Arab Film and the Dichotomy of Labels:
Dima El-Horr's *Every Day Is a Holiday*

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“I wouldn't say I took advantage of the situation but it inspired me.” (Roy Samaha)

The quote, from an interview between Roy Samaha and Anthony Downey in *Ibraaz*, encapsulates the performativity of moving beyond the problematized notion of labels such as Arab artist, cultural authenticity, Orientalism, modernization, and appropriation. While the label provides a point of references the same distinctions provides a unique and personal opportunity to make the invisible visible within the international art community (Kasrab 7, Marks 2, Downey 7). Elizabeth Kassab argues that the discourse of self-reflection and critique is the ability to define and empower a culture, especially through the vulnerable transition of decolonization. Similarly, Jessica Winegar suggests that authenticity in a postcolonial art practices “negotiated a set of seemingly dichotomous concepts formed through the colonial encounter” (93). This paper, working from the belief that culture, irrespective of its history, is dynamic, will briefly examine the aesthetic and narrative techniques chosen by Dima El-Horr in her film *Every Day Is a Holiday* (2009) in terms of: self-critiquing while defending and restoring a positive sense of self; pulling culture out of the abstract through the use of historical realities, and moving beyond the over-simplified clichés of West and East while providing a uniquely Arab vision (Kassab 4, 14).

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is the separation of an “other” as a person or culture with less capacity than your own. In terms of this paper it acknowledges an epistemology created by a conquering colonial power and legitimized through politics, science, art, and literature over a span of multiple generations that created a specific frame for the history and culture of the Arabic-speaking peoples. Said
argues that the “other” defined paternalistically as simple, underdeveloped, and therefore de-humanized enabled structures of power and authority to be imposed. Over time power structures entrenched a hegemony in order to justify economic policies that perpetually benefited the established colonial power (Said 1-7). Inspired by Foucault, Said's work was pivotal in establishing a paradigm in which values and beliefs are socially constructed and therefore require critical deconstruction. All of the Arab states were colonized by France, Britain, or Italy and decolonized at various times during the first half of the 20th century.

Kassab defines decolonization as a “formal independence—a time, as we know, not free from unofficial or even official forms of external hegemony and occupation, whether political, military, or economic” (5). The process of decolonization, more than reclaiming a political state, is an ambiguous system of reclaiming and retelling histories, reconstructing beliefs and re-appropriating culture. Re-creating the present, by the nature of time and space, requires the acknowledgement of a colonial period with slippery boundaries. Jalal Toufic writes extensively about such a process of reclaiming, and the complex ramifications it has for a cultural tradition. He argues for a discourse of intent in which lost traditions are examined to ensure that they are not replaced with what he calls “counterfeit traditions” (71). Similar to Said, Toufic acknowledges stereotypes as a socially constructed entity embedded into our unconscious. However, Toufic argues that because many of the stereotypes are unconscious, problematizing them can not only be counterproductive but, worse, it maintains them (69). Joris Luyendijk, in his article Beyond Orientalism, states that “I am not saying the Edward Said is right. What I am saying is that I was convinced by his argument” (9), as he reflects on his time as journalist in the Arab world and proposes a postmodern cultural relativism. Included in his thesis is a call for a greater level of transparency in which skepticism is invited, so that overly simplified messages, especially in the media, are deconstructed to
reveal the many dynamics of content and context. For example he notes that in a police state it is very difficult to verify all of your facts, as by nature they are hidden and ambiguous (12-3). Does that mean that you do not report? Create different communication criteria? Or do you accept that there is no such thing as “objective” and ask questions respectful of the complex social, political, and cultural circumstances in each situation?

Self-critiquing while defending and restoring a positive sense of self is a main theme of the three female leads, Hala, Lina and Tamara, in Dima El-Horr’s *Every Day Is a Holiday* (2009). The women meet by chance on the way to visit their husbands in a prison outside Beirut. On their journey they come to rely on themselves and each other as they traverse the desert sometimes on foot, as the bus is abandoned shortly into the journey when the driver is killed. In the final scene, Hala and Lina are waiting at the edge of the dock for Tamara, who does not arrive. Hala and Lina are now widows, yet they are presented not as victims but rather in bright colours, seeming to be very much alive as they laugh at the idea of what it might be like to be with a lover under water. About half of the scene shows nothing but the vast blue sea, with only their voices present behind the camera. The viewer is left with a sense of hope for the future as we soak in the vastness of the ocean with only the horizon as a point of reference (1:12:24).

The strength the female characters carry is a necessary consequence of surviving the Lebanese civil war. Men are visibly absent in the movie: we are told they exist, and we see glimpses of them, for example when the army drives by or when the villagers pass the truck. The one male character who we spend time with, the chicken truck driver, is portrayed as childlike: he never gets things quite right, has little regard for the chickens he is hauling, and seems unable to initiate an action on his own, for example, always waiting for direction from a mysterious voice at the end of a satellite radio. Said, drawing from the writings of colonial administrators Evelyn Cromer and
Alfred Lyall, provides examples of the Arab stereotypes they established: “Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, 'devoid of energy and initiative,' much given to 'fulsome flattery,' intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals;...are inveterate liars, they are 'lethargic and suspicious, and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race” (38-9). The truck driver (we are never given his name) characterizes many of these traits, almost like he was created using Said’s evidence as his initial character sketch. For example, he offers the women as hostages while he is talking into the satellite radio. The driver is hauling chickens is in the desert for a long period of time, and he never attends to their needs; when the truck stops fast, one is killed on the front windshield like a large bug. In a hurry the truck driver takes off, leaving the women and the chickens in the desert to fend for themselves, leaving the dead chicken on his windshield (30:25-35:08).

