



NEW QUEER ARAB CINEMA: QUEERING THE ARAB WORLD

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In the twenty-first century there has been a substantial increase in the attention given to the “Queer Arab World,” to the challenge of heteronormative and binary discourses, and to the condition of queer individuals in Arabic-speaking countries.¹ This is evidenced by the increase of LGBT and queer activism in the region, even if much of it is dominated by gay cis men seen, for example, in the leadership of Beirut Pride (although, organizations that consciously encourage intersectionality, such as Meem in Lebanon and al-Qaws in Palestine, also exist).² This increased representation of queer folks is also reflected in Arab arts and culture, as bands like *Mashrou’ Leila* sing more openly about queer issues, queer magazines like *My Kali* are launched, and Instagram pages like *@artqueerhabibi* gain traction. Arab cinema follows this trend as well, despite the fact that it already has a historical precedent of queer representation,

1 In this piece, I focus on Arabic language cinema, which is why I am referring to Arabic-speaking countries. This does not discount the ethnic and language diversity that exists in Arabic-speaking countries, which should also be explored in NQAC.

2 Al-Ali, Nadje & Ghiwa Sayegh (2019). ‘Feminist and Queer Perspectives on West Asia’, in *Queer Asia* (eds. Jonathan Daniel Luther & Jennifer Ung Loh). London & New York: Zed Books, 247.

especially in Egypt.³ I argue, however, that there is a new wave of queer cinema in Arabic-speaking countries that constitutes an identifiable film movement which I will call “New Queer Arab Cinema” or NQAC. I also argue that New Queer Arab Cinema constitutes a way to “queer the region,” or to rupture the hegemonic cultural discourses of the region. NQAC is an act of resistance; firstly, because it constitutes Fifth Cinema; secondly, because it embodies the idea of the politics of the ordinary; and, thirdly, because its intersectionality answers many usual critiques made to the Arab queer community.

What is New Queer Arab Cinema?

NQAC is a movement defined by queer self-representation on screen with films whose content illustrates the intricacies of queer lives in the region, defying traditional cinematic conventions and societal taboos while fulfilling the four goals of Fifth Cinema. NQAC is grounded in the historical precedent of queer representation in Egyptian cinema.⁴ Despite the existence of censorship laws regarding queer representation on Egyptian screens, some filmmakers (most notably Youssef Chahine, Niazi Mustafa, and Salah Abu Seif)⁵ still featured queer characters in their movies in the golden days of Egyptian cinema. However, this mostly constituted a reflection of how Egyptian societies viewed queer individuals rather than self-representation, which is why these characters were often depicted as deviant or traitors, if they were men, or as comic or in a transitory phase, if they were women.⁶

3 Habib, Samar. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*. Routledge, 2007.

4 Habib, Samar. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*. Routledge, 2007.

5 *Ibid*, 114.

6 *Ibid*, chapter 6.

In more recent years, self-identified Arab queer directors, at least in the “queer-theory set of mind”⁷ such as Anthony Chidiac,⁸ Selim Mourad,⁹ Sam Abbas,¹⁰ Abdallah Taia,¹¹ or Maysaloun Hamoud¹² have used cinema as a means to self-represent their communities. This has given voices to the marginalized in the lesbian and gay communities, as well as the trans community, like in *The Great Safae*,¹³ which is a community that historically has been much less represented. Additionally, self-representation has encouraged the defiance of cinematic conventions; for example, Mourad portrays nudity within a family context in his film *This Little Father Obsession*. These transgressions mirror, in many ways, the wave of transgressive queer American cinema in the early 1990s, which was called “New Queer Cinema” by film theorist Ruby Rich,¹⁴ which is why I refer to these more recent productions as “New Queer Arab Cinema” or NQAC. This wave of New Queer Arab Cinema is not only observable in on-screen depictions, but also in the modes of screenings and productions: in 2018, Tunisia hosted the first edition of the queer film festival Mawjoudin, and Sam Abbas launched ArabQ, a production house dedicated to queer Arab and Muslim narratives in the same year. In addition to full-length movies, there has also been an increasing number of NQAC short films, many of them based on real-life, such as *The Art of Sin* (2020) by Ibrahim Mursal,¹⁵ *The Last Paradise*

7 Elfadl, Murtada. “Maysaloun Hamoud on Tackling Taboos, Cinematic Influences, and Her Homage to ‘Thelma and Louise’ - Blog.” *The Film Experience*, 4 Jan. 2018, <http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2018/1/4/maysaloun-hamoud-on-tackling-taboos-cinematic-influences-and.html>.

