

# Cinema global - local: Cooperation and Co-Production between Europe and the Middle East

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In recent years an increasing amount of films from the Middle East have entered the international film festival circuit. Some major works like *Paradise Now* (*Al-Jana Alan*, Hany Abu Assad, NL/D/F/IL 2005), *Caramel* (*Sukr Banat*, Nadine Labaki, F/LB 2007), or *Waltz With Bashir* (*Waltz Im Bashir*, Ari Folman, IL/D/F/USA/B/CH/AUS 2008) also get theatrical releases in Europe or the USA, where they are often read as documents and authentic insights into a foreign culture.

Due to very high production costs of cinema movies, and a lack of funding in the region of origin, most of the financing is provided by European public film funds. The pressure of refunding through exhibition and sales and the scarcity of screens in the Middle East, demand Europe as a market for these films. What is the impact of European financing or co-production on films from the Middle East?

German funds boasted with the Oscar nominations for *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir*, Michael Schmid-Ospach, then head of influential *Filmstiftung NRW* is quoted in a fund's press release of February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006 'I keep my fingers crossed that *Paradise Now* will take the Oscar also to North-Rhine-Westphalia', and daily newspaper *Hamburger Abendblatt* stated on March 16<sup>th</sup> 2009 that *Waltz With Bashir* was 'besides Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* and Werner Herzog's documentary *Encounters at the End of the World* yet another German iron in the award-fire'. As ownership of a film is bound to financing, in fact both films are German.

A short overview of public film policy in Arab Middle Eastern countries and Israel, as well as some exemplary information about European media interventions in the Middle East, introduce key aspects of production and ideational approaches to film-making in the region.

Using the example of *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir* as the two films from the region with the widest international exposure and press coverage, questions about the interests in cooperation, the dependencies and power structures, the themes dealt with in co-productions, and influences on narrative structure will be touched upon. Critics' readings and lobbyists' interventions are contrasted with, or put in relation to, initial project ideas and

production realities.

Finally the paradox and maybe schizophrenic character a film can develop and the life it is leading between different national and globalized ideals and realities will be looked at.

Whose collective memory, whose national archive will these films be part of?

This contribution is limited to the Arab countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt) and Israel. The region has a different colonial history from North Africa or the Arab Peninsula. It was immediately affected by the formation of Israel with which most of the countries have direct borders and all absorbed Palestinian refugees. From the European co-producers standpoint Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and the closest ally in the region. A large number of Israeli co-productions with Europe deal with Palestinian/Arab subjects and hence, to a certain degree, define Arabness and analyze Arab issues for the European audiences.

### Cinema as Weapon

Movie theatres opened in different Middle Eastern countries around the 1910s. Until the Arab states in the Middle East gained independence in the 1940s only few films were produced by individuals and local production facilities were insufficient. Solely Egypt established a highly commercial industry in the 1930s. Early cinema in independent Lebanon, and Iraq as well, was rather commercial and many films were produced by, or in cooperation with, Egyptian film-makers who left their country after the revolution of 1952.

The late 1960s marked a change not only in Arab film making. All over the globe revolutionary movements gained strength. Alternative ways of film production and film aesthetics were developed and numerous manifestos were published. 'For as long as part of that [colonized, I.N.] people can have a cultural life, foreign domination can not be sure of its perpetuation' (Cabral, as cited in Joseph Massad, 2006). Cinema was, in this sense, used as weapon.

Socialist Iraq and Syria put efforts in setting up national film industries, including the required film schools. Until then film-makers from the two countries went to conduct their studies in Eastern Europe, mainly in Moscow. The PLO set up own film units and Syrian *National Film Organization* produced several internationally acclaimed films, mainly on Palestinian subjects, directed by foreign Arab film-makers.