Juxtaposing Said’s definition and the scenes from the movie creates one of many interesting loops, contrasting visual proof for the stereotype while supplying a context where these events could practically occur. For example, it is the women who provide an alternative behaviour to the truck driver's mistreatment of animals when Hala vomits at the sight of a eviscerated ram left to rot on the side of the road. Said implies that the “West” prefers to view men of the “East” as inferior, both in his description of the Arab stereotype and in his observation in which British administrators were retired at fifty-five, thus ensuring that only the younger men were active abroad. (Said 42) In addition, the female characters instantiate a feminist ideology more typical of second-wave feminism. They seem to be well cared for, from comfortable backgrounds, and on a journey to (re)claim their personal power. Lina’s character wants to move forward and is going to the prison to have her husband sign the divorce papers, whereas Tamara is going to see her husband for the first time since their wedding ceremony when he was taken away by the army. In comparison, third-wave feminism emphasizes inclusion of multiple
ethnicities, socioeconomic circumstances, and rejection of the gender binary. El-Horr therefore seems to be playing with a perception of the experiences and beliefs found in her viewing audience and contrasting them with the presentation of her characters. This creates an atmosphere of ambiguity whereby the audience becomes an active rather than passive participant in the viewing experiences unfolding for them. The viewer is drawn into an extended circle of discourse and self-awareness between stereotypes and self-recognition.

Ambiguity is about being uncertain; abstraction focuses on concepts rather than realities. Pulling culture out of the abstract through the use of historical realities is a strategy of postcolonial demystification and re-humanization (Said 234-5). El-Horr provides a contrast between ambiguous stories and details portrayed as realities. The film has a strong sense of realism, with long establishing shots and limited use of non-diegetic sound, for example in the dream sequences and as the primary sound when real time is elided, for example, while the bus was leaving the city. Yet the viewer is never given clear direction on location or reference to a specific historical event. El-Horr is quoted by Time Out Editors as stating that the movie is a “collective memory of the country” (1). Sarah A. Rogers describes “the relationship between individual and collective histories, particularly those that circulate around the Lebanese capital and urban memories of the civil war” (40-1), as an effective contemporary motif to depict historical realities for events in which a clear and simple explanation is not adequate. For example, it is impossible to determine whether the prison riot alluded to at the end of the movie is an actual historical event or a pastiche of multiple events (a quick Internet search through Arab newspapers indicates that prison riots of various levels of intensity seem to be a fairly regularly reported event in Lebanon).

The movie has a loose linear timeline and a classical Hollywood appearance with the use of continuity editing. We know that the prison is a three-hour bus ride from Beirut,
we can speculate from the military activity that the bus is likely to be travelling south towards Israel, but we are never given any specific indicators for time or location, and the functions of the film medium adds to this uncertainty. Are they filming the same geographical space of desert over again from different angles so that it looks different? Time is also ambiguous: it feels like an all-day adventure, time is more likely to be marked by the darkness at the beginning and end of the journey to the prison, and shadows are the only indicators of time passing throughout the day.

There are two scenes in which villagers are moving away through the desert, as though in flight from their homes. These scenes give a sense of time moving both literally and conceptually that contrast with each other. The first occurs shortly after Hala, Lina, and Tamara join the chicken truck driver. The truck stops to let the group of people pass by, as the road is not wide enough for both people and vehicles. We are given a close view of a procession of approximately fifty people of all generations, led by women, through there are male members within the group, all carrying large sacks on their heads. Near the end of the scene the women's faces, with equally stern gestures, are brought close to the viewer, though not quite as a close-up shot. (25:49-28:12). The second scene is again of villagers moving, this time near rather than on the road, depicted rather like a herd of migrating animals that you might pass while on a drive. There is the same haunting Arabic music in the background as in the first scene, except this time the distance between the people and the camera is far enough that their shapes are distorted, taking away any sense of individuality such as age. In the middle of the sequence Hala is in a phone booth speaking with her husband while he teaches her how to shoot his gun. The people disappear from the mise-en-scène during this time and return to the left edge near the end. The scene finishes with a long shot in which the people are wandering in one direction near the road and Hala is walking on the road in the other direction (41:56-44:55).
Said refers to stereotypes that Arabs “cannot walk on either a road or pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever European grasps immediately, that roads and pavements are made for walking)” (38-9). Throughout Orientalism he analyzes the Western tendency to see Arabs as a people less developed or living in the past, allowing for a reading that sees them as primitive and less than equal. Lina Lazaaar, in her article "Promising Futures," describes the desert as “a contested space that was often depicted in Orientalist painting of the late nineteenth century as an empty place and therefore ripe for exploration and annexation” (56). In the first migration scene the political message is more implicit. Hala asks the truck driver to explain what is going on with the people on the road. Why, the viewer can ask, are the homes of the rural people not defended or the forced migrations not recorded with the same sense priority as would be found in similar situation in the city? In these scenes El-Horr depicts the passage of time from a rural to an urban way of life and from a post colonial to a colonial presentation. In the first migration the villagers are performed as practical human beings, forced to choose and initiate actions for the safety of their families while utilizing their available resources. In comparison, the people in the second migration scene are abstracted and are blended into a vast and unclaimed landscape with no sense of place or real belonging. El-Horr seems to draw on an art-historical approach, such as Lazaaar describes, to reference a colonial image of displacement. Similar motifs were used in 18th-century North American landscape paintings to depict First Nations cultures thought to be dying out. By focusing the scene on the human experience rather than the specific historical details El-Horr could be referencing many displacements within the Arab world, such as the forced migration of Palestinians or the southern Lebanese driven out of their villages by Israeli bombardments in the 2006 war.