8 Chidiac, Anthony, director. *Room For A Man*. Carole Abboud for c.cam production, 2017.

9 Mourad, Selim, director. *This Little Father Obsession*. 2016.

10 Abbas, Sam, director. *The Wedding*. ArabQ Films, 2018.

11 Taia, Abdallah, director. *Salvation Army*. Les films de Pierre et Les Films Pelléas; Rita Productions, 2013.

12 Hamoud, Maysaloun, director. *In Between*. Alma Cinema, 2016.

13 Maroufi, Randa, director. *The Great Safae*. Le Fresnoy, 2014.

14 Aaron, Michele. *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 3.

15 Mursal, Ibrahim, director. *The Art of Sin*. Skagerak Film, 2020.

(2019) by Sido Lansari,¹⁶ *Half a Life* (2014) by Tamara Shogaolu,¹⁷ and *The Great Safae* (2014) by Randa Maroufi. NQAC is also increasingly present on online platforms: in 2021, the Tiohtià:ke (Montreal) based collective Dhakira launched the first edition of the North African Queer Film Festival, and the SWANA online streaming service Shasha released a queer cinema program in 2021.

NQAC as Fifth Cinema

An additional way to think about NQAC, what it is, and what it entails is through the lens of Fifth Cinema. Cinema theorists of the late twentieth century used First, Second, and Third Cinemas as separate categories distinguished by different narratives and modes of production and distribution. According to this categorization, First Cinema constitutes classical, hegemonic cinema, or cinema that embraces the model imposed by the Hollywood film industry;¹⁸ Second Cinema is Arthouse Cinema, or cinema that conveys text that is resistant to the dominant socio-cultural norms but still expresses the aspirations of the middle-classes or petit bourgeoisie;¹⁹ and, Third Cinema is anti-colonial in nature and contributes to the development of radical consciousnesses, which includes, for example, guerilla cinema;²⁰ Fourth Cinema is a relatively new category developed by Barry Barclay designating cinema made by indigenous peoples.²¹ Fifth Cinema, as argued by Ricardo Peach, encompasses movies that challenge internal colonization, or the “decolonisation of dominating and discriminatory representations that come from within a society of origin or a society lived in by choice.”²² According to this definition, internal colonization

16 Lansari, Sido, director. *The Last Paradise*. 2019.

17 Shogaolu, Tamara, director. *Half a Life*. 2014.

18 Peach, Ricardo. *Queer Cinema as a Fifth Cinema in South Africa and Australia*. 2005.

19 Peach, 333.

20 Ibid, 336

21 Ibid, 341

22 Ibid, 343.

includes the colonization of queer individuals by hetero-dominant ideologies and discourses; the colonization of women, men, and transgender people by patriarchal ideologies; and, the colonization of immigrant lives by nationalist ideas.²³ He describes the attempt of Queer Cinema as Fifth Cinema to decolonize 'internal' cultural oppressions through four aspects: the countering of dominant and oppressive images through more diverse representation; the active attempt to create social change through representation, exhibition, and reception; the subversion of heterosexist social paradigms; and the use of underground and clandestine production.²⁴ He also argues that Fifth Cinema, and Queer Cinema as part of Fifth Cinema, can cross into other film categories and be critical of both the oppression of queer people as well as colonial oppression. Helen Hok-Sze Leung argues for the necessity of such intersection, specifically for the intersection between Queer Cinema and Third Cinema and for the necessity of a more radical queer cinema that would "address the complex relationships between late capitalism and sexuality,"²⁵ as many queer films entertain queer narratives while perpetuating other dominant societal norms and discourses.