Production in Lebanon more or less stopped due to the civil war (1975-90) and decreased in Egypt as a result of scarce financial cover in the largely nationalized film industry as well as

the rise of TV. Only individual directors worked outside the state-run or commercial production houses. Youssef Chahine opened his own company in Egypt and after several Arab co-productions and a joint venture with the Soviet Union, co-produced with France since the 1980s. Lebanese directors Jocelyne Saab, Heiny Srour, Bourhane Alawya, and Randa Chahal worked with different bodies inside the Arab World and Europe since the end of the 1970s. Saab and Alawya do so till today. As members of the *International Organization of the Francophonie*, Egyptian and Lebanese companies can, since the beginning of local non-commercial production, apply for the cinema support program of the *Francophonie* as well as for French *Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC)* and *Fond Sud*.

Arab film-making today has to be seen as an effort of individuals. Except Egypt whose commercial production is gaining strength again over the past years, no country has a considerable film-industry, film-institutions or film-laws. The *National Film Organization* in Damascus is still functioning and produces not more than one or two films a year. It also organizes the bi-annual *Damascus International Film Festival*. The Lebanese Ministry of Culture founded a Cinematheque in 1999 which had to be closed in 2001 'due to economic and administrative difficulties'. Small funds for production and post-production can be provided by the Ministry, yet the regulations are not published'. The *Royal Jordanian Film Commission's* main objective is to provide production services and locations to foreign producers. The country has served as location for films as Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the last Crusade* (USA, 1989) or Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winner *The Hurt Locker* (USA, 2009) among many others. It had announced the launching of a film fund accessible to Arab film-makers for summer 2009. Yet, in the wake of the international financial crisis the institution of the fund has been canceled for the time being. So far two feature length fiction films have been credited Jordanian, one in the late 1960s, followed by award-winning *Captain Abu Raed* (Amin Matalqa, 2007) about forty years later.

Hany Abu Assad's *Rana's Wedding – Jerusalem another Day (Al-Quds fi Yawm Akhir*, Palestine 2002) was purely financed by the *Palestinian Film Fund* of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture. The film department of the ministry was then headed by Liana Badr, who is a co-writer of the film's script which is based on her story. No other film had a credit of the *Palestinian Film Fund*. Iraq is not in a situation to establish public film institutions at this point. The few productions and the *Independent Film and Television School Baghdad* are funded by private investors or Western NGOs. In fact in all the countries foreign NGOs fill the gap left by governments' inaction or cultural disarming.

When it comes to larger cinematic productions, the director, often also functioning as local producer, is raising funds through co-production partners in Europe.

Israel has a well functioning film-industry and a wealth of public funds, yet the grants or loans provided are not sufficient to produce films meeting international standard in technical terms or rather the films' 'look'. Israeli film-making dates back to the time of the Zionist settlement in Palestine. Mainly consisting of documentary films and newsreels in the early years, Israeli film industry started producing fiction in the 1950s. To date the country has a considerable film archive and a very high reputation abroad. Though provided with all tools necessary for the film's production, Israeli film-makers depend on foreign, namely European markets, for exhibition and refunding, given the country's small size.

### Peace and Co-operation

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil wars like in Lebanon or Nicaragua ended and new warfare as in Iraq, Yugoslavia, or Rwanda begun. Saddam Hussein made debate on the Palestinian question a condition for peace negotiations to end the 1991 war. In fact, a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation participated in the multilateral *Madrid Conference for Peace in the Middle East* in 1991 and the consecutive talks. In parallel secret negotiations were held between Israeli and Palestinian officials, hosted by the Norwegian government. They resulted in the *Declaration of Principles*, signed in September 1993 in Washington DC, and thus stopped the multilateral efforts of the official conference. In addition to the first EU-Mediterranean cultural partnership programs, these so called *Oslo Accords*, till the mid-2000s sometimes called 'peace agreements', were a starting point for numerous intervention initiatives in the region, including media projects.

