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Understanding Arab Culture through Cinema

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Abstract

The article examines the use of cinema as a tool for teaching about Arab culture and assesses the process in which learners acquire a higher level of intercultural communicative competence. The essay draws primarily on multilayered class activities and students' responses to pre- and post- screening surveys related to eight Arab films. The article reveals that the evaluation of the learners' intercultural competence and their familiarity with Arab culture in particular is a long process that filled with misunderstandings, gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions on the part of the learners. To successfully conduct this type of teaching, the article also points to a number of measures that ought to be taken into consideration. First, the instructor needs to be familiar with the learners' cultural background in order to understand their intercultural awareness and perception of the 'Other.' Second, students should be provided with adequate historical and cultural background information against which Arab cinema emerged. Finally, the inclusion of atypical and thought-provoking films is an indispensable feature of the learning process because these types of films will challenge students intellectually and placed them in unfamiliar and non-relatable territories. The procedure of guiding students effectively towards achieving a better understanding of Arab cultures and subsequently attaining a higher level of intercultural competence, therefore, proved to be a multi-faceted process of growth, whose anticipated outcomes affect both the learners and the instructor.

Keywords

Arab culture, Film, intercultural competence, perception of the Other, students' comfort zone, Western Media

Teaching Arab Culture through Cinema

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Abstract:

The article examines the use of cinema as a tool for teaching about Arab culture and assesses the process in which learners acquire a higher level of intercultural communicative competence. The essay draws primarily on multilayered class activities and students' responses to pre- and post-screening surveys related to eight Arab films. The article reveals that the evaluation of the learners' intercultural competence and their familiarity with Arab culture in particular is a long process that filled with misunderstandings, gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions on the part of the learners. To successfully conduct this type of teaching, the article also points to a number of measures that ought to be taken into consideration. First, the instructor needs to be familiar with the learners' cultural background in order to understand their intercultural awareness and perception of the 'Other.' Second, students should be provided with adequate historical and cultural background information against which Arab cinema emerged. Finally, the inclusion of atypical and thought-provoking films is an indispensable feature of the learning process because these types of films will challenge students intellectually and placed them in unfamiliar and non-relatable territories. The procedure of guiding students effectively towards achieving a better understanding of Arab cultures and subsequently attaining a higher level of intercultural competence, therefore, proved to be a multi-faceted process of growth, whose anticipated outcomes affect both the learners and the instructor.

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1. Introduction:

No other regions in the world more embody the question of borders than the Arab World in general and the Middle East in particular. The political remapping of these areas by the economic self-serving ambitions of colonial powers led to the creation of intricate cultural boundaries and new political realities that continue to play a major role in the state of instability in the Middle East. Teaching/learning about the Middle East and the Arab world, therefore, is a multifaceted process that necessitates a high degree of acquaintance with the history, culture, and the physical and non-physical borders of these regions. The acquisition of these facets of knowledge is the basis upon which the promotion of intercultural competence is built. To be sure, the use of films in teaching can serve as an effective instructional tool for assessing students' intercultural competence concerning the Arab world and the Middle East.

As discussed elsewhere in this special issue, cinema is considered to be a multidimensional and interdisciplinary medium that can contribute considerably to the understanding of the socio-political, historical, and cultural features of the culture it purports to represent (Currie, 2011, p. 47-62). The incorporation of films in teaching at the college level, therefore, often provides learners with a thought-provoking and enjoyable learning experience. This form of learning also allows students to acquire global awareness and equips them with learning tools that can cultivate intercultural competence. The fact that American culture can be described on the whole as culturally and linguistically monolingual (Erand, 2012; Lamus, 2008; Soto & Kharem, 2006) provides us with a unique and challenging educational framework within which the use cinema as a teaching tool is tested.

2. Background:

2.1 Site and Cause:

This essay explores the levels of intercultural competence that could be achieved by U.S. college students in an undergraduate course entitled Arab Film. The course is part of those offered at Cleveland State University (CSU) as General Education Humanities requirement and can fulfil electives in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies minors. The study primarily examines learners' perception of the Arab "cultural other," their ability to negotiate intercultural differences and, ultimately, to cross cultural borders successfully. Hence, this investigation assesses students' abilities to identify cross-cultural diversity and borders by comparing and

contrasting different human experiences and socio-political or religious realities (Newman, 2003; Sadowski-Smith, 2011).

The state of scholarship on Arab cinema is still, relatively speaking, in its initial stages. Most studies offer a general historical overview of the evolution of the Arab cinema industry and how it reflects on socio-political and cultural changes (country or region (Armes, 2015; Gertz & Khleifi, 2008; Khatib, 2006; Khatib, 2008; Hawl, 2010; Shafik, 2007a; Shafik, 2007b)). Other studies are dedicated to the development of the film industry in a specific). It is worth noting in this regard that Egypt, due to its centrality in the film industry, figures prominently in these studies (Shafik, 2007a, 10-18; p. 24-27). However, the examination of how films can serve as a teaching medium for learning about Arab cultures still remains an unexplored area and is the aim of this article.

2.2 The Films:

Throughout the semester students watched a total of eight Arab films made in five Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan). Specifically, from Egypt, learners viewed the following: *The Genie Lady (Afrita hanem)* (dir. Henry Barakat, 1949)¹ and *The Yacoubian Building (Imarat ya'koubian)* (dir. Marwan Hamed, 2008). As a representative of Palestinian films students watched *Divine Intervention (Yadd ilahiyya)* (dir. Elia Suleiman, 2002) and *Omar* (dir. Hany Abu Assad, 2013). These films serve as testimony to the fact that Palestinian cinema has achieved international recognition in recent years. From Lebanon² we watched *West Beirut (Bayrut al-gharbiyya)* (dir. Ziad Doueiri, 1998) and *Caramel (Sukkar banat)* (dir. Nadine Labaki, 2007). Students then watched the Syrian film *The Extras (al-Kumbars)* (dir. Nabil Malih, 1993). The class screenings concluded with showing the Jordanian film, *Captain Abu Raed* (dir. Amin Matalqa, 2008).

