

WALEED F. MAHDI, *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation, Critical Arab American Studies* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020). Pp. 328. \$75.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780815636717.

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Building on a growing body of work in Arab American cultural studies, *Arab Americans in Film* expands the field by offering a comparative look at select films from the US and Egyptian film industries. By doing so, Mahdi is able to draw conclusions about the way that respective forms of US and Egyptian nationalism are staged in the films' narratives, which, Mahdi argues, fail to go beyond a "polarizing" framework and therefore cannot capture the complexity of Arab American diasporic experiences of mediated belonging and inclusion. Mahdi argues that many of the mainstream examples from the Hollywood and Egyptian cinemas present Arab Americans through "reductive binaries" (6) that often rely on simplistic narratives and stereotypical images. This leads Mahdi to conclude that "even in their most complicated forms, the two filmic sites remain superficial, constraining heterogeneous Arab Americans in a liminal space in which the broad categories of Arabness or Americanness appear as mutually exclusive and clashing opposites" (206–7). Though mainstream films in both the US and Egyptian film industries ultimately cannot capture the complexities of Arab American cultural citizenship transnationally, Mahdi makes a case for the possibilities of independent Arab American filmmaking to do so.

Chapters one and three of the book focus on mainstream Hollywood representations of Arabs and Arab Americans. In chapter one, Mahdi most directly builds on the work of Jack Shaheen and Ella Shohat, who have theorized how early orientalist themes give way to more overt anti-Arab and Islamophobic stereotypes about violent terrorists.¹ Mahdi helpfully builds on Shaheen's catalogue of anti-Arab

themes in mainstream Hollywood films, showing how and where these themes align with US nationalism and geopolitical interests. Chapter three moves to a consideration post-9/11 films that purport to offer more complex representations of Arab Americans beyond the terrorist stereotype. Mahdi's argument about these post-9/11 representations are indebted to Evelyn Alsultany's analysis of the way that popular film and TV appeared to move beyond simply negative stereotypes and yet still failed to do more than present "simplified complex representations"² that ultimately reinforce what Mahmood Mamdani describes as the "good Muslim, bad Muslim" binary.³

The greatest strength of the book is precisely its insistence on the intricacies of Arab American diasporic experience as portrayed in films. Chapters two and four, which focus on an analysis of select films in the Egyptian film industry, offer a crucial perspective on the transnational scope of Arab American representations. Mahdi argues that, though they are more nuanced, mainstream Egyptian filmic representations of Arab Americans nevertheless exhibit a "failure to capture the interstitial nature of Arab American citizenship" (67), a topic also beautifully addressed in Carol Fadda's *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*.⁴ In chapter two, Mahdi demonstrates how Egyptian cinema successfully counters mainstream Hollywood orientalism, and yet reinforces the orientalist East/West binary by ultimately forcing Arab American characters to choose between identifying with either Egypt or the US (68). Chapter four turns toward a consideration of the Egyptian film *Laylat el-Baby Doll* in order to "propose new ways to imagine Arab American subjectivity on the silver screen" (136). Depicting "diasporic activism," Mahdi argues that the film is able to achieve a more nuanced representation of Arab diasporic experiences, which can go beyond the polarizing and reductive binaries portrayed in nationalistic US and Egyptian films. Overall, Mahdi's analysis of representations of Arab Americans in the Egyptian film industry offers a truly compelling comparative reading of cultural texts that will help us develop more nuanced understandings of Arab American cultural contexts. Chapters two and four, in particular, elaborate underdeveloped pathways of research; thus, the field of Arab American cultural studies will accordingly benefit both from the inroads Mahdi has made and from his invitation to build on them.

In his introduction, Mahdi promises to "chart the established links between the 'real' and the 'reel' by connecting the examined films to critical events" (8) and the book certainly lives up to this promise,

yet the analysis of these connections could be more developed methodologically. The relationship between representation and reality is both a topic of much debate within cultural studies and a central question that can be approached from many angles. Mahdi sees films as “educational tools” and “mirrors of reality” (217), which suggests – rightly so – that they are not purely fictional. At the same time, neither are these films nonfictional, and suggesting as much can run the risk of oversimplifying cultural analysis.

One of the most interesting, if slightly buried, details in the book comes at the beginning of chapter five, which focuses on Arab American-produced cinema. In an opening anecdote to the chapter, we learn that Arab American filmmaker Moustapha Akkad is renowned in the US for producing the *Halloween* film series as well as “best recognized in the Arab world for directing two canonical films that celebrate Muslim and Arab histories” (169). Hidden away in the footnotes, we also find out that Akkad was killed in a bomb blast in Amman that can be attributed to al-Qaeda while working on his third such canonical film – *Saladin* (238). What, if anything, can this juxtaposition of the “real” horror that ended Akkad’s life and the “reel” horror that built his Hollywood reputation tell us? Are these fictional and nonfictional horrors mutually exclusive, or does seeing them as such amount to the type of “reductive binary” that plagues nationalistic representations of Arab Americans in both the US and Egypt? How should scholarship in Arab American cultural studies navigate these representational binaries? *Arab Americans in Film* answers these questions by pushing back on reductive binaries. In chapter five, we are introduced to the possibilities of Arab American filmmaking, as a form of “self-representation,” to tell more complex stories about Arab America/n diasporic experience. Mahdi argues that Arab American-made cinema, on the whole, navigates transnational forms of cultural citizenship much more elegantly than either mainstream US or Egyptian films. Yet the overall structure of the book, which delineates the problems with select mainstream US and Egyptian films in order to end with the possibilities of Arab American filmmaking, sometimes seems to reify the very binaries it works so earnestly to transcend.

Given the book’s proposal to understand films as reflective of reality, the Akkad example also points to a larger unresolved question throughout *Arab Americans in Film*: Can a legacy of “negative” representations be “fixed” by making movies with “positive” and “accurate” representations of Arab Americans, Arabs, and Islam?

Given his dedication to producing epic films with the “mission to change the way Tinsel Town and mainstream western media stereotype Arabs and Muslims,”⁵ Akkad seemed to believe so, and yet despite working to change the landscape of representation from within, his corrective films have not enjoyed near the amount of commercial success as his canonical horror series *Halloween*. What to make of these differential reception contexts? At the time of his death, Akkad was working to complete an epic film with the aim to educate the mainstream public about *Saladin* while offering a historically contextualized understanding of the crusades. In this sense, he exemplifies Mahdi’s overall argument about the potential of films to be accessible, educational tools that “have the power to function as tools for visibility, podiums for authenticity, and mirrors of reality” (217). Yet the circumstances of Akkad’s death – which could make up a scene of a mainstream orientalist Hollywood film – demonstrates how fiction can rub up against reality in cruel, surprising, and even mundane ways. Films often fail to be “tools for visibility,” and interpreting them for their “authenticity” can run the risk of simplifying the cultural complexities Mahdi seems to want to uphold. Rather than understanding films in terms of their ability to reflect reality, perhaps we would do better to focus on their potential to generate new stories and even to imagine new types of reality into existence. With its innovative comparative consideration of multiple film industries and its emphasis on complex filmmaking, *Arab Americans in Film* gives us a good way to begin.

NOTES

¹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2001); Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008); Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema,” in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 19–66; Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

² Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America: The Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

⁴ Carol Fadda, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁵ Firas Al-Atraqchi, "Halloween Producer's Epic Plan," *Al-Jazeera*, 2 September 2007, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2007/9/2/halloween-producers-epic-plan>.