The majority of the media projects aim at regional democratization, professionalizing of the Arab media, and dialogues for peace-building. The objectives range from 'ending unskilled, inaccurate, highly partisan reporting', 'teaching the importance of fact-checking and objectivity' to 'voicing versus invisibility, stereotyping and distorted development' (Bruce Stanley 2007: 141 et sqq.). They target mainly journalists, sometimes artists and (documentary) film-makers. At the same time a large number of Arabs state that Western mainstream media, like CNN, BBC and others bracket them within such categories as 'terrorists', 'terrorist supporters' or 'Islamic fundamentalists' and draw an undifferentiated image of Arabs and Muslims (see e.g. Dina Matar 2007). Against this background many media intervention programs lack credibility in the region, especially with the critical intelligentsia.

In 1992, the European Union launched the MED Programs, one of them MED-Media, for media professionals. The programs aimed at intensifying political and economic cooperation

between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean after the 1991 Gulf War. Due to nepotism in the EU administration the program was interrupted for several years and was picked up again in 1998 (European Parliament, 1999). MED-Media focused on support for co-operation between Palestinians and Israelis in the post-Oslo processes. Application for funds was possible if Israelis and Palestinians submitted joint film/cinema projects. *The Inner Tour (Ha-Tioul Ha-Pnimi*, 2001) by Israeli director Ra'anana Alexandrovitch is one of the very few completed works initiated by MED-Media and got some wider exposure. Many Palestinians rejected the program. At a time they were shaping their society, the project ironically forced them to co-operate with those they sought independence from. Or in other words, this democratizing intervention project enforced cross-border co-operation before borders were agreed upon and power relations were balanced. Furthermore, thanks to bilateral co-production agreements and a well functioning public cinema-industry in their country, Israelis had access to additional European funds, another imbalance, in this case from resulting from the occupation and subsequent absence of Palestinian administration, which thwarted the idea of equality.

The *Greenhouse* project which was one out of twelve projects supported by the Euromed-Audiovisual program, succeeding MED-Media, directly strengthened the *Palestinian Campaign for Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel*. Headed by an Israeli film organization the project was initially a training initiative for Arab and Israeli documentary film-makers. Besides strong emotional refusal and serious allegations against the Palestinian partner in a different context<sup>ii</sup>, very practical questions arose: e.g. how can Syrians or Lebanese even theoretically participate in the workshops? The solution provided was that meetings would take place in either Jordan or Egypt, countries accessible to all MENA partners. Yet none of the Arabs could accept that representatives of a public Israeli entity chair a training initiative on Arab soil as long as occupation goes on. There was little understanding from the side of the EU project management. Moreover, *Greenhouse*, after restructuring, is the only project still operating with EU grants after the ending of Euromed-Audiovisual II funding period.

In October 2009 Euromed-Audiovisual III was launched, the deadline for submitting proposals will be in June 2010. This further edition of the program is financed by *EuropeAid*.

<sup>i</sup>The specific objectives of this call for proposals are:

- to develop and reinforce cinematographic and audiovisual capacity in the Mediterranean partner countries;
- to promote complementarity and integration of the film and audiovisual industries in the region; and
- to promote the free movement of goods and services in the sector.

The Euromed Audiovisual III Programme also aims to provide the Mediterranean authorities with technical support for the improvement of the legislative and institutional framework in the sector, an

objective that will be managed by technical assistance for capacity-building provided under a service contract. [...]

This call for proposals is divided into three areas [...]:

- **Area 1:** Training of industry professionals (approx. 30% of the budget [...])
- **Area 2:** Building distribution capacity and supporting the emergence of new distribution models and media (approx. 30% of the budget [...])
- **Area 3:** Developing a Euro-Mediterranean audience (approx. 40% of the budget [...])' (European Commission 2009:5).

