

Arab Cinema in Europe: The Gains, Losses and Challenges ahead

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The big Arab success story of 2019 was the colossal box-office success of Lebanese Nadine Labaki's Oscar-nominated third feature, "Capernaum," which raked in \$64 million worldwide, \$50 million of which were grossed in China alone. The unprecedented triumph of Labaki's refugee drama – the most commercially successful Arab film of all time – was regarded as a watershed moment for Arab movies:¹ a sign of the expanding reach of a cinema that has often been lumped in the niche art-house market. The more fascinating and telling Arab success story from last year was the equally remarkable commercial success of French/Algerian Mounia Meddour's debut feature, "Papicha," at the French box-office. Raking in 1.6 million euros from about 250,000 sold tickets, the Cannes nominee accomplished the unexpected feat of becoming the most successful African picture directed by a woman at the French box office.² Long established worldwide, Labaki's success was not entirely surprising, given the caliber of the heavy backers behind her (Sony Pictures in North America; Wild Bunch, the leading European film distributor, in Europe) and her previous stellar box-office record with "Caramel" (2007), and its follow-up, "Where Do We Go Now?" (2011). "Papicha" was an altogether different proposition, however: the first film of a debutant Arab director with little cachet, and backed by a distributor (Jour2Fête) that is second in the ranking to the French majors (Wild Bunch, Le Pacte, MK2, Pyramide).

The success of "Papicha" – a garish, high-pitched melodrama about a college student attempting to organize a fashion show at the peak of the Algerian Civil War – was another confirmation of Arab Cinema's growing popularity in Europe; an indicator that with proper marketing and good reviews, an Arab picture could penetrate the stern barrier of the mainstream. Conversely, the success of "Papicha" also reveals the challenges facing Arab cinema in increasing its presence in Europe.

Over the past two decades, the most commercially successful Arab films in Europe closely adhered to specific formulas: stories of terrorism ("Paradise Now," 2005), poverty ("Cappernaum"; "Ali Zaoua," 2000), female oppression ("Papicha"; "Wadjda," 2012; "Cairo 678," 2010). In other words, films that ratify Western viewers' perceptions and prejudices of the Arab world rather than defy them. And herein lies the presiding obstacle confronting Arab Cinema: for an Arab film to reach a wider audience, or so distributors and sales agents believe, it must stick to these static subjects or risk banishment to the purgatory of festivals and art-house cinemas.

Arab cinema has witnessed a major leap over the past 20 years on all levels: artful aesthetics, elevated production values, and sophisticated narratives. The increase of regional funds and European co-production with Arab filmmakers went in tandem with festivals expanding their geographical representation. In major festivals, such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Toronto, it has become habitual for Arab films to figure in their selections, and distribution of films from different parts of the Arab world is no longer a one-off, as it used to be in the last century.

¹ RITMAN, Alex. "What the \$50 Million Success of 'Capernaum' in China Means for Arab Cinema." www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/what-china-box-office-success-capernaum-means-arab-cinema-1218378.

² KESLASSY, Elsa. "'Papicha' Becomes Most Successful Female-Directed African Film Ever in France." <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/papicha-becomes-most-successful-female-directed-african-film-ever-in-france-1203416926/>

For an Arab film to garner distribution deals in Europe, a participation in one of the aforementioned major festivals is almost mandatory. Not all festivals, however, take chances on selecting Arab films that stray from the usual themes of poverty, migration, terrorism, wars/revolutions and subjection of women. Arab films with different topics and of different genres that deviate from the still dominant social realism, continue to struggle for international attention, leaving the general European viewers with a very limited pool of pictures from the region.

Beyond festivals, even more limited in capacity are the European territories exhibiting Arab movies in theatres. France remains the Mecca for global independent films, and by default Arab movies; the one international market where a high-profiled or buzzed-about Arab film can generate substantial revenues theatrically. Germany comes in as a distant second, thanks to the abundance of cinemas showing films in their original language in different parts of the country.

Spain and Italy have been more elusive markets to crack. Foreign films are usually dubbed in both countries, a costly process when you consider most Arab films have little commercial potential. There were a few exceptions to the rule, most prominently in Palestinian Annemarie Jacir's "Wajib" (2017) – a father-son relationship exploring the stark and morally grey reality of present-day Palestine. Jacir's third feature, which premiered at the competition of the Locarno Film Fest of the same year, grossed \$191,398 in Italy and \$104,370 in Spain – sizeable figures for Arab films showing theatrically.

An even bigger box-office success was Ziad Doueiri's 2017 Oscar nominee, "The Insult," a controversial courtroom drama centring on a spat between a Christian Lebanese mechanic and a Palestinian Muslim refugee. Doueiri's Venice Film Fest winner grossed \$849,360 in Italy and \$135,133 in Spain.

The rest of Europe remains virtually blind to Arab cinema. Norway is emerging as a potential new market for Arab filmmakers. "Capernaum" raked in \$197,205 in the emerging Scandinavian market – a record for an Arab film. The impact of Arab cinema on the rest of Europe, by comparison, is negligible. Despite its Oscar and Cannes buzz, "Capernaum" only managed to score \$7,578 in Bulgaria, \$5,002 in Czech, \$25,281 in Lithuania and \$15,971 in Romania. The UK, meanwhile, has seen its congested market for non-

English films radically shrinking in the past few years, with only "Capernaum" managing to make a little splash at the box-office (\$183,773 in comparison to the \$2,881,734 generated in France, the \$1,210,101 taken in Italy; and the \$1,103,683 grossed in Germany).

Art-house cinemas, where Arab films are usually slotted, are struggling to attract a wider audience the world over. It's no wonder then that Arab films have also struggled to compete with Hollywood and the local comedies, which continue to dominate the programming of most cinemas in Europe. As a reaction towards the increasing streamlining of mainstream cinema across the region, film festivals of different shapes and sizes have sprung up all across the continent. Today, festivals are no longer exclusive high-brow cultural events strictly catering for film buffs: festivals have evolved into alternative exhibition spaces for art-house cinema with a wider reach and diverse latitudes of programming. And this is where most Arab festivals have gained visibility.

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A well-received small or medium-budget Arab film can have a lengthy festival life across Europe, making the rounds in marquee fairs in its few months of premiere, before expanding to smaller festivals with different focuses in subsequent months. The audience figures for multiple festival screenings across Europe can equal, and even exceed, the number of admissions for a limited theatrical release. And that's not counting various other avenues, such as educational institutions, art spaces and museums.

The proliferation of Arab festivals all over Europe has also boosted the presence of Arab films on the continent. The list is long: Alfilm in Berlin; Malmo in Sweden; Arab Film Festival in Zurich; Arab Film Days in Oslo; Arab film Fest in Rotterdam; Amal Euroarab Film Festival in Spain. Eastern and Central Europe remains a virgin territory for Arab cinema, chiefly due

to the heterogeneousness of their societal makeup and their negligible Arab immigration. The recent success of the post-war Lebanese cinema and Youssef Chahine retrospectives at Karlovy Vary – Eastern and Central Europe’s leading film festival – proves, however, that there is an audience beyond the typically-targeted Arab communities in this region.

A considerable part of revenues for most Arab films doesn’t come from theatrical release, but rather from the sales deals finalized before the actual release. The larger part of the proceeds, however, are generated from TV and streaming sales inside the Arab world. In previous years, European TV sales meant little for both the visibility and generated income of Arab films, which were mostly placed in specialty programming on the likes of the French/German network, Arte.

The rise of streaming services is swiftly changing this reality. Netflix has been aggressively acquiring Arab films, old and new, for its international audience, including, most recently, the restored films of Youssef Chahine, the Arab world’s most iconic filmmaker. Arsenal, Germany’s foremost art-house cinema and distributor, streamed Arab films from its archive during the lockdown. Meanwhile, more Arab titles continue to be available on Amazon, Google and Apple.

In other words, there’s more access to Arab cinema in Europe now than any time in history. What is sorely missing is proper marketing and curation. The most popular streaming services offer endless hours of content from around the world, with little sense of curation. Smaller movies can easily get lost, only discovered by the inattentive audience through word of mouth or sheer serendipity. With no marketing and promotion and no guidance in channeling this vast content, Arab films face the same fate as most independent films acquired by the streaming giants for

the sole purpose of increasing content.

The lack of diversity is another major issue. The festival films most streamers acquire do not deviate from the habitual aforementioned subjects. Genre films and non-political dramas are rarely shown to international viewers, limiting the breadth and scope of what European audiences deem Arab cinema to be. Few curators venture outside the festival circuits and into local markets, seldom taking chances with their programming and consequently offering different visions of the Arab experience.

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It is difficult to envision how serious an impact the Covid-19 crisis will have on Arab cinema. With European festivals scheduled to resume in September, albeit on a scaled-down form, and with cinemas reopening across the continent, things might be getting back to normal soon. What cannot be reversed though is the rise of streaming services as the primary vehicle for consuming film around the world. Will the streamers demand more of the same topics that are the bread and butter of independent, festival-friendly Arab films; or will they push for the creation of different content, relevant to the coronavirus age? Will Arab filmmakers manage to stand out in this ever-oversaturated market? Most importantly, will Western and European viewers be willing to accept different stories and images from the Arab world? For better or worse, the rise of streaming services and decline of the theatrical experience could provide the next chapter in the evolution of Arab cinema.