Three major pedagogical reasons account for showing the abovementioned movies in class. First, the themes and issues that these films discuss are representative of intricate political or social realities in Arab cultures. Some of these films give insights into the state of political unrest that many Arab countries are undergoing. Second, most of the selected films comprise controversial issues and provocative themes that

¹ Due to a shortage of data, I did not use *The Genie Lady* in this study.

² Due to the shortage of time I did not include films from North African cinema, which introduced a number of interesting and relevant films. Such is the case with the Algerian film *Chronicle of the Years of Embers* (dir. Muhamad Lakhdar-Hamina, 1975), the Tunisian film *The Silences of the Palace* (dir. Moufida Tlatli, 1994), or the Moroccan film *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Street* (dir. Nabil Ayouch, 2000).

can place learners outside their comfort zone where they negotiate dissimilarities and unfamiliar cultural settings. In other words, these challenging features play a crucial role in prompting critical thinking and enhancing students' abilities to cross borders and reach a higher level of intercultural competence. Finally, most of the screened movies achieved national and international prominence and, hence, they are more descriptive of the Arab cultures as well as relevant to class discussions.

2.3 Research Participants:

The number of students who completed the course "Arab Film" is 45, among whom were established U.S. citizens, first and second generation immigrants, heritage speakers, and native speakers. The student body consisted of freshmen (18 %), sophomore (36 %), junior (9 %), senior (31 %), and Project 60 (6%). When it comes to areas of study and disciplines, the course participants also represented a number of fields, seeking degrees in the following colleges: Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) (27%), Sciences (24 %), Engineering (23%), and Business (12 %). Interestingly, these numbers demonstrate that at least two-thirds of the students came from colleges other than that of CLASS. This also shows that using films as a teaching tool can attract more students across disciplines. Examining the student body in terms of familiarity with Arabic, one finds that 48% are native Arabic speakers, 40 % are native (non-Arab) English speakers, and 12 % are Arabic heritage speakers. Among these participants 18 % of them declared a minor in Arabic, half of whom are non-Arab students.

3. Methodology:

Prior to the film screenings, students obtained, through readings and class discussions, general background information about political and historical transformations that the Arab world underwent in the last 100 years. Following this phase, students became acquainted with certain features of Arab cultures that contributed to the development of Arab cinema. To further understand the socio-political and historical changes that shaped the region, these readings were situated within orientalist, colonial, and post-colonial studies. Likewise, students submitted a weekly response paper reflecting on these readings and class discussions.

The screening of the selected films involved a five-stage procedure, the first of which was the reviewing of the socio-political and cultural context and the place of the country of production in the evolution of Arab cinema. Second, students completed two questionnaires: Pre- and post-

film screening. These standard questionnaires were developed for this special issue after slightly adapting them to the particulars of the Arab film course. The binary stages of completing these questionnaires were instrumental in assessing students' growth and the level of their intercultural awareness regarding certain aspects of Arab cultures.³ Third, students wrote a short paper (two double-spaced pages) in which they addressed certain questions related to the film content, genres, themes, and cultural context. The fourth procedure involved having a class discussion for each film to assess students' intercultural competence and, particularly, how they handle similarities and differences between nations and cultures. These discussions helped the instructor to better understand the students' learning needs. Finally, this learning experience concluded with class discussion in which students were asked to place these films in order from the most favorable to the least favorable and account for this ranking.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion:

The abovementioned five stages of class learning practices and discussions produced interesting findings that give insight into U.S. college learners' modes and phases of acquiring intercultural competence regarding the Arab World. Specifically, pre-screening questionnaires shed substantial light on the initial level of the students' intercultural competence. They clearly indicate that the majority of students were poorly informed or misinformed about the history and the cultures of the Arab world. Students' responses in the pre-screening surveys also reveal the significant role that Western mainstream media plays in shaping their perception of Arab cultures. Not only does this Western perspective portray the Arab World unfairly, but also it eclipses the self-depiction of the "cultural other." This Western representation, which often silences the Arab voice, was expected to play a major role in American college learners' initial reception of Arab cultural products such as films.

However, to fully understand students' responses, it is insufficient to account for their reactions solely against the impact of the inaccurate and unfavorable depiction of Arab cultures in Western media. Rather, we need also to place learners' behavior within the broader context of their overall limited acquaintance with non-U.S. realities in general, be it in politics, history, cultures, or cinema. This orientation is exemplified in fact that most students (Arab and non-Arab learners alike) are more familiar

³ Dr. Heba El-Attar prepared the original questions for both questionnaires that I in some cases modified.

with Egyptian cinema than with that of other Arab countries, seemingly because Egypt is the center of the Arab film industry. Information about the learners' level of knowledge about the Arab World as demonstrated in the pre-screening questionnaires, however poor that knowledge might be, constitutes an important yardstick by which the instructor could better prepare her/his students for the film screenings and the follow up discussions.

The post-screening questionnaires, which represented primarily the students' acceptance or rejection of the screened materials, were instrumental in measuring learners' reactions when assessing higher levels of intercultural competence. In other words, these questionnaires aided in understanding the cultural boundaries that students were able to recognize, and subsequently facilitated the identification of the cultural borders they were able or willing to cross. Hence, students' responses to the post-screening surveys constitute the basis upon which this study rests. Specifically, the analysis of the post-film surveys provided two main avenues of examination to evaluate learners' process of acquiring knowledge and testing out their level of intercultural competence. The first channel deals with students' initial reactions to the screened films in terms of similarities, differences, and comparisons. The second conduit of examination concerns learners' viewpoints and the ability to negotiate when it comes to differing borders that Western mainstream media usually associate with Arab cultures, particularly, sexuality and gender issues and politics.