Also Euromed Audiovisual III is a EU-Mediterranean Partnership program and hence, though focusing on the 'integration of the film and audiovisual industries in the region', a EU-partner is compulsory for project application (ibid.: 8). It is mainly the EU or national public bodies who set off and finance media intervention initiatives through umbrella programs like the Euromed Audiovisual. The respective projects are conducted by individual 'consortiums' consisting of NGOs and operating under the project name under which they apply for EU-funding, like e.g. *Greenhouse*.

### Co-production for the big screen

Allover the world only a very small number of film-makers succeeds in completing a feature length film that makes it to the top festivals and captures the cinemas. Despite the honor for the director and the producers to participate in such an internationally prestigious event, festivals are tough market-places. Only works of the highest possible international standard, yet not (too) commercial, make it into the official selections. The films' subjects have to be relevant, which usually means that the story has to tell about a timely subject or deal with a universal question in a new and critical, yet audience-compatible way.

In recent years a growing number of films from the Middle East is selected for official competitions of European top festivals and is awarded with prestigious prizes: Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (Yadon Ilaheyya, Pal/F/D 2002) won the Jury Award in Cannes, *Atash* by Palestinian director Tawfik Abu Wael (Israel 2004) was awarded with the prestigious International Critic's Award at the *Semaine de la Critique* in Cannes together with Keren Yedaya's *Or* (Israel/F 2004) which received the *Camera d'Or* in the same festival section. *Jelly Fish* (*Meduzot*, Etgar Keret and Shira Geffen, IL/F 2007) won the award three years later. *Lemon Tree* received the Audience Award at Berlinale's Panorama section and *Lebanon* (*Levanon*, Samuel Maoz, IL/D/F 2009) took the *Golden Lion* in Venice in 2009. *Waltz with Bashir* won the hearts of the critics and the audience in Cannes and *Paradise Now* the Amnesty International Award as well as the Blue Engel for the best European film (sic!) in Berlin.

## Almost Paradise

The international success of *Paradise Now* is remarkable and somewhat heavenly at first glance. The film tells the story of two young Palestinian men who have been recruited for a strike on Tel Aviv and focuses on their last days together. When they are intercepted at the Israeli border and separated from their handlers, a young woman who discovers their plan causes them to reconsider their actions.

After a very cinematic introduction to the protagonists and the story's setting, the film becomes rather verbose, explaining motivations to commit suicide as a bomb. Pros and cons are discussed in a model democratic manner as if to introduce the foreign viewer to the subject.

Hany Abu Assad, born in Palestinian Nazareth inside Israel, went to study airplane engineering in Holland in the late 1980s, yet moved into film-production soon. *Paradise Now*, his fourth feature length film as director, was originally meant to be a story about the 90 minutes spent between a suicide bomber reaching the place of attack and striking, a time nobody knew what the wo/men might do or feel. It was supposed to be a reflection on prejudices, fantasies and fears. Based in Amsterdam, Abu Assad repeatedly found himself in situations where he was asked to explain suicide bombing. Being confronted with the strong emotions of his Dutch fellows and his own, he started to think about turning the subject into a film with a satirical approach<sup>iii</sup>.

Also other Arab directors report about the pressure to constantly explain politically motivated violence. Mahmoud al-Massad, who lives in The Netherlands as well, tells in his director's statement for *Recycle* (E'adat Khalq, Jor/NL/D/CH/USA 2007):

'As a European-based film director from Zarqa, Jordan, I wanted to find out why extremism seems to breed so easily in my hometown. So I returned to Zarqa after eight years to research a film that would examine cultural conflicts between Islam and the West, and find options other than those presented by the media, which tends to present two sides to a story and then forces us to choose one. [...] As I travelled around Zarqa, I realized the people who were opening up to me, and perhaps even those who were threatening me, were asking themselves the same questions. It was while trying to negotiate the maze created by media interpretation and the reality of the situation and find answers that I met Abu Ammar. He was a man who showed me that even those considered most extreme are not as one-dimensional as the world might think. The focus of my film changed, and *Recycle* was born'. (Wide Management 2007:4)

Abu Assad applied to a number of European funds, which expressed interest provided some conditions were met. Basically, the story needed to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing to a European audience. The decision makers of the contributing German funds, for example, said that they need to support films which are interesting for their German

audiences, because of tax money paying part of the production. Another important aspect for the funders was the need to comprehend the story, given the delicate subject<sup>iv</sup>.

