



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

PORT OF ENTRY: TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF  
CINEMA IN LEBANON (1919-1975)

by  
GIOVANNI FRANCESCO VIMERCATI

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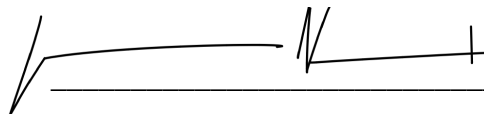
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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Giovanni Francesco Vimercati

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This thesis looks at the origins and early development of the film industry in Lebanon through the lenses of the political economy of media. Its aim is to understand how the country's economic model has shaped the national film industry and its output. The choice of methodology has been dictated by a recurring, critical remonstrance in the scholarship on Lebanese cinema. The lack of state funding and of "recognizably Lebanese" films have often been adduced as the Achilles heel of Lebanese cinema by scholars and critics alike. In my thesis I frame them on the contrary as constitutive and defining elements of the Lebanese film industry and, therefore, as pertaining to the national character of the country. I start by placing the origins of cinema in Lebanon in the colonial context, to analyze how this has impacted its historical shape and industrial orientation. After having established the ascendancy of distribution and exhibition over production that characterized the early days of cinema Lebanon and pointed to the economic reasons behind this tendency, I proceed to observe how production picked up in the in the early 60s and look at the kind of film that were produced and shot in the "Switzerland of the Middle East." Though these films were often foreign (co-)productions and featured stereotypical tropes about Lebanon and its capital, I argue that what they represent both textually and contextually should not be dismissed. Their commercial vocation and expendability are not a negation of national cinema, as scholars have argued, but a faithful reflection of the country's cultural priorities. Conversely, when looking at those film that have been unanimously considered "distinctively Lebanese," I critically dissect them to show that their national attributes are actually partial and end up reflecting the country's fragmentation rather than its imaginary essence. I finally argue that the impossibility for cinema to faithfully reflect the nation that produces it is characteristic of both the medium itself and the artificial construct of nationalism.

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“Cinema was at once a reason to go out – and therefore an opportunity for shopping – and indirectly an advertisement for consumerist modernity.”

(Samir Kassir)



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“We do have more theoretical knowledge than ever before; but as we learn more about structures of underlying reality, we confront growing complexity instead of simplicity and add more to the unknown than to the known.”

(Amos Vogel)

The October 2017 issue of *Le Commerce du Levant*, the Lebanese equivalent of *The Economist*, featured a ten-pages long dossier dedicated to the state of film production in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> Occasioned by a conspicuous rise in the number of movies produced over the course of 2016 and 2017, forty feature films as opposed to only three at the beginning of the new century (2000-2001), the report took account of the challenges and opportunities facing the Lebanese film industry. Some of the shortcomings affecting it at the time were as old as the Lebanese film industry itself: lack of government funding, poor distribution of local titles both domestically and internationally, and a general inability to make financial ends meet for independent productions. In what would strike me as a curious coincidence, the cover story of that same issue of *Le Commerce du Levant* was titled “*Les banques, sont-elles solides?*” (“Are Banks Safe and Sound?”) and featured an interview with Lebanon’s Central Bank governor Riad Salamé who reassuringly ruled the risk of a financial crisis out.<sup>2</sup> This editorial fortuity was to have, for my research at least, a meaningful resonance.

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<sup>1</sup> Elias Kassim, “Le Liban fait son cinéma,” *Le Commerce du Levant*, Octobre 2017, pp. 60-70.

<sup>2</sup> The same issue also contained an article that discussed a recently published study by Toufic Gaspard (“The Financial Crisis in Lebanon,” Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, August 2017) in which the Lebanese economist warned of “a serious financial crisis, which would devalue the Lebanese Lira and destabilize

The relation between Lebanon's economic model, historically reliant on the financial sector, and that of its film industry is in fact the very focus of this thesis. The attempt to understand to what extent the former has shaped the latter is what animated my research. The reason why I decided to investigate the history of cinema in Lebanon from this particular angle was in part dictated by a recurring reproach in the literature on the subject. Most studies on Lebanese cinema lament the lack of government backing and the absence of a distinct national character, framing these two aspects as defective features.<sup>3</sup> It was in the search for the possible causes of this alleged proclivity that I individuated in the political economy of media a suitable lens.