5. Students' Behavior and Reactions:

This section primarily considers students' responses in the post-screening questionnaires where two major issues are compared and contrasted: Identification of similarities and outside the comfort zone. The order in which these two themes are arranged and discussed is indicative of the learning process that students experienced. Such arrangement gives us a better idea of learners' different levels of acquiring intercultural competence. As for Western perceptions of Arab cultures regarding sexuality and gender and politics, they are placed under the second channel of examination that appears in Section 6: Negotiation.

5.1 Identification of Similarities:

When students ranked the screened films according to the most favorable, three films were at the top of their selection. Arranged from the highest to the lowest, these were: *Captain Abu Raed*, *Caramel*, and *Omar*

(see Appendix, Charts 1-4, 8, 9). Three major factors help to explain students' decisions to rank these three films as the highest: The universal themes, Western-oriented features, and simple plots placed within modern times. Specifically, this group of U.S. college learners quickly identified with these films because they unfold in modern time frames and have universal topics and simple storylines. Such is the case with childhood dreams and idolization (in *Captain Abu Raed*), sisterhood and relatable urban drama (in *Caramel*), and romance and betrayal (in *Omar*). This behavior leads to the conclusion that the socio-political realities behind each of these films, whose stories unfold in contemporary Arab societies, did not factor in students' rankings. A few words about these films in terms of production, therefore, may help readers to better understand why students felt within their comfort zone with these films.

Captain Abu Raed, whose story takes place in Amman, won a number of international prizes, such as the Sundance Film Festival World Cinema Audience Award in 2008. The film director, Amin Matalqa, was born in Jordan and moved to the U.S. at the age of 13. He made a career as a director and drama writer in the U.S. Among the American films that he directed were *The United* (2012), which is the first ever Disney film in Arabic, and *Strangely in Love* (2014) (Asfahani, 2014). These pieces of information will prove crucial later, in trying to understand why students felt within their comfort zone when they watched *Captain Abu Raed*.

As for the content, *Captain Abu Raed* revolves around the life of a man named Abu Raed, who works as a janitor at Alia International Airport in Amman. He lives alone in a poor neighborhood after having lost both his son and his wife. Among his neighbors are a group of children who play an important role in the storyline. These characters are contrasted by Nour, who works as a pilot and lives in the wealthy part of Amman and pursues a career against all odds. One day Abu Raed returns home wearing a pilot cap that he had found in a trash can. Seeing him with the pilot cap, the children, being under the impression that he was really a pilot, started to call him "Captain." At first, Abu Raed was reluctant to assume this role but decided to seize the opportunity to captivate the children with his imagined travels and adventures, hoping to infuse their lives with dreams that can come true. A boy named Murad, who lives with his abusive father, was skeptical and managed to expose Abu Raed's real job. As events unfold, Abu Raed becomes involved in the life of Murad, attempting to help him by giving him a better future. At the end of the film, Abu Raed pays with his own life to rescue Murad from his abusive father. The film ends with a scene where we see Murad achieving his dream by becoming a pilot (Torrance, 2009).

Students' responses in the post-film questionnaire show that, instead of catching the underlying social and political challenges depicted by the film, such as the reversed gender role in Jordan, they sought the comfort zone with which they could identify. This is the area of ease closely connected to three major features embodied in the films. First is Abu Raed's role as the children's storyteller and dream-maker. Second, Western influences on the film are observable, for example, in the depiction of Westernized life style and mode of production. A third feature is the use of English language and Western-like dress in reference to Nour's circle of family and friends.

No doubt, the fact that the film director, Amin Matalqa, is, as previously mentioned, deeply influenced by the American cinema industry sheds considerable light on the similarities between this film and American movies. The film, therefore, is abundant with examples showing the director's attempts to model it on American films. Such is the case with lighting and camera work and the Western-oriented storyline. Furthermore, the question regarding whether the film helped the viewer to understand the state of unrest in the Middle East was added this time to the post film survey in an attempt to test students' perception of socio-political intricacies in Arab societies. As Chart 10 (see the Appendix) shows, the majority of them disagreed or deemed this question as irrelevant. The fact that 47% of the students said yes to this question demonstrates that many of them still have limited and superficial knowledge about the region's politics.

These results were similar when considering the Lebanese film *Caramel*, which ranked second highest and is a feminist romantic and social drama directed and written by Nadine Labaki. She is also known as the director/actress of the recent famous Lebanese film *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011), the story of which revolves around the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) (Rothe, 2015). Nadine Labaki plays the main character (Layale) in *Caramel*, which focuses on the lives of five women (Layale, Nisrin, Jamal, Rima, and Rose). A major setting for this film is a modern beauty salon in Beirut where Layale, Nisrin, and Rima work and socialize. Each one of these women represents different social aspects of Lebanese society. Layale is stuck in a dead-end relationship with a married man; Rima is a lesbian and tries to keep this a secret. Nisrin is about to be married but is troubled by having lost her virginity before she met her future husband and, hence, fears that this pre-marital relation will be disclosed. Jamal is a divorced woman with children and pursues a career as an actress in TV commercials, refusing to accept the fact that she is no longer in her twenties. Finally, Rose is a seamstress who is socially stuck taking care of her mentally ill sister.