The criteria of the Fifth Cinema framework helps show how films from Arabic-speaking countries that represent queer lives in the twenty-first century constitute a distinct cinematic movement of Queer Arab films, NQAC. NQAC counters dominant and oppressive images by bringing about more diverse representation. For example, *In Between* presents the perspective of a lesbian, Christian 48-Palestinian living in Tel-Aviv, an identity that is generally erased from discourse about Palestine and Israel. NQAC also seeks to bring social change through other means than just representation, as the film festival Mawjoudin and the production group ArabQ bring change through queer exhibitions, workshops, distribution, and reception strategies. The underground

23 Ibid, 344.

24 Ibid, 348.

25 Aaron, 157.

aspect of distribution mentioned by Peach is also present in NQAC. Due to existing censorship laws and bans, which in some countries date back to as early as the 70s,²⁶ NQAC has had to innovate ways to reach its targeted populations. One way Sam Abbas did so for his movie *The Wedding*, in which he relays the life of a secretly gay Egyptian-American man living in New York, was through the conduction of secret screenings throughout the region, as well as launching it online.²⁷ Other platforms such as the North African Queer Film Festival and Shasha distribute queer films online, with some occasional discrete screenings in the region. Thus, NQAC is a contemporary film movement that fits the framework of Fifth Cinema, allows queer self-representation on screen, shows the intricacies of queer lives in the region, and defies traditional cinematic conventions and societal taboos.

NQAC and the Politics of the Ordinary

NQAC is challenging rigid boundaries and queering the region as it embodies Jason Richie's idea of the politics of the ordinary. Richie argues for the importance of queer inquiry learning from the privacy of the quotidian and of the ordinary.²⁸ He argues that activists and theorists often use queer theories, such as theories of homonormativity and homonationalism in a one-dimensional and hegemonic way, erasing the specificities of socio-historical contexts of different situations. He draws from Kathleen Stewart's thoughts on the impact of the ordinary on the subject as a capacity to affect and be affected²⁹ and argues that observing the ordinary lives of queer individuals in their specific

26 Habib.

27 Weaver, Hilary. "The Filmmaker Screening His L.G.B.T.Q. Movie Across the Middle East." *Vanity Fair*, *Vanity Fair*, 8 Nov. 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/11/secret-screenings-of-lgbtq-movie-the-wedding>.

28 Richie, Jason (2014), 'Pinkwashing, Homonationalism, and Israel–Palestine: The Conceits of Queer Theory and the Politics of the Ordinary', *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, vol. 47, no. 3, 620.

29 Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press, 2007.

contexts is more relevant to understand their everyday realities of queerness (for example, he argues that the life of a queer Palestinian cannot be understood outside the specific context of Israeli sovereignty and violence).³⁰ An approach he offers to understand queerness in Palestine is through the metaphor of the checkpoint, as both a physical and symbolic way in which Israeli sovereignty penetrates intimate spaces of everyday life of queer Palestinian individuals.

NQAC reflects Richie's idea about the importance of the politics of the ordinary to understand queer narratives in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, these films do not pretend to create theories that explain all the complexities of queerness in an Arab context, but rather present one (or a few) queer narratives that are rooted in a specific social, economic, political, and historical context. For example, in *The Art of Sin*, Ibrahim Mursal explores what it means to be queer as an artist and as a political refugee from Sudan. Similarly, in *This Little Father Obsession*, Mourad explores queerness in a context of Christianity, economic uncertainty, and infertility. These stories allow audiences to understand particular aspects of queer Arab lives without presenting homogenous and essentializing narratives. Additionally, these narratives are more accessible to queer people in the region than theory, which can sometimes be overly complicated. There are still flaws within NQAC today, as the voices of queer women and non-binary people seem to be less represented, but the more films are produced, the more contexts are explored.