"Political economies of media," in fact, "take it as axiomatic that the media must be studied in relation to their place within the broader economic and social context" to better understand their dynamics and significance.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely what I did when looking at the history of the film industry in Lebanon and in doing so I realized that what scholars and critics have so far described as drawbacks are actually among its constitutive elements. The lack of public funds and a national cinema that was never conventionally so are, I argue, qualities endemic to the Lebanese film industry and economy, and related ones at that. The very limited role the state plays in the national economy is a matter of political course in the history of Lebanon. Right after

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the banking sector, unless appropriate measures are taken by the authorities." See Bachir El-Khoury & Sahar Al-Attar, "La stabilité du système financier en question," *Le Commerce du Levant*, Octobre 2017, pp. 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> See Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996); Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017) and Ibrahim al-Aris, "An Attempt at Reading the History of Cinema in Lebanon: From Cinema to Society and Vice Versa," in *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, ed. Alia Arasoughly (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996), pp. 19-39.

<sup>4</sup> Dwayne Winseck, ed., *The Political Economies of Media and the Transformation of the Global Media Industries* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 4.

independence, and in substantial continuity with the Mandate era, the Lebanese ruling class entrusted to the hands of the market and its supposed freedom most of the country's assets. Private initiative and capitals are, to this very day, the main propulsion behind the country's economy. Lebanon's intermediary role between European and Middle Eastern markets was embraced by its business and political class, which thanks to "ties of kinship and marriage have virtually coincided," making Beirut the privileged entry point for Western capitals, goods and values.<sup>5</sup>

Tempered by a cultural, political and historical attachment to the Arab hinterland, Lebanon's extrovert exposure to European interests has shaped its economic outlook to a visible extent. Trade over industrial production, banking over agriculture, service over infrastructure have been defining aspects of the political economy of modern Lebanon. Similar tendencies have also characterized the history of its cinema, which from the very beginning favored the sale and circulation of movies over their production, business over self-representation. Far from puritanically considering commerce and art as two separate and irreconcilable endeavors, I will be looking at their symbiotic relation in the context of the Lebanese film industry before the start of the Civil War (1919-1975). The blurry distinction between culture and commerce in Lebanon is best personified by Charles Corm, writer, publisher and art critic, as well as the exclusive agent for the Middle East of the Ford Motor Company.<sup>6</sup> Founder of *La Revue Phénicienne*, the main intellectual organ of Phoenician nationalism, Corm translated into French Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* and was awarded the Edgar Allan Poe International Prize of Poetry in 1934 for his book *La Montagne Inspirée* ("The

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<sup>5</sup> Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 351.

<sup>6</sup> See Carla Henoud, "Charles Corm, le visionnaire," *L'Orient Le Jour* (24 September, 2009).

Sacred Mountain"). Parallel to his intellectual activities, he ran a business empire, the Charles Corm & Co., which was the first and largest multinational company in the Middle East at the time.<sup>7</sup> Just like political and private interests can hardly be told apart in the Lebanese context, the same applies to the arts and commerce as the case of Charles Corm demonstrates.

## A. Literature Review

The history of Lebanese cinema or, as I prefer to define it for the scope of this thesis, of cinema in Lebanon is an understudied subject in what is, in turn, a poorly researched area of academic interest: Arab film studies. While “scholarship on Arab cinema remains relatively limited, both in substance and frequency,” depth and spectrum vary from country to country.<sup>8</sup> Egyptian cinema for instance, having industrially dominated the cinematographic imagination of the entire Arab world, has been the focus of several book-length studies.<sup>9</sup> Individual directors, Youssef Chahine most notably, have also been the subject of academic scrutiny and the sociological implications of Egyptian cinema have been investigated too.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the Lebanese

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<sup>7</sup> See Franck Salameh, *Charles Corm: An Intellectual Biography of a Twentieth-Century Lebanese “Young Phoenician”* (London: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Terri Ginsberg & Chris Lippard, “Introduction,” in *Cinema of the Arab World: Contemporary Directions in Theory and Practice*, ed. Terri Ginsberg & Chris Lippard (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), p. vii.