Analyzing students' responses in *Caramel's* post-screening survey (see the Appendix Charts 1-4, 8, 9), one finds that, as in the case of *Captain Abu Raed*, Westernized film techniques and portrayal of characters appealed to them. In other words, learners were able to find many parallels and familiar aspects between the stories of the five Lebanese women and those that are depicted in typical American films. Hence, these similarities caused students to feel comfortable without being pressured to think critically about cultural background and the complex life from which these stories emerged. It is not surprising that matters of female solidarity, the search for sexual identity or relations, and their resistance to different social pressures were well pronounced in the film, whereas there was a lack of discussion of the religious diversity among those females. To further exemplify this orientation the instructor added a new question to the post screening survey: Whether the film helps their understanding of the state of unrest in the Middle East, which was later added to see students' perception of real socio-political complex life in Arab societies. As Chart 10 (see the Appendix) shows, the majority disagrees or believes this question to be not relevant. This reaction seems to be indicative of students' inadequate knowledge about the complex social and religious life in Lebanon.

Omar, which was directed by Hany Abu Assad, is a socio-political drama and romance that students ranked as their third most favorite movie. The film plot revolves around a man named Omar, whose character reflects the life of Palestinians under the Israeli occupation. Omar works as a baker and is deeply in love with Nadia. Besides social factors, their lives are also physically divided by the separation wall. Omar is also involved in a Palestinian resistance movement against the Israeli occupation along with two other close friends, Imad and Amjad. Their first collaborative operation led to the killing of an Israeli soldier. However, the Israelis were well-informed of the details about this operation through their informant, Amjad. When Omar is captured by the Israelis, he is framed by an Israeli officer named Rami and forced to collaborate with the Israelis. As events unfold, new realities and pressures complicate Omar's life. He first discovers Amjad's betrayal, both for collaborating with the Israelis and for being in love with Nadia. Omar then loses his friend Imad when Amjad mistakenly kills him. Omar eventually loses his girlfriend Nadia, who became very suspicious of him. As the Israelis continue to seek Omar's collaboration against his people, he kills Rami in order to end the circle of mistrust and free himself from any connections with the Israelis and their ceaseless provisos.

Omar is a well-done film that manages to convey the Palestinian tragedy and life under the Israeli occupation in a cinematic form that

resonates well with the expectations of a Western audience. The analysis of *Omar*'s post-screening survey (see the Appendix, Charts 1-5, 8, and 9) clearly demonstrates that students identified with many aspects of the film. This is evident in their comments, such as "most easily relatable film we have seen this semester," or "my expectation on this Palestinian cinema were [sic] completely opposite than what I have watched in this movie." *Omar* offers an atypical, yet far-sighted, take on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by representing it socio-politically and psychologically through Palestinian narrative. By doing so, the film excellently humanizes the Palestinian side of the story and diminishes the imbalanced Israeli role in this conflict (Zahriyeh, 2014). The director develops the concepts of love, betrayal, loyalty, and resilience as the main themes of the film's plot. Another relevant factor may be that the film script was written by Waleed Zuaitar, an Arab-American of Palestinian origin who works as an actor and producer in the American film industry. These data demonstrate again that, as in the case of *Captain Abu Raed* and *Caramel*, *Omar* consists of certain cinematic features (plot, setting, and characters) that Western audiences easily associate or identify with. A good example of this orientation can be seen in the scenes depicting the Israelis' chase and capture of Omar, which clearly resembles American action films.

These findings indicate that the perception of American learners of Arab cultures is more influenced by mainstream media than by acquired fact-based knowledge. Hence, the level of students' familiarity with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of *Omar* plays a marginal role. Unfortunately, unlike in the case of *Captain Abu Raed* and *Caramel*, the question regarding whether the film helped learners to understand the state of unrest in the Middle East was *not* added this time to the post film screening. Adding this question would have been more helpful to test out students' perception of socio-political intricacies in Arab societies, especially because the presentation of political issues is much clearer in *Omar* than *Captain Abu Raed* and *Caramel*.

6. Outside the Comfort Zone:

The camera's eye in *Captain of Abu Raed*, *Caramel*, and *Omar* was mindful of Western and non-Western audiences alike. In contrast, the themes and the social-political concerns that figure in the *The Extras* and *Divine Intervention* were markedly remote from familiar cinematic settings with which Western viewers can identify. In fact, the vast majority of students ranked these two films as the least favorite ones (see the Appendix, Charts 1, 2, 7, 4, 5, and 9). Because denouncing the political reality is the ultimate purpose of these two films, their storylines and

techniques render the existing cultural borders obscure and, to a certain extent, unfathomable. Crossing and decoding these metaphoric borders, therefore, was a difficult task for the viewers due to their limited knowledge about the intricacies of the history, politics, and cultures of the Arab World. Such a challenge induced alienation or rejection on the part of the learners. This is evident in the fact that some of the students found *The Extras* “boring and confusing,” and *Divine Intervention* to be “difficult to understand, especially since it does not have music or talking,” “very weird,” or “film was difficult to follow, no plot or character development and very vague symbols.”

Indeed, political and social symbols and messages were abundant in both films. *The Extras* is considered a high quality film that reflects the political situation in Syria under the Assad regime during the 1980s and 1990s. The film is a reflection of political oppression as well as social injustice in Syria (Cooke, 2007, 102-106; Shafik, 2007a, 224; Wedeen, 1999, 116-120). The storyline of the film revolves around a man named Salim who works during the day as a gas station attendant and as an extra in the national theatre. He asks a close friend to loan him his apartment for two hours in order to spend some private time with his girlfriend, Nada. Even this private apartment becomes a public space as the couple is interrupted by Syrian secret police officers, who are searching for a blind musician living above the apartment. What also seems to make *The Extras* difficult to follow is the fact that the apartment serves as almost the entire setting for the film, where fantasy, daydreams, and reality converge.