The support of European film funds is essential to make the production possible. Pre-sales of distribution rights on the basis of the script enabled the producers to provide the best possible equipment, pay professional personnel, and guarantee – on the technical level – an international standard ‘look’ of the film. Yet, the other side of the coin is the pressure to satisfy the extremely high expectations. How to tell this local story to a global audience? How to reflect a current and disturbing phenomenon in my home country with public and private investors abroad? How many concessions to make for reaching the goal of producing a film that can reach transnational audiences? These are questions Arab directors are constantly confronted with. Many times they are the only Arab in the core team.

The permanent presence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in European mass-media feigns a feeling of knowledge and familiarity with the subject to the viewers. Furthermore, reporting by a third party, usually perceived as neutral, pretends overview and fairness. When it comes to investing public European money in Arab films, or more precisely a film by an Arab director, the film’s political direction becomes pivotal. In the preamble of the guidelines for film support of *Filmstiftung NRW*, for example, it says:

“Filmstiftung are bound to refuse support to screenplays or film projects whose content glorifies war and physical or psychological violence, incites racial hatred, or is pornographic and a moral endangerment to children and young people”<sup>v</sup>.

It is not mainly German law which defines what glorification of war or incitement of racial hatred is, it is German ‘common sense’ and foreign policy. In France as well the issue of Israel/Palestine is delicate and in The Netherlands, the third co-production country, political tension is high since the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh. All three are engaged in the ‘global coalition against terror’.

Abu Assad likes to position his films in the no man’s land between fiction and reality, he likes to confuse and take the viewer to his, Abu Assad’s, reality rather than to a reality the audience already knows. He prefers the grey zone in which new views and thoughts can be developed (Irit Neidhardt, 2006). What are the grey zones on the backdrop of the realities of film financing? How subtle can he be if the audience he has to reach for recouping production costs most probably never saw an image of a Palestinian’s banal daily routine?

*Paradise Now* has stirred little controversy, in fact, since its November 2005 opening in US theaters. The film has prompted no boycotts. It has elicited no complaints that it is “carrying the original terrorists’ intended message to every theater in the world,” as conservative pundit Charles

Krauthammer fumed about Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, or that it "echoes the conventional wisdom found in Berkeley's faculty lounges and Barbra Streisand's sitting room," as the *San Diego Union-Tribune* dismissed the George Clooney vehicle *Syriana*. Instead, and despite conveying an uncomfortable political message more forthrightly than either *Munich* or *Syriana*, *Paradise Now* has received measured praise from American reviewers. (Lori Allen, 2006)

Allen explains the rather positive reception of *Paradise Now* in the USA, where it was awarded with the *Golden Globe* for the best foreign film and nominated for an *Oscar*, with its understated staging. Film reception is embedded in a local/national culture of the recipient. Compared to Hollywood movies, of which quite a number deal with the Arab World and 'terrorism' since the 1970s, *Paradise Now* is pretty much a film in a 'grey zone' as Abu Assad put it.

In Germany, together with the USA the most pro-Israel country in the world, the film caused a lot of controversy though. Its proponents liked the human approach and the film's realism. They found it important to show that Palestinians are 'human beings'. The opponents found the movie too one-sided. The choice to tell the film from the perspective of the suicide bomber was seen as the director's 'Palestinian propaganda' (see e.g. Tobias Ebbrecht, 2005). Though Martin Kloke has understanding for the 'unbalanced character' of *Paradise Now* because of the director being Palestinian, he cynically adds that 'it seems to be part of this realistic authenticity that the Israeli side is barely taken into consideration, and if so only as 'victimizers' or 'water-poisoners' and criticizes that 'any kind of multi-perspectivity and cognitive uncertainty that would have integrated the Israeli society in its complexity' is missing (Kloke, 2005). The controversy was heated up when national education centre *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* published tuition material and recommended *Paradise Now* for cinema education at schools. In fact the material was taken off the market due to massive protests.