<sup>9</sup> See Mustafa Darwish, *Dream Makers on the Nile: A Portrait of Egyptian Cinema* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Mohammad Khan, *An Introduction to Egyptian Cinema* (London: Informatics, 1969); Sameh Fathy, *Classic Egyptian Movies* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018) and Yves Thoraval, *Regards sur le cinéma égyptien* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> See Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2007); Youssef Rakha, *Barra and Zaman: Reading Egyptian Modernity in Shadi Abdel Salam’s The Mummy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt* (Chicago: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies and MEDOC, 2002).

film industry, despite having been for many years second only to Egypt, has not received the same level of scholarly attention. Most of the few existing studies focus on the Civil War period and its aftermath, irrespective of the language they're written in.<sup>11</sup> This can be partly explained by the fact that *auteur* cinema in Lebanon, which has historically monopolized the interest of film scholars and critics alike, bloomed in the mid-1970s, just as the country descended into a civil war that was to last fifteen years. Directors like Maroun Baghdadi, Jocelyne Saab, Randa Chahal Sabag, Borhane Alaouié, Heiny Srour, Jean Chamoun and Mai Masri started making films shortly before or after the start of the Civil War (1975-1990). Though poorly distributed and ignored by the general public in Lebanon, their films came to represent *the* Lebanese cinema worth studying and canonizing. Commercial B-movies for instance, which flourished in wartime Lebanon, have been either neglected or hastily dismissed by most scholars with the exception of Muhammad Soueid.<sup>12</sup>

The pre-war period is only briefly touched upon in histories of Lebanese cinema that span its entirety or origins.<sup>13</sup> Though unconcerned with theoretical elaboration, Abboudi Abou Jaude's *Tonight: Cinema in Lebanon 1929-1979* and Raphaël Millet's

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<sup>11</sup> See Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Dima El-Horr, *Mélancholie Libanaise: Le cinéma après la Guerre Civile* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016); Mahmud Soueid, *Al-sīnamā al-mu'ajjalah: aflām al-ḥarb al-ahaliyyah* [Postponed Cinema: Films of the Civil War] (Beirut: Arab Research Organization, 1984) and Elie Yazbek, *Regards sur le cinéma libanais (1990 – 2010)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> See Mohamed Soueid, *Al-sīnamā al-mu'ajjalah: aflām al-ḥarb al-ahaliyyah* ["Postponed Cinema: Films of the Civil War"] (Beirut: Arab Research Organization, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> See Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017); Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996) and Abboudi Abou Jaoude, *Tonight: Cinema in Lebanon 1929-1979* (Beirut: Al-Furat Li Al-Nasher Wa Al-Tawzi', 2015). The history of Lebanese cinema is also summarily sketched in studies dedicated to Arab cinema like Viola Shakif, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007) and Lizbeth Malkmus & Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

*Le Cinéma au Liban* are invaluable sources of archival information, rendered all the more precious by the lack of any structured form of film archive or library in Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> Scholarly work on cinema in Lebanon is, in fact, stunted by the poor accessibility of primary sources, films included. The inexistence of a national film institute and archive is in itself an eloquent absence, one that points to the lack of a unitary political and cultural vision of and for the country. It also speaks to the very place that cinema has occupied in the history of modern Lebanon: a place where commercial imperatives took precedence over cultural concerns.