The Extras offers different levels of theatrical staging where its protagonists play various roles to convey further the film’s main message to the audience. Like many Syrian citizens, Salim and Nada are metaphorically two “extras,” i.e., unpredictable and replaceable characters. The oppressive socio-political atmosphere causes these two characters to hide in a temporary space that can offer them an unreal, yet unrestricted, theatrical stage where they can freely voice their protest and perform their fantasies. The performance of these characters in the film, which strongly echoes the theatre of the absurd, perfectly mirrors the incomprehensible and illogical Syrian reality both on the political and the social levels. Nevertheless, the semiotic complexity of the film, added to the multilayered sociopolitical and cultural boundaries they purport to depict, posed a serious challenge for the research participants. Students’ state of confusion and puzzlement regarding this film is also evident in their responses to the question whether the film helped to understand the state of unrest in the Middle East. It may be notable that this question was added later to the post-film screening. Although politics constitutes a

major aspect of *The Extras*, 57 % of the students provided a negative answer to this question (see the Appendix, Chart 10).

Divine Intervention, directed by Elia Suleiman, is a continuation of *Chronicles of a Disappearance* (1996), a film made by the same director. Both of these movies reflect a crucial stage in Palestinian history that spans the Oslo Accord and the second Intifada. At that stage, Palestinians witnessed a further extension of political fragmentation, displacement, unrest, and destabilization. A central theme that figures in these films is the shared fate of the Palestinians in the West Bank with that of the Palestinian minority inside Israel (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 171-172). To that end, Suleiman attempts to provide different angles to portray the contradictions and the fragmentation in the life of the Palestinians by creating a new space where cultures and identities can be, at least symbolically, restored (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 186).

The storyline of *Divine Intervention* revolves around the divided life of a Palestinian and takes place in three major locations: Nazareth, an Israeli checkpoint, and Ramallah. The role of the main character is actually played by Suleiman himself; the character has a family in Nazareth and a girlfriend in Ramallah. He is using the parking lot of an Israeli checkpoint as a place of meeting, especially because his girlfriend cannot cross the border. Hence, the main character is depicted as having a fragmented identity. Such fragmentation is conveyed through desynchronized and ostensibly unconnected scenes, and incomplete or nonexistent dialogues. These cinematic features create an image of what Abu Remaileh calls “negative space” or the “cracks in the story” (2008, p. 1-29). The film’s scattered scenes and divided places give insight into the challenging life of the Palestinians under the overt and covert Israeli occupation. Use of this technique may explain why students perceive the film as having unfamiliar political and social features that prevent recognizing familiar cultural settings. This is evident, also, in having many scenes without dialogue or musical background.

Analysis of the post screening survey (see the Appendix, Charts 1, 2, 7, 4, 5, and 9) revealed that students felt alienation, failing on the whole to follow its storyline and recognize the significance of its political symbols. The aesthetic techniques that seemed to the students to differ greatly from the Hollywood movie style (see Chart 9), coupled with the multilayered political boundaries that the film depicts, contributed to the learners’ confusion. Hence, they were unable to decipher the film content or identify with its message. Unlike in the case of *The Extras* that was screened later, the question regarding whether the film helped them to understand the state of unrest in the Middle East was *not* added to the post film screening. Assessing the students’ reaction to this question would have been helpful

to examine their perception of socio-political intricacies in Arab societies, especially since the presentation of political issues is clearer in *Divine Intervention* than previous films. With this in mind, it is important to consider students' background, particularly their limited knowledge about the culture where this film was made. This seems to explain their responses, which are to a certain extent contradictory in nature. When it comes to learners' cinema education, it seems that most of them are influenced by the Hollywood film industry that dictates certain expectations, structures, and patterns.

Regardless of learners' positive or negative responses to those films, the ultimate responsibility rests on the instructor to structure class activities and discussions in a manner that best fits the course objectives. The study shows that when students found their comfort zone in *Captain Abu Raed*, *Caramel*, and *Omar*, they identified similarities with the "Other," but were not quick to discern or appreciate the differences. The instructor had then to coordinate class activities in a manner that could bring to their attention the underlying themes in those films. Such is the case with the reversed traditional gender role and sharp social stratification in *Captain Abu Raed*, the political role of women in Lebanese society and politics in *Caramel*, and Israeli occupation and intricacies of the Palestinian resistance in *Omar*. The fact that these three films were screened at different stages of the course gave both the instructor and the students opportunities to channel the learning experience in such a way that leads to growth and better recognition of differences across cultural borders. This is evident in verbal interventions, modifying questions, or adding new ones. As a result, learners developed further skills in intercultural communication by understanding that accepting the "Other" was not merely limited to finding similarities, but rather to expect and be prepared to empathize with the differences.

One pedagogical criterion behind film selection for this introductory course on Arab film was, as previously mentioned, the controversial and challenging themes and content. Learners' exposure to unfamiliar/uncomfortable content may have led them to rank those films as non-favorites, such as the case with *The Extras* and *Divine Intervention*. However, it is exactly such a challenge that creates room for deep discussion, leading students to critically reflect on the "cultural other," and revisit their own conceptions and values. This process will lead ultimately to a better level of intercultural communicative competence. In the case of *The Extras* and *Divine Intervention*, the instructor guided students to decode the complex aesthetic aspects in both films. Thus, through further readings and class discussions, learners came to appreciate the cinematic art and messages in these films as indicative of a

recognizable human experience in a relatable language that serves as a vehicle to allow them to cross cultural borders.

7. Negotiation:

An earlier reference in this essay to students' responses to the pre-screening questionnaire not only emphasized their limited knowledge of the region, but also indicated the crucial role that Western media play in their limitation as well as confusion. Learning from students' previous reactions and making relevant changes to class discussions are positive steps towards achieving a higher level of intercultural competence. To that end, the instructor needs to find more effective instructional procedures and better film choices that can place students outside their comfort zone, where they are forced to think critically and negotiate cultural differences. In this manner, learners can become more tolerant, reach a better understanding of differences, and be equipped with the ability to recognize and communicate within unfamiliar cultural borders. The next two sections, therefore, assess how students react and negotiate limitations when it comes to the presentation of sexuality and gender and politics in the Arab World. Please bear in mind that these two areas are distinctive characteristics that Western media tend to associate with the Arab culture.