### Animating Memory

Plenty of similarities can be found between *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir*. *Waltz with Bashir* also took home the *Golden Globe* for best foreign film and was nominated for an *Oscar*. Both films are co-productions with France and Germany, and both are placed in the grey zone between reality and fiction. The readings though, differ vastly.

*Waltz with Bashir* documents the struggle of the filmmaker, Ari Folman to come to terms with the gaps in his memory surrounding the part he played in the 1982 Lebanon War, and the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of *Sabra and Shatila* in Beirut. The entirely animated documentary starts with a sequence of Folman's friend's nightmares.

From the very beginning the borders between memory, reality, and fantasy are blurred. As increasingly common in documentary film formats, about half of the film's scenes are reenacted or staged. These parts, Folman's inner eye images, recall Eran Riklis' *Cup Final* (*Gmar Gavia*, IL 1991) or Haim Bouzaglos' *Cherry Season* (*Onat Ha-Duvdevanim*, IL 1991) as well as news reports. The former being fiction films which equally deal with the tension between banality and stress of Israeli soldiers' daily grind during the Lebanon invasion.

Tel Aviv based Folman participated in the war as young soldier on duty. When he turned forty, he felt tired to serve his annual reserve duty, in which he directed and scripted comedy films for the army and went to see a psychologist for some meetings to get the release order. After the sessions ended and Folman obtained demobilization, he realized that he had told the psychologist 'everything' he did in the army but remembered nothing about the Lebanon War. This was when the idea for the movie was born.

The animation, Folman said, gave him 'the freedom he wanted as director' (Making Of, 2009). He started talking with his friends about their war memories, something he had never done before. His researcher placed an ad in the internet, looking for men who served during the first three months of the war and were ready to talk. The stories of a hundred men were filmed by Folman's team. With this material in hand the director went to the countryside, locked himself in for six days and scripted the film (ibid.).

The *New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and Television* was the first fund to support the project, other financiers, mainly Israeli and Western TV stations, joined in to complete financing and alleviate access to markets and distribution subsidies. Not much is written or told about the production and financing of the film other than regarding the singularity of animating a feature length documentary.

Decoding the film, the public relation material, and reviews gives the impression that Folman faced less reservation than Abu Assad. If applying the same ethical, or political, standards to both productions, some aspects strike. Whereas *Paradise Now* is told from the perspective of a fictitious suicide bomber, *Waltz with Bashir* is written from the perspective of a real ex-soldier who visualizes, or reenacts, memories of murders conducted by the army he served in, in his presence, maybe by himself. Folman calls the massacre of *Sabra and Shatila* 'the worst thing that humankind can do to each other' (The Match Factory 2008: 7) and scripted it as his film's climax. In the light of this cruelty the invasion itself, the consequential occupation of private Lebanese houses as well as the destruction and murder by the Israeli army that are shown, though as staged memories, seem negligible. Folman talks to his friends to discover his own role in this war, never to discuss, reflect, or question, nor to exchange or

share memories or views with them. There is no idea of multi-perspectivity.