The overriding prevalence of economic interests over artistic ones, I argue, does not represent a negation of art in the name of profit, but constitutes the very basis on which cinematographic culture in Lebanon developed. That this cinematographic history hasn't been deemed worth preserving by government institutions tells us two things. The first is that just as the notion of the Lebanese nation itself remains contested, so does its national heritage.<sup>15</sup> The other, related clue is that the films produced in Lebanon may not be "Lebanese enough" to be considered a reputable part of National Culture. Somewhat paradoxically, the only films that have left a sedimented trace in the national imagination, the "Fairuz Trilogy," are directed by foreigners and stage an image of Lebanon that is hardly representative of the whole country (and yet, interestingly, considered and accepted as such). Their national relevance lies more in the popular success and resonance they enjoyed than in the actual national character of their narrative and iconographic content.

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<sup>14</sup> See Maya El Dib, "The Story of an Ephemeral Archive: The Politics of Preservation of and Access to Télé Liban's Archive" (MA Thesis, American University of Beirut, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Heritage and the political will to protect it is one of the driving principles behind film preservation, see Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## B. Methodology

Other than a recent article exploring the role Lebanon played in the 1960s and early 1970s as a shooting location and co-production partner, the political economy of cinema in Lebanon is, to put it bluntly, not a thing.<sup>16</sup> To obviate this absence, I placed my research in the wider context of theories of political economy of media and film in particular. While earlier studies tended to focus on the internal dynamics of the film industry itself,<sup>17</sup> recent scholarship built on the “need to combine history, social theory, political economy, and media/cultural studies in order to properly contextualize, analyze, interpret, and criticize products of the media industries.”<sup>18</sup> Given the scope of my research and its central ambition to relate the historical shape of Lebanon’s film industry to that of the country at large, the scholarship I draw upon goes necessarily beyond the boundaries of media studies to focus most notably on the (economic) history of Lebanon itself.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, the preoccupations and findings of authors unconcerned with each other’s respective fields overlapped at times, as in the case of Mahdi ‘Amil’s analysis of Lebanon’s “colonial mode of production” and Tahar Cheriaa’s survey of film

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<sup>16</sup> Samhita Sunya, “On Location: Tracking Secret Agents and Films, between Bombay and Beirut,” *Film History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall 2020).

<sup>17</sup> See Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publishing, 2003); Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Richard B. Jewell’s two-parts history of the RKO studios, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) and *Slow Fade to Black: The Decline of RKO Radio Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> See Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Kais M. Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Georges Corm, *Le Liban contemporain: Histoire et société* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2012); Kamal Dib, *Warlords and Merchants* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004).

distribution across Africa and the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> This validated the interdisciplinary inclination of the current thesis, which posits the impossibility of separating cinema from the society that produces it. Though no artform can rely on the ingenuity and talent of its creators alone, cinema in particular necessitates an industrial and commercial infrastructure without which films simply wouldn't be. The organization of these infrastructures has historically matched the contours of nation states, a cine-geographic paradigm that not even globalization has yet managed to dismantle completely.<sup>21</sup> Thus, to study the history of the film industry in Lebanon is, inevitably, to study Lebanese history, too.

Methodologically, this thesis consists of a qualitative study based primarily on historical and archival research. To (try to) access archives in Lebanon is in itself an instructive experience, as their fragmentation replicate to a detectable extent that of the country – film archives and libraries being no exception. Material traces of Lebanese film history can indeed be found and located but, like anything else in this country, they are scattered among different patrimonial groups and guarded by their respective interests and institutions (that these groups can be traced to confessional denominations or “sects” doesn't change the fact that the interests they incarnate and defend tend to be material rather than religious). Film memory in Lebanon, like the country's own history, is not a shared one.

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<sup>20</sup> See Mahdi 'Amil, *Arab Marxism and National Liberation* (Leiden: Brill, 2020) and Tahar Cheriaa, *Écrans d'abondance, ou cinémas de libération en Afrique?* (Tripoli: SATPEC, Organisme libyen de cinéma, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> See Valentina Vitali & Paul Willeman (eds.), *Theorising National Cinema* (London: BFI, 2016) and Mette Hjort & Duncan Petrie (eds.), *The Cinema of Small Nations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).