7.1 Sexuality and Gender Issues:

Women's status in Arab/Islamic societies, sexuality, and feminism play a major role in the biased Western representations of the 'Other' that can be seen in media and literature (Said, 1995, p. 202-203, 1997; Shaheen, 2009, p. 25-30). This orientation also holds true in discussions of Arab cinema where these topics function as evidence of cultural demarcations between the West and Arab/Islamic societies (Mohanty, 1997; Shohat & Stam, 2001, p. 13-54; p. 137-177). This issue can be especially seen in learners' reactions to women's roles in politically charged films, such as *The Yacoubian Building* and *West Beirut*. A few words about these two films is in order before comparing and analyzing the data gathered from the post-screening surveys.

The Yacoubian Building, which is considered the highest budgeted film in Egyptian cinema, revolves around the lives of characters sharing the same building. These residents, who represent various social classes, are confronted by different life challenges. The themes of social injustice, political corruption, and exploitation, therefore, figure prominently in this film. Among the film's main characters is Zaki, a fading and old aristocrat who has an argument with his domineering sister over inheritance. Taha is

the son of the building doorman who cannot achieve his dream of becoming a policeman because he belongs to a low social class. Buthayna is another important character who struggles to support her family even at the expense of being a victim of sexual exploitation. Azzam is a wealthy old man who uses a twisted interpretation of Islam to satisfy his sexual desires and pursue a political career. Hatem, a wealthy and well-educated man, serves as the editor of a French daily newspaper, *La Caire*, but he is more conspicuous in the film for his homosexual orientation. In many ways, the film presents the socio-political background that led to the ousting of Mubarak's regime in 2011.

West Beirut, which is a political drama, tells the story of the Lebanese civil war through the eyes and the experiences of three friends: May, a Christian girl, and two Muslim boys, Tarik and Omar. The film's plot focuses on the drastic socio-political and religious changes that Beirut underwent during the civil war (1975-1990), and particularly the partition of the city into west (the Islamic part) and east (Christian) along religious lines. Tarik's father, who represents a nationalist Arab identity, wants to stay in Beirut, whereas his mother, an established lawyer, wants to leave for a safer place. The film ends leaving the viewers wondering what happened to these characters and whether there is a way out of the war.

West Beirut, *Caramel*, and *The Yacoubian Building* all contain a presence of women and their role in Arab society that is more conspicuous than in the other films shown in class. The following remarks focus on the students' reactions mainly to two questions that appear in the post-film screening. First, a question asks whether they see more differences than similarities between the conditions of women represented in the film and those of women in the U.S. (see the Appendix, Charts 3). The second question asked whether students found the representation of sexuality in the film to be disturbing (see the Appendix, Charts, 5).

These films portray the struggle of Arab women, not only against Arab patriarchal structure and poverty, but also against Western colonialism. Class discussion showed that students' reactions to the abovementioned questions fell into two major categories: Acceptance and identification in the case of adhering to Western paradigms as in *Caramel*; reluctance, skepticism, and objection when it breaks with the image traditionally established by Western media, as in the case of *West Beirut* and *The Yacoubian Building*. Thus, the pre-screening feedback as well as students' responses to the first screened films helped the instructor organize class discussions and activities in a manner that could help learners overcome their cognitive dissonance regarding the issue of Arab women. The same holds true in regard to the portrayal of homosexuality in Arab films. In fact, learners accepted the silent homosexual identity of one

of the female characters in *Caramel*, whereas most of them were shocked seeing Hatem's homosexual pursuits and actions in *The Yacoubian Building*.

The abovementioned data indicate that learners' responses are highly influenced by the representations of Arab women in Western media where they are portrayed on the whole as dominated by exploitative males and marginalized in Arab society. This misleading image about Arab women dictates to a great degree the anticipations of most students, particularly the non-Arab ones. It would not be surprising if the students are actually looking in these films for examples to conform and enhance their expectations. Nevertheless, the presentation of women in these films is not monochromatic; rather, it varies according to social class and profession. It is no wonder that the portrayal of women in these films appears to suffer contradictions and inconsistencies.

For example, Dawlat in *The Yacoubian Building* emerges as socially powerful and contrasts with the miserable life and low social status of Buthayna, who experiences different forms of oppression. Similarly, the independent and powerful image of Hala, Tarik's mother in *West Beirut*, contrasts with the lower social status of the women who work at the brothel. The same can be said about Layale in *Caramel*, who is a sexually open-minded woman, when compared with Nisrin, who is afraid of having the secret of losing her virginity disclosed. This trend also appears in the role of Nour in *Captain Abu Raed*. She is presented as modern and independent and compared to Murad's mother, who lives helplessly with her abusive husband. This comparison can be further substantiated in the analysis of the findings from the responses regarding *The Extras* and *Divine Intervention*. *The Extras* included only two female characters: Nada, who plays the major role, and Adel's fiancée, who appears in one scene only for a few minutes. In *Divine Intervention* the only female character kept silent during the entire film. Unlike women in other films, the female characters in *The Extras* and *Divine Intervention* actually have no other women with whom to be compared or contrasted.

Regarding the question of whether the learners found the representation of sexuality in the film to be disturbing, the majority of respondents (at least 65%) disagreed in the case of all films. Yet, the reactions can vary from one to another in certain cases. For example, in comments for the *Extras* post-screening survey, only one student wrote: "There are some shocking scenes about sex that should not be shown." No doubt, the student refers here to Salim's sexual daydream fantasies. These findings show that the majority of students, who are accustomed to different forms of sexuality presented in American films, do not see these sexually oriented scenes disturbing. However, when it comes to

homosexual relations, the result was different. This is evident in the post-screening survey of *The Yacoubian Building* where the question specifically asked whether the students were shocked by the depiction of homosexual relations in the film. Answering this question, 64% of the viewers of *The Yacoubian Building* say that they were shocked by the depiction of homosexual scenes. No doubt, the participants refer here to the intimate scenes between Hatem, the journalist, and the police officer.