*Every Day Is a Holiday* contains one earlier scene of a migration. The women, two of them in high heels, holding bright shopping bags, are stranded in the desert after
the bus driver is shot by a sniper. The women move single file from the bus back to the main road. The camera is at a distance so the women are abstracted. Their modern appearance and details such as the transmission towers signify a contemporary society connected to technology, sharply contrasting with the vast wilderness of a desert. The group separates to get a better perspective of where they are and which route will get them back to their original journey. They can see each other but are too far away to talk and they establish that their cell phones are of no use because there is no signal (18:10 -22:59). The surreal vision of being in the desert, without a cell-phone signal, because your bus driver was hit by a sniper while you are on your way to visit your male family member in jail on Independence Day, in high heels and a sundress, begins to hint at the complexities of the blurred lines created in a postcolonial world where West and East are no longer found in a clichéd binary relationship. On its own, this scene portrays aspects of the gap between the advantages of a globalized world in the technology and the shopping bags symbolizing a society managing in a late-capitalist framework. When combined with the other two migration scenes, the gap between who has access to what resources, superimposed on an international neoliberal economic structure, provides an intricate perspective on the political realities of the global market being both “liberating and predatory” (Winegar 277) in Lebanon (Lazaar 18).

Kassab argues that “cultural decolonization and the search for authenticity are associated with the need to synchronize ideas with reality: the need to connect views and theories with the concrete realities at hand” (338). She further examines the level of introspection required to avoid the “tendency toward either self-glorification or total victimhood” (338). All three of El-Horr’s characters, at least on the surface, seem to model Kassab’s advice. They all come to the bus from a place of stagnation because a combination of circumstances had presented them with barriers through which they had been unable to maneuver through. Through a physical journey they transform, and yet
the viewer does not perceive them as individual victims. There are moments in the film that should be emotionally moving and yet strangely they are not. For example, after Hala vomits, she sits under a tree and seems to sob; she seems isolated and alone. This is a logical speculation because the camera is far enough back that her body is abstracted like an Impressionist painting; the viewer sees the lines and the shapes minus the details. In the top right hand corner we can see the truck driving further away from her (33:05-33:48). Similar viewing sensations occur when Lina and Tamara disclose their stories, and with each story the viewer is brought a bit closer. Tamara spends the most time in a relative close-up shot while she is telling her story, yet she never looks directly at the camera, creating a sustained emotional distance, thus moving the viewer to the role of voyeur or an eavesdropper (35:39-41:21). By keeping the viewer at a distance, El-Horr allows the stories to be told but not shared; yet neither are they mythologized, appropriated or reduced to a cliché. She strategically creates a place of abstraction, and provides an environment of perceived exclusion for the viewer. The distance creates a space for reflection and critique for the audience.

Dima El-Horr’s Every Day Is a Holiday presents a variety of concepts that coil back onto themselves. Though not the focus of this paper, the continuous circling of images and the subsequent connection to the concepts within the film, leads me to speculate that El-Horr is drawing from Lacanian film theory. As a viewer I realized that I am participating in a critique both as an observer and a player, by the nature of the inwardly spirally and ever-building connections offered between the mise-en-scène and the ideology of the film. As the characters and events in the film comprise collective memories and concepts that are sharply contrasted with a realist style of cinematography, the edges in the film are fluid and ever changing, depending on my entry point as a viewer. El-Horr’s practice of taking past stereotypes or colonial devices and presenting them within a contemporary subject matter highlights the connection
between colonialism and globalization and the degree in which these symbols are embedded within our collective lexicon. The emotional distance she creates between the viewer and the characters ensures they are not reduced to simple clichés while requiring the spectator to conceive their humanity from an intellectual rather than emotional perspective. Though El-Horr is not the first Lebanese film maker, her cohort within the international market is small enough to make her part of the collective of the first. In that role through the process of decolonization, and the aftermath of civil war, she carries both the freedom to create her own vision and the burden of re-appropriating an Arab voice in an ever-changing local and global culture.
Works Cited:


