and crew, deal with loneliness. *Ain al-Ghazal* critiques, as quite common among the colonized elites at that time, arranged marriages. Also, the protagonists of *The White Rose* (*al-Warda al-Bayda*, EG 1933, Mohamed Karim), the first Egyptian sound movie, have to cope with loneliness as due to class and tradition rules, the two lovers cannot wed. The films explicitly challenge the tradition and suggest breaking this rule. Though today *The White Rose* is remembered rather for its music, it was praised for its nationalism when it opened in Egyptian cinemas in 1933. High-ranking politicians thanked Mohamad Karim for his "nationalistic and futuristic project" and his "patriotic film".

Until well into the 1990s, loneliness in Arab cinemas was explored in relation to society. That is in fundamental contrast to Western cinema. Especially in the popular colonial genres of western and adventure films, the hero is a lonesome man - and more recently sometimes a woman - who is on a mission that s/he will naturally fulfill alone. Imperial documentary films usually depicted the colonized as anonymous groups whose supposed nature is explained by an omniscient male voice-over. It is in resistance to the fictionalization of "the Arab" in the Western movies, which were also shown in the colonies, that the early Arab films after the independence were committed to the genre of realism. The new nation-states employed cinema to create national identity and unity at home and present the country, or the entire Arab nation, as it allegedly really was abroad. The best known of those films is certainly *The Battle of Algiers* (DZ 1966, Gillo Pontecorvo), which the Algerian government had commissioned. The hero of the documentary-style fiction is, next to the uprising's leader Ali la Pointe, the now united Algerian collective. At home, nation-building films ultimately lost wider credibility after the defeat of 1967. A new generation of filmmakers started laying their fingers into their societies' wounds and introduced the individual to the Arab screen.

Mohamad Malas shot two of his early short films in his hometown Quneitra on the Syrian Golan Heights, which he had left as a child. The town was occupied by the Israeli army in 1967 and liberated in the 1973 war. Before the Israeli military finally withdrew, it destroyed the city, rendering it inhabitable. In *Quneitra 74* (1974, 20 min), a film with barely any dialogue, a fictitious character dissolves away from a gathering of former citizens that visit the town for the first time after Syria regained its control. The film's character takes the viewers to the places that shaped her life. While the atmosphere of *Quneitra 74* is rather ghostly, *The Memory* (*al-Zakira*, 1975, 13 min) is concrete, albeit surreal. It portrays 70-year-old Wedad Nassif, one of the roughly dozen individuals who remained in Quneitra during the occupation. She decided to stay after its destruction. While the Syrian government had declared the killed city as a national memorial, Malas' films breathe soul into it by conveying an idea of what the loss of Quneitra means to its inhabitants.

*Fertile Memory* (*al-Zakira al-Khasba*, 1980, 99 min) by Michel Khleifi is the first film that came out of occupied Palestine. It intimately portrays two women: Roumia Farah Hatoum, an elderly widow of working-class background from Nazareth, and the much younger divorced writer Sahar Khalifa in Ramallah. *Fertile Memory* opposes the films that the PLO produced in exile, which were mainly counter-media, as well as the Western depictions of Palestine. Khleifi asked who Palestinians were and dug into his society's complexity and contradictions. "This is how I decided to make a film for - not about - the women of Palestine, and through them, a film for Palestine".

Also, Nouri Bouzid intertwines individual and collective tabooed traumas in *Man of Ashes* (*Rih al-Sad*, 1986, 109 min). Set against the preparations of his arranged marriage, Hachemi is haunted by the memories of his sexual abuse during childhood. Questioning his manhood, he revisits three father figures, the biological father, his woodcarver-instructor, who is his abuser, and the owner of the carpenter's workshop, Mr. Levy. The latter's grandson was Hachemi's close childhood friend and left the country, like most Tunisian Jews, after independence. In Bouzid's definition, "admitting the defeat, the new realism proceeds to expose it and make the awareness of its causes and roots a point of departure". Exploring one's society through its subjects demanded another cinematography. Influenced by neo-realism and *cinéma-vérité*, the proponents of the new Arab cinema broke with hitherto cinematic conventions. They pushed and blurred the borders of documentary and fiction and experimented with narrative forms.

In the more recent body of Arab alternative films, loneliness is one of the dominant themes. It is barely related to society anymore. The successive domination of liberal and neoliberal ideology in Arab countries and the according competition and isolation, in addition to authoritarian (military) rule, extensively destroyed social fabrics. The new generation of directors admits its loneliness and exposes the pain. *The Mice Room* (*Oudet el-Feran*, 2013, 85 min) is a rare example of a collective work by six filmmakers from Alexandria who interweave six fictional stories about cross-generational loneliness in their city. They began forming this calm kaleidoscope before the mass uprisings in 2011 as a step to create togetherness. The two disparate strangers in Sherif Elbendary's *Dry Hot Summers* (*Har .. Caf .. Sayfan*, 2015, 30 min) find a moment of relief from their solitude when they, by accident, meet in a taxi and end up posing as a couple for a wedding picture

before their paths separate again. In Mohamed Sabbah's *Chronic* ('A Shafir, 2017, 89 min), photographer Omar tries to handle the emotional burden of the constant loss he is confronted with in Beirut, a city faced with permanent emigration and political violence. People cue in front of Omar's studio to share their stories of loss and pain during the photo sessions. While his clients prepare for the shootings, the photographer secretly films them with an observation camera.

In the light of pulverized societies, the films stress the need for human encounter. By exposing pain with empathy and love for their characters, the directors create an encouraging warmth to turn towards each other again.

<sup>1</sup> \_

Armbrust, Walter (1996). *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/Melbourne/New York, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>

Kleifi, Michel (2006): *From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression*. In: Hamid Dabashi: *Dreams of a Nation. On Palestinian Cinema*. Verso, London/New York, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Nouri Bouzid as quoted in Bahmad, Jamal (2013): *Naked Nation: On Nouri Bouzid's Man of Ashes (1986)*, in: Bisschoff, Lizelle and David Murphy: *Africa's Lost Classics. New Histories of African Cinema*. Routledge, London, p. 75.

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