

CINEMA

Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation, by Waleed F. Mahdi. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020. 328 pages. \$75 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by Linda Y. Mokdad

Waleed Mahdi's *Arab Americans in Film* examines representations of Arab Americans in American and Egyptian film, drawing upon disciplines such as American studies, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and history. An ambitious project, Mahdi's book argues for a transnational approach to consider how "Arab American cultural citizenship" is constructed in American and Egyptian film, before and after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Mahdi writes:

A major theoretical contribution of *Arab Americans in Film*, therefore, is in suggesting that Arab American Otherness cannot only be conceived as an outcome of US Orientalist and racialized histories. It rather imagines Arab American Otherness as an outcome of the polarized cultural imaginations of "Self" and "Other" that exist in both US and Arab state nationalist narratives, examined in this book through Hollywood and Egyptian cinematic experiences" (p. 5).

But it is never entirely clear that Mahdi does depart from the analytical framework of Orientalism or even why he understands Orientalism as relegated to a national sphere.

Chapter One, for instance, provides a compelling history of film in the United States to argue that the 1970s marked a turning point in how Arab Americans, Arabs, and the Middle East were constructed (the book's focus, while on Arab Americans, at times conflates or intermingles these categories in ways that make the object of study

elusive). Building on the work of Edward Said, Melani McAlister, Jack Shaheen, and Evelyn Alsultany, the author explains that the earlier exotic and removed images that stood in for the Middle East were largely replaced by cinematic images of a domestically threatening, more menacing Arab codified as the terrorist or oil shaykh. Attributing this representational shift to Cold War politics, the oil embargo by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), American foreign policy, and the US alliance with Israel, this scholarly history deviates little from the analytical framework of Said's *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978), which is, after all, a pioneering transnational study of how "the West" defines itself against "the East." And while it is a history that might be confined to the study of American films, it nonetheless illustrates how such representations of Arab Americans already rely on global events that extend beyond the nation-state. In addition, invoking and measuring an extensive catalog of dozens of American films (Chapter One) against a handful of relevant Egyptian films from a different and circumscribed period (the 1990s and 2000s) makes it difficult to accept that the cultural work these two cinemas participate in is somehow commensurate. As such, it is equally difficult to endorse the conclusion that they offer competing articulations of "Self" and "Other" or that they are equally reductive and othering in their constructions of Arab Americanness. It also seems arbitrary to expect Egyptian cinema to provide more complex representations of Arab-American identity, given this identity itself is an American category or formulation, and understandably outside the purview of Egyptian national imperatives or citizenship.

Even if we do accept that Hollywood and Egyptian cinema can be measured against one another in this way, the book still presents them as two national case studies rather than explicitly considering how these cinemas are in some kind of conversation with one another, or how the (unequal) circulation and reception of these films can account for some transnational basis for Arab-American identity. The book's foregrounding of Egyptian films is admirable and needed, given the

hugely influential role the commercial Egyptian film industry has played in the Middle East and beyond, but to frame it in response to US film is to risk both reinforcing the primacy of Hollywood and perpetuating an East/West binary that the author is rightly working hard to dismantle.

In addition to the book's comparison of US and Egyptian films, its second major objective, and the one that occupies its subsequent three chapters, is to "identify post-9/11 filmic efforts in Hollywood and Egyptian cinemas, as well as the filmmaking of Arab Americans themselves, that challenge the aforementioned restrictive representation strategies" (p. 6). Mahdi provides cogent analyses of *Traitor* (US, 2008) and *Laylat al-Baby Doll (The Baby Doll Night)* (Egypt, 2008), films he understands as offering more complex if still limited representations of Arab Americans due to their engagement with multiple story lines, their diasporic mode of belonging, and heterogeneous identities that dissolve East/West binaries. Finally, in the last chapter, Mahdi focuses on close readings of three Arab-American films *AmericanEast* (2007), *Amreeka* (2009), and *The Citizen* (2012), which he singles out for offering aspirational self-representations that engage critically with the American dream and for departing from narratives that center Arab Americans in relation to terrorism or foreign policy.

Each of the chapters that comprise *Arab Americans in Film* is worthwhile and sensitive in its handling of the long and impactful history of Hollywood's anti-Arab bias. But perhaps it is the scope of the project that makes it difficult to fully integrate these individual chapters into a cohesive whole or to reconcile the sheer breadth of the earlier chapters with the specific concerns of the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, the book draws attention to little-studied films and provides an important point of departure for other scholars interested in studying cinematic and cultural constructions of Arab-American identity.

Linda Y. Mokdad, Associate Professor of English, St. Olaf College

LABOR

Migrant Dreams: Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States, by Samuli Schielke. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2020. 137 pages. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Ray Jureidini

It seems anachronistic already to be reviewing a book on migration that was written prior to the pandemic brought on by the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), which has changed everything in the world of migration for the foreseeable future. The dreams of prospective labor migrants have added risks and restrictions now. Nonetheless, this is an account still worth reading.

The book is an anthropological ethnography that follows the circulatory labor migration experiences of some young Egyptian men to the Gulf states. Samuli Schielke, a research fellow at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, uses one Egyptian man in particular (naming him Tawfiq) with some of his friends and fellow migrants. The author maintains contact with Tawfiq for over a decade in Egypt and spends a "brief and intense" three weeks with him in Qatar in late 2009, observing his life and work as a security guard placed by his company to guard a bank.

With an unusual structure, the book (only 115 pages of text) is divided into 16 short chapters, or vignettes, ranging from 4 to 10 pages each. It is in a language that is very accessible to a broad, academic, and non-academic readership, although references are fairly faithfully restricted to anthropologists.

The dream theme has constant philosophical meanderings throughout the book, offering numerous reflections on the fantasies and expectations of young Egyptian men for the lives, as well as the limitations and disappointments. But their dreaming, often compromised, never ends. Dreaming is hope. Not to believe in the dream is to lose hope. Schielke sometimes draws depressing conclusions: "The dream of young men from low-income backgrounds . . . is fantastic in the sense that it does not include the practical details necessary to its fulfillment" (p. 89).