7.2 Politics in the Arab World:

The Arab world and the Middle East figure prominently in mainstream Western media, especially in view of the fact that politics and the state of unrest in the Arab World and the Middle East have far-reaching implications on Western economies. Violence, oppression, and corrupt political regimes are the main generalized characters that Western media associates with these regions. This section examines students' familiarity with politics in the Arab World through watching *Divine Intervention*, *Omar*, *The Extras*, *West Beirut*, and *The Yacoubian Building*. The questions to which learners were asked to react were geared toward comparing and contrasting the social, political, and economic features in both the Arab World and the U.S. (see the Appendix, Charts, 4-6, and 10).

Analyzing these data, one is faced immediately with various, yet seemingly contradictory, observations that appear to shed light on both the content of the films and the participants' perception and learning habits regarding political realities in the Arab world. The following observations are in order. First, the majority of respondents believe that (except in the case of *Divine Intervention* and *The Extras*) there are more similarities than differences between the social, political, and economic background that appears in these films and the ones in the U.S. (see Chart 4). These findings point out that students' reactions were influenced more by the extent to which they could understand the plot of the film than by its socio-political, intricate context and message. Second, the majority of respondents in the case of all films do not consider the representations of violence disturbing (see Chart 5). These reactions reflect, I believe, the fact that violence plays a minor role in these films and seems to indicate that students' perception of violence derives from watching certain American films that are extremely violent. Third, most respondents were *not* surprised by how the political system depicted in the film differs from that in the U.S., except in the case of *Divine Intervention*, *Omar*, and *West Beirut* (see Chart 6). This result seems to indicate that the participants deem the political context of films associated with a conflict or a war as

more different. (Whereas the first two films concern the Palestinian question and the struggle against the Israeli occupation, *West Beirut* revolves around the Lebanese civil war, which is considered a defining event in modern Lebanese history).

Finally, the majority of the respondents did not consider the political views shocking in the case of *Divine Intervention* and *The Extras*, whereas the results in the case of *Omar* and *West Beirut* were quite the opposite (see Chart 5). There are major explanations for this response, the first of which is related to the students' ability to make the connection between the plot and wider political context. It seems that the learners were able to place the events of the film in a wider socio-political context in the case of *Omar* and *West Beirut*, but they failed to do so in the case of the *Divine Intervention* and *The Extras*. Second, apparently it was easier for the students to visually make the connection between the film's story in the case of *Omar* and *West Beirut* and the setting of war-like and open armed conflicts. However, it was harder to make this association when it came to the storyline of *Divine Intervention* and *The Extras* due to their intricate structure and storyline. This orientation is also evident in the fact that the majority of the participants believed that *West Beirut* helps to improve their understanding of the political unrest in the Middle East, but most of them disagreed when it came to *The Extras* (see Chart 10). As previously mentioned, this question was unfortunately not included in the post-film questionnaire in the case of *Omar* or the *Divine Intervention* and should be included in future offerings of this course.

8. Implications and Recommendations:

"Arab Film" was an enjoyable and constructive course for both the instructor and the students. This form of learning proved to be a more appealing and engaging experience for many students with different academic backgrounds than a typical instructional setting. Due to cinema's powerful visual effect, students could appreciate more and began to understand cross-cultural borders when selected films stimulate critical thinking that eventually leads to a higher level of intercultural competence. This orientation is more critical when it comes to Arab cinema as the Arab world figures, for economic and political reasons, prominently in Western mainstream media. The significance for CSU students in learning about the Arab World seems to be closely related to the fact that the Arab population of Greater Cleveland is one the largest Arab communities in the United States.

During the course, students could be seen undergoing a gradual growth in terms of maturity, openness to other cultures, and skills to

critically perceive the 'Other' differently. At the same time this was a personal learning process for the instructor weighing modification and addition of features in the instructional procedure that aimed to help students cross cultural borders, and consequently achieve a higher level of intercultural competence. Showing unfamiliar or controversial films is more effective in pushing students beyond their comfort zone. Such is the case with students' exposure to more situations in which they need to compare and contrast non-familiar realities. This learning process will sharpen students' learning techniques and critical thinking. Subsequently, these practices will promote growth toward a higher level of intercultural competence.

When I teach this course again, I will modify it in such a way as to enhance students' learning experiences and guide them to achieve a better level of intercultural competence. Showing films that represent the intricate realities found in the Arab cultures would be an instrumental practice towards achieving these goals. Furthermore, to cover the theoretical aspect of the course, I will be using, along with reading materials, documentaries about the politics and the history of the Arab World. In this way, students will relate visually to more aspects of the Arab cultures as we can screen films from other parts of the Arab world.

9. Conclusion:

This essay has shown that the use of cinema as a teaching tool in American academic institutions promotes a challenging and stimulating learning process that incorporates other interdisciplinary areas, such as history, sociology, literature, and politics. This form of instruction can provide students with effective tools to enhance their perception of the target culture as well as their intercultural awareness. This holds true especially when it comes to Arab cultures, which are presented one-sidedly in Western mainstream media. The use of cinema as a teaching method, therefore, can enrich students' learning experience, sharpen their critical thinking, and enable them to work toward a higher level of intercultural competence.