As much as the Israeli Other is almost physically absent in *Paradise Now*, the Lebanese Other is in *Waltz with Bashir*. We see the Palestinian Other, in Lebanon, briefly as victims of the massacre conducted by the Lebanese Other in *Sabra and Shatila*. Otherwise the Palestinians are named as 'the terrorists', never as 'Palestinians', which caused no protest. Moreover the film was celebrated by the international press. 'Waltz With Bashir is an extraordinary, harrowing, provocative picture. We staggered out of the screening in a daze' Xan Brooks wrote in *The Guardian*. *Le Journal du Dimanche* wrote 'The artistic choice made by Folman (animation) brings an apocalyptic and surrealistic dimension to this universal and moving film'. And Jason Solomons claims in *The Observer* 'It's a shattering war film, full of guilt and shock, and finding a new medium for expressing and exploring familiar themes' ([www.waltzwithbashir.com](http://www.waltzwithbashir.com)). Asked about his feelings regarding *Sabra and Shatila* today Folman himself states:

'One thing for sure is that the Christian Phalangist militiamen were fully responsible for the massacre. The Israeli soldiers had nothing to do with it. As for the Israeli government, only they know the extent of their responsibility. Only they know if they were informed or not in advance about the oncoming violent revenge' (The Match Factory 2008:7).

This explanation of the director is quite identical to the reading many Lebanese, who watched the pirated DVD in their country, had. They criticized that Folman sees himself as the victim. For Israeli historian Tom Segev 'the film "Waltz with Bashir" belongs to the kvetch genre: "Oy, how traumatic that massacre in Sabra and Chatila was for us"' (Segev, 2009).

## Conclusion

Most of the films from the Middle East that get wider international exposure in the last ten years are Israeli or Palestinian. All of them are co-productions and mostly deal with subjects Europe associates with the region, namely occupation, war and terror as the list of the award winning films above reflects. Whereas in earlier years also individual Egyptian or Syrian fiction films made it into competitive sections of mayor international festivals like Cannes or Locarno, these countries' productions are nearly invisible now even to the professional audience.

The media intervention programs and training initiatives for Arabs delivered by NGOs, yet financed with European public monies, mirror hegemonies and dependencies. Taking into consideration the absence of cinema infrastructure in the Arab World and thus the lack of institutional representation, or backing, for film-makers leads to question to what degree the

director can control her/his story. Or in other words, to what extent the films, which are read as national works, can reflect debates or atmospheres in their country of origin at all? The decoding of films, not only from the Middle East, is in many cases national, as in the case of *Paradise Now*. Critics' reactions to *Waltz with Bashir* suggest that the reading of the film is connected to the actual political experience *within* the region versus political assumptions *about* it, a rather regional reading. An aspect entirely missing in the Western decoding process of films from the Middle East is the question who was involved in the encoding. The critics, who translate the film to the wider audience, focus on the films' subjects or manipulations, rather than on the economic and institutional backing of the creation and thus interests behind it. After completing the film it is solely the director who has to defend the work as a statement from her/his country and about it.

The majority of co-productions by directors from the region, like all over the world, get little attention. The socio-political effects of the economic and institutional structures that make the production possible should be analyzed carefully in another study, nevertheless.

It is the films with international recognition, be it by box office numbers or debates that are remembered. Temptation is high to envision *Paradise Now* as part of a Palestinian collective memory and *Caramel* as Lebanese. Without physical archives in the Arab countries, and Palestine not even being a state, how long will the movies be accessible as part of cultural heritage? In French archives the film rolls will be stored and made accessible, *Paradise Now* will additionally be found in German archives. It is in Europe where Arabs will still have to look for their cultural memory in the distant future.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.culture.gov.lb/Sections/main.ASP?page=Cinema>

<sup>ii</sup> More about the activities against the Greenhouse and the Palestinian Campaign for Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel can be found here:  
<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=137&key=greenhouse>, Greenhouse website  
<http://www.ghfilmcentre.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> I had several conversations with Hany Abu Assad on *Paradise Now* between 2001 and 2003. The narratives of the early stages of the idea's development in the countless interviews held with the director after completing the film differ a lot from the informal conversations we had when the film was not more than an idea yet.

<sup>iv</sup> Conversations with funds' staffers.

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.filmstiftung.de/English/guidelines\\_for\\_support.php](http://www.filmstiftung.de/English/guidelines_for_support.php)