Activists and theorists sometimes homogenize stories and explain situations using categorizations and theories that become "emptied of specific meaning."³¹ Although the work of queer activists and theorists in Arabic-speaking countries is crucial as they create queer spaces and work to better queer lives in the region, NQAC is an important complement to their work. Indeed, it presents

30 Richie, 622.

31 Richie, 621.

the ordinary of queer lives beyond only activism or oppression, and presents alternative narratives to what is understood as the homogenous way to live queer lives in the region. It complexifies the understanding of what being queer in the region means, both for people within it who might only understand it as a result of Western influences or as a deviance, and for people outside the region, who might, for example, have an Islamophobic understanding of the issue that links all queer oppression in the region to Islam. It also creates an imaginative, creative space where queer narratives can be explored beyond activism.

NQAC and Intersectionality

An additional way NQAC “queers” the Arabic-speaking region is through depictions of intersectionality that challenge many of the usual critiques made to the queer community and to queer representation. Intersectionality is especially important in queer spaces of the region as most of these spaces are dominated by one narrative, the narrative of privileged queer individuals, most notably Arab (the dominant ethnicity), gay, cis, upper or middle-class men. Because of the dominance of such a narrative and the lack of intersectional political awareness, LGBT movements sometimes reproduce oppressions.³² An example of this can be seen in how organizers of the Beirut Pride furthered a politics of respectability for middle-class, Lebanese, gay men at the expense of more marginalized queer communities in Lebanon.³³ Specifically, they thanked the police, erasing the histories of detention and torture of queer people, especially trans women, by the Lebanese police; and stressed the importance of Lebanese citizenship, ignoring the realities of queer immigrants and refugees in the country.

32 Smith, Malinda, and Fatima Jaffer. *Beyond the Queer Alphabet: Conversations on Gender, Sexuality and Intersectionality*. 2012, 19.

33 Al Ali, 257.

NQAC creates spaces where alternative, marginalized narratives can express themselves and where the complexity and diversity of queer identities can be explored. Because of the length of movies, filmmakers have the space to explore how questions of class, sexuality, gender, religion, and ethnicity work hand in hand. Each movie can be a space where a different identity is considered and different intersections are depicted, including the ones that are not usually portrayed. For example, in *Salvation Army*, Abdellah Taia explores what it means to be a gay man living in poverty in Morocco, shifting the camera away from the usually talked about wealthy queer Arabs. In *In Between*, Hamoud sheds light on the lives of 48-Palestinians, an identity that is often ignored in discourse regarding Palestine and Israel, and the specificities of the life of a queer Palestinian Christian woman in Israel who also breaks the norms of Palestinian society by openly drinking and consuming drugs. The intersectionality of NQAC can also be a helpful parameter in determining what can be included in the movement. For example, I would argue that movies like Nadine Labaki's *Caramel*,³⁴ in which a queer character (Rima) exists in the sub-text but without any backstory regarding the specificities of her queer identity cannot be considered a part of NQAC, because of its lack of contextualization and intersectionality. However, it is also important to recognize that NQAC has, so far, favored certain kinds of queer narratives (for example, gay Christian men or young urban lesbians) at the expense of other identities, which calls for a more thorough effort at displaying complex queer characters.

Challenging anti-queer rhetoric through NQAC

The intersectionality of queer characters in NQAC also constitutes a strong argument against usual critiques of queer Arabic-speaking communities, either from within Arabic-speaking countries or from outside of them. One common critique of queer communities from within the region is that queerness in