This study reveals that most students began the course with a highly limited knowledge of Arab cultures. This is evident in misinterpretations, inconsistencies, and contradictions that appeared in students' responses and class discussions. The procedure of guiding students effectively towards achieving a better understanding of Arab cultures and subsequently attaining a higher level of intercultural competence proved to be a multi-faceted process of growth, whose anticipated outcomes affect both the learners and the instructor. This long

process began with the instructor's attempt to evaluate the participants' educational background, which in our case can be described on the whole as monolingual and narrow. In fact, using the questionnaire and adapting instruction accordingly have shown that there was a need to spend additional time providing students with more information about the cultures, history, and politics in the Arab World.

Second, learners' responses showed that the instructor's efforts to minimize the dominant role of Western media in shaping students' perception and views about Arab cultures were not sufficient. Hence, it would be better, when this course is taught again, to dedicate more discussions to historical and sociopolitical background in order to debunk misconceptions that will consequently remove many cultural barriers and misunderstandings. The students' reactions also show that exposing them to controversial issues and themes was crucial in prompting critical thinking after they felt outside their comfort zone and began to negotiate dissimilarities and unfamiliar areas. Thus, in order to achieve a higher level of intercultural awareness, it would be better to screen more provocative Arab films that capture burning socio-political and cultural issues in the Arab societies.

To recapitulate, the present study demonstrates that not only can cinema serve as an effective source of learning about Arab cultures, but it also functions as a yardstick to assess students' learning about cultures across borders as well as the level of intercultural communicative competence. To successfully conduct this type of teaching, however, the article points to a number of measures that ought to be considered. First, the instructor needs to be familiar with the learners' cultural background, which informs their intercultural awareness as well as their perception of the 'Other.' Second, students should be provided with adequate historical and cultural background against which Arab cinema emerged. Finally, the inclusion of atypical and thought-provoking films is indispensable, because students are intellectually more challenged when they are placed in the vicinity of unfamiliar borders and non-relatable territories.

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Appendix: Students' Responses to the Questionnaire

1) Ranking of films

Film title	Rank	Most favorite/ interesting	Least favorite/ interesting	Student comments
<i>Captain Abu Raed</i>	1	87 %		Interesting; very interesting, well done
<i>Caramel</i>	2	70 %		Interesting; very interesting,
<i>Omar</i>	3	62 %		Very interesting
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>	4	50 %		Interesting
<i>West Beirut</i>	5		51%	
<i>Divine intervention</i>	6		80 %	Boring, weird
<i>The Extras</i>	7		80 %	Boring

2) More similarities than differences: Themes and topics

Film title	Agree	Disagree	Student comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	72 %		
<i>Caramel</i>	77 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>West Beirut</i>	60 %		
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>	51 %		
<i>Divine intervention</i>		61%	Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Extras</i>		63 %	Disagree or strongly disagree

3) More differences than similarities: Status and conditions of women

Film title	Agree	Disagree	Students comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	66 %		Agree
<i>Caramel</i>	65 %		Agree
<i>Omar</i>	80 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>	78 %		Agree or strongly agree

<i>West Beirut</i>		51 %	disagree
<i>Divine intervention</i>	52 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Extras</i>	63 %		Agree

4) More similarities than differences: Social, political, economic background

Film title	Agree	Disagree	Students comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	55 %		Agree or strongly agree
Omar	59 %		Agree or strongly agree
The Yacoubian Building		51 %	Disagree or strongly disagree
Caramel	57%		Agree or strongly agree
West Beirut		59 %	Disagree or strongly disagree
Divine intervention		56 %	Disagree or strongly disagree
The Extras		56 %	Disagree or strongly disagree

5) More similarities than differences: Violence in film is disturbing

Film title	Agree	Disagree	Agree or strongly agree
<i>Omar</i>		60 %	Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>		51 %	Agree or strongly agree
<i>West Beirut</i>		64 %	Agree or strongly agree
<i>Divine intervention</i>		60 %	Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Extras</i>		77 %	Disagree or strongly disagree

6) Surprised at how different the political system is

Film title	Agree	Disagree	Students Comments
<i>Omar</i>	53 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>	70 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>West Beirut</i>	67 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>Caramel</i>	52 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>Divine intervention</i>	75 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>The Extras</i>	54 %		Agree or strongly agree

7) Recommend the film to others

<i>Film title</i>	Agree	Disagree	Students Comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	85 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>Caramel</i>	84 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>West Beirut</i>	80 %		Agree or strongly agree
<i>Omar</i>	60 %		Strongly agree
<i>Divine intervention</i>		51 %	Very weird; vague symbols, horrible movie
<i>The Extras</i>		72 %	

8) Representation of sexuality is disturbing

<i>Film title</i>	Agree	Disagree	Students comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>		At least 65%	
<i>Caramel</i>		At least 65%	
<i>Omar</i>		At least 65%	
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>	64 %		Agreed; Shocked by depiction of homosexual scenes
<i>West Beirut</i>		At least 65%	One student compared it with American Civil War
<i>Divine intervention</i>		At least 65%	
<i>The Extras</i>		At least 65%	There are some shocking scenes about sex that should not be shown.

9) More similarities than differences: Techniques

<i>Film title</i>	Agree	disagree	Student Comments
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	61 %		Many students believe it is NA
<i>Caramel</i>	51 %		
<i>Omar</i>			
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>			
<i>West Beirut</i>	55 %		
<i>Divine intervention</i>		68 %	Disagree or strongly disagree
<i>The Extras</i>		61 %	Disagree or strongly disagree

10) The film helps understanding the State of the political unrest in the Middle East

<i>Film title</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>Student Comments</i>
<i>Captian Abu Raed</i>	47 %	32%	21 %	Many students believe that this question is NA
<i>Caramel</i>	40 %	40 %	20 %	
<i>Omar</i>				
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i>				
<i>West Beirut</i>	93 %			Agreed or strongly agreed
<i>Divine intervention</i>				
<i>The Extras</i>	43 %	57 %	-	

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