

CERAW
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Media in general, and especially feature films, have the power to create places. Mass media and the cinema supply major parts of society with information on current affairs and ideas about foreign places. It is within this context that the interdisciplinary network on 'Cinema and the Middle East' met from 11-12 October 2000 at the Institute of Geography at the University of Mainz. The conference was jointly organized by Prof. Dr Anton Escher and Prof. Dr Günter Meyer, both of the Centre for Research on the Arab World (CERAW).

Attended by many scholars and experts, the conference provided an excellent opportunity for professionals from research, industry, academia and related government sectors to discuss the latest developments in Middle Eastern cinema. The conference participants tried to focus on a very broad variety of topics related to the many aspects of film production in countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East. The questions ranged from those concerning production conditions and the cinematic depiction of everyday life, to the analysis of economic structures and socio-economic interconnections of the film industry in parts of the Middle East, Northern Africa and Asia.

Several panels concentrated on 'National Cinemas' of the following countries: Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and India. Within these panels, several papers were presented. Randolph Galla (Amman) spoke about 'The Mua'assasa al-amma li-s-sinamā fi Dimāšqi: Working Conditions for Cinema Directors'. He highlighted the fact that Syrian authorities regard cinema today as a visiting card to the world. Viola Shafik (Cairo) presented a paper on 'Prostitute for a Good Reason: Stars and Morality in Egypt', giving

a brief introduction of the history of the Egyptian film industry, its current star system and the general evaluation of stars on the artistic as well as on the moral levels. The Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and his film *Close-Up* was the subject of Azadeh Saljooghi's (Salt Lake City) presentation in which she demonstrated how Kiarostami suggests new meanings of cinema, audience, and human imagination.

Using Ziad Doueiri's film *West Beirut* as an example, Ala Al-Harmaneh (Mainz) demonstrated the use of historical elements in the context of an autobiographical movie. Sven Andressen (Frankfurt) introduced 'The Legend of Anârkali' and Indian historical film. Claudia Preckel (Bochum) focused on some ideas of the Indian film industry, usually referred to as 'Bollywood'.

Several panels specifically dealt with the construction of the so-called Orient, while using different angles on the topic. The 'historical Orient' was the central focus of one of these panels. Diana Wenzel (Mainz) offered a paper on 'The Construction of Cleopatra in Film: A Queen of Egypt as a Symbol of Oriental Culture'. Regina Heilmann (Mainz) tried to approach the cinematic Orient from an archaeological point of view, analysing 'The Ancient Near East in Film and Babylon's Reception as a Paradigm for the Other'. Wolfgang Zwickel, in his paper on 'The Arc of the Covenant – Cinematic Representation of a Biblical Object', dealt with the problematic use of biblical texts, giving two examples of movies deal-

ing with the Ark of the Covenant: Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* and Bruce Beresford's *King David*.

A different approach was introduced by Christopher L. Lukinbeal (New Haven). In his presentation, he tried to show how landscapes function in popular American cinema. The construction of cinematic landscapes and movie-generated geographies were also presented by Stefan Zimmermann (Mainz). He offered an inside glance of 'Cinema's view of Marrakech' by analysing European and American film productions using Marrakech as their location.

The use of stereotypes in the depiction of Arabs in popular European and American cinema was demonstrated by Martin Noweck (Munich), who showed that the use of offensive stereotypes is usually based on specific political intentions. Annelies Moors (Amsterdam) looked into a different mass media phenomenon. She chose (the clothing company) Benetton's advertising campaign which features photos of Jews and Palestinians posing in friendship, to reflect upon what sort of 'imagined community' was being produced.

Films were not only discussed, but also shown. The first day ended with the presentation of Parine Jaddo's *Aisha*, an intricately woven experimental film on Arab identity and gender. The next day, the exceptionally innovative feature documentary *The English Sheikh and the Yemeni Gentleman* was screened in the presence of its director, Bader Ben Hirsi. The film traces the search of

the London-born director for his cultural heritage in Yemen. The panelists were highly fascinated by the extraordinary photography.

The interdisciplinary network counts more than 100 members from 21 different countries. The conference greatly benefited from the diversity of its participants, coming from various fields of studies and industry. This blend led to intriguing and fruitful discussions within the different panels. The discussions and the personal engagement of several researchers and filmmakers reconfirmed the importance of this field of research.

The forthcoming meeting will be held again at the Institute of Geography at the University of Mainz, scheduled for 4-5 September 2001, and will concentrate exclusively on film and mass media of the Maghreb. ◆

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