

Introduction

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Intro to Maghrebi Cinema

Cinema Introduction

Collectively, films from North Africa have a longstanding reputation of being one of the most artistically sophisticated bodies of cinema from the developing world because of their geographic, historic, and cultural location between the European, African and Arab worlds.

Since the birth of the national film industries in the post-independence era of the 1960s, films from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have frequently functioned as vehicles for social commentary. In most cases, the first films produced in these countries articulated a sense of national identity in the newly independent nations and treated such themes as the balance between tradition and modernity, reconciliation between colonial histories and aspirations for an independent future, and tension between expected gender roles and social realities. These themes have remained prominent in North African films to the present.

What is distinct about films from this region is that the cultural traditions and social issues typically reflected in Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian cinemas often challenge the limits of conventional public discourse. Contrary to the melodramatic films of the commercial film industry in Egypt for example, in North Africa, film has remained a vehicle for social commentary as much if not sometimes more than it is intended as a form of entertainment. Though situations treated in the scripts are not unique to post-colonial societies of Africa or the Arab world, the manner in which they are portrayed in North African cinema is unique because of the cross-cultural perspective filmmakers from this region have. For instance, nearly all of the major names in filmmaking have studied in France, Belgium or elsewhere in the West. Many filmmakers of the generation that rose to prominence in the 80s and 90s were students in Europe during the late 60s when artistic expression gained in political commitment.

Cross cultural influences have also played a part in the process of filmmaking. Films initially produced in the national film industries were by and large wholly funded by the State and were to a greater or lesser extent propagandistic, expressing particular views of the struggle for liberation. With the passing years and the increase in the costs of production, filmmaking from this region relied on procuring funds through co-production with funding coming from the West, largely from France and Belgium. One can argue that the benefits of co-production enable filmmakers to leverage more control over the content of their films. Equally plausible is whether co-production influences content through the portrayal of stories in a more exotic tone. These are some of the questions treated in the interviews with filmmakers that follow.

Today, films from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia enjoy a great deal of respect and focus in international film festivals and art house cinemas of the West and worldwide. Often, films from this region are praised for the manner in which they build bridges between cultural boundaries from the unique perspective at the cross-roads of civilizations. They are also admired for the manner in which they address taboo subjects with persistence and passion. These traits of North African cinema are both part of the cinematic tradition and parcel of the unique cultural perspective of the region.

The database of North African film contained on the following page is intended as a resource for people interested in learning more about North African films in general. It is not meant to be complete, but is rather a growing resource. Please feel free to send a comment if there is a film you would like to recommend to be added.