34 Labaki, Nadine, director. *Caramel*. EuropaCorp, 2008.

the region (like feminism) is a result of Western influence. For example, the movie *The Yacoubian Building*³⁵ embodies this idea as Hatim's homosexuality is partially explained by the fact that his mother is French and that he works for a French language newspaper. A way that NQAC counters this argument is by rooting its queer characters in regional culture. For example, in *In Between*, Salma, who is a lesbian, mixes Arab songs as part of her work as a DJ, and criticizes Israel throughout the movie, which anchors her character in the local context and culture proving that she is not an "agent of the West." Another reason why NQAC is powerful is that it allows queer individuals in Arabic-speaking countries to represent themselves as they perceive themselves to be. This is important as other movies present queer narratives through a heteronormative gaze. For example, the French-Tunisian director Abdellatif Kechiche represents young lesbians in an over-sexualized way in his movie *Blue Is the Warmest Color*.³⁶ NQAC can also be a platform where directors can respond to practices that are used to diminish the specificities of being queer in an Arab context, such as pinkwashing. *In Between* responds to pinkwashing as Hamoud discusses what it means to be a queer 48-Palestinian without glorifying Israel as a "safe haven" for Arab queer individuals, but rather presenting a critique of Israel and the specific discriminations that queer Palestinians in Israel face. Because it constitutes an attempt to contextualize and complexify queer Arab identities in a more intersectional way, while still anchoring them in local cultures, NQAC is queering the region.

Conclusion

The growing film movement of NQAC in the Arabic-speaking region is challenging traditional cinematic conventions and societal taboos, displaying the complexities of queer lives in the region through self-representation, and beautifully exemplifying Fifth Cinema. Thus, it constitutes a mode of "queering"

35 Hamed, Marwan, director. *The Yacoubian Building*. Good News Group, 2006.

36 Kechiche, Abdellatif, director. *Blue Is The Warmest Color*. Wild Bunch, 2013.

Arabic-speaking countries as it creates a space where heteronormative and binary discourses are challenged and queer individuals represent themselves as they perceive themselves through depictions of everyday queer lives that embody the politics of the ordinary. Its intersectionality also responds to common critiques made to queer Arabs. However, it is important to note that there is diversity within movies that constitute New Arab Queer Cinema: some are produced by queer directors while others are made by allied advocates; some still present queer characters as not-central to their narratives; some focus more on subverting the norms of existing cinema; and, some have a more explicitly intersectional focus than others. Additionally, most of NQAC seems to be dominated by male directors, which fits the broader dominance of men in film industries. However, the more queer Arab movies are produced, the more diverse narratives and perspectives are talked about. NQAC movies as well as movies that do not fit the NQAC framework but feature queer characters, also differ in the reactions they trigger, both within the region and outside of it. For example, *Much Loved*³⁷ was mostly rejected by the general Moroccan public; it was banned from theaters and actresses received death threats,³⁸ but it was well received in the “Western world” as it was screened in Cannes and the Toronto International Film Festival. Other films, such as *In Between*, triggered mixed feelings: it was rejected by some Palestinians who opposed the “inauthentic” depiction of Palestinian women in the film (which earned the director a *fatwa*)³⁹ and by some Israelis who rejected the criticism of Israel present in the movie. However, it was also praised by other Palestinians who celebrated the complexification of what it means to be Palestinian, as well as by some Western audiences (it won awards at the Toronto, San Sebastian, and

37 Ayouch, Nabil, director. *Much Loved*. Pyramide Distribution, 2016.

38 Alami, Aida. “Moroccan Film About Prostitution Creates Uproar.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 3 June 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/arts/international/moroccan-film-about-prostitution-creates-uproar.html>.

39 Iqbal, Nosheen. “How Sex, Drugs and Politics Earned *In Between*’s Director a *Fatwa*.” *The Guardian*, *Guardian News and Media*, 28 Sept. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/28/maysaloun-hamoud-female-director-israel-palestine>

Cannes film festivals).⁴⁰ Most NQAC movies seem to trigger strong reactions from various audiences and create spaces for discussion and debate which, in some contexts, did not exist before. I believe that the creation of such spaces is a revolutionary act in and of itself. It is also important to recognize the significance of the work done by queer scholars and activists in the region and that there is diversity within these groups, especially in organizations that are already focused on intersectional work. NQAC is, therefore, a necessary complement to the important work of these organizations, rather than a replacement.

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40 Ibid.

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