My research with primary sources led me to an archipelago of micro-archives, (in)formally organized and distributed across different organizations which at times house different parts of the same archive (as in the case of Baalbeck Studios archives which are divided between Umam Documentation & Research and the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik). Personal archives have, in some instances, been entrusted to the hands of organizations like those of Walid Chmait, long-time film critic of *Le Jour* and one of the animators of the Cine-Club de Beyrouth, which is with Nadi Likol el Nas. The entire collection of *Cinés D'Orient*, Lebanon's first francophone film magazine which was published from 1939 to 1975, is archived in the Bibliothèque des sciences humaines at *Université Saint-Joseph*. A selection of the French-language editions of the *Informations-News-اخبار* bulletin published bi-monthly by the Arab Film and Television Center in Beirut can be found in the offices of Fondation Liban Cinema.<sup>22</sup> The latter also houses some of the brochures that the *Cine-Club de Beyrouth* produced for their screenings, catalogues of the early editions of the *International Film Festival of Lebanon* and other materials concerning Arab cinema. That the documents archived by different organizations more or less directly reflect their agendas and orientation, be it political, cultural or both, is by no means an exclusively Lebanese phenomenon. Archives in fact are not neutral spaces where information, data and artefacts are impartially stored, but are sites where knowledge and memory are hierarchically structured and constructed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The center was established in July 1964 following two conferences UNESCO had organized in Beirut in October 1962 and 1964 on "Cinema and Arab Culture" and was aimed at facilitating the development of film throughout the Arab world. The center was equipped with a library, editing facilities and a screening room, organized exhibitions and roundtable as well as publishing a bi-monthly bulletin (in Arabic, English and French presumably) that chronicled the developments and news of the pan-Arab film industry.

<sup>23</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press,

Issues of representation, consequently predicated on textual analysis, have tended to dominate studies of Arab cinema. In this thesis I favor an industrial analysis of cinema in Lebanon and the limited recourse to textual analysis, like in chapter 2 and 3, is to corroborate or compare findings. Chapter 1 reconstructs the birth of the film industry in Lebanon during the mandate and its contradictory relation with colonial modernity. The advent of cinema, I argue, accompanied the colonial enterprise and was in fact something initially reserved to foreigners who throughout the mandate era were the only ones to direct films in Lebanon. If making films was initially precluded to Lebanese, their sales and circulation was managed by the native bourgeoisie in fulfillment of its trading role between western products and eastern markets. Very much like country's (neo-)colonial economy, the film industry in Lebanon developed its distribution and exhibition wings to the detriment of production. Agents of Hollywood majors in Beirut were the nodal links in the global supply chain of American films. Starting in the 50s the Lebanese capital became a veritable hub for the distribution of foreign movies throughout the Middle East as Hollywood expanded overseas to survive its own domestic decline.

When the Lebanese film industry started producing its own films, the same outward orientation persisted as I illustrate in Chapter 2. Lebanon served in fact as a sort of "production facility" and shooting location where foreign films were filmed or co-produced. Consequently, film production developed more as a service economy rather than a cultural producer in its own national right. Though the films produced during the so-called "Golden Age" of Lebanese cinema have been unanimously dismissed as "not Lebanese enough" or mere commercial exploitation, I argue that they

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2006) and Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

on the contrary represent, both textually and contextually, an accurate rendition of Lebanon's constitutive features. By drawing a comparative parallel between the Hong Kong film industry and the Lebanese one I trace their shape and cultural output back to their political and economic history. In both countries, the lack of state funding and the internal characteristics of their domestic film markets determined the commercial vocation of the film industry and its outward alignment.

In Chapter 3 I take into consideration those films that have been considered as authentically representative of Lebanon and its cultural history, the "Fairuz Trilogy" most notably, and question the validity of such claim. To do so I first examine the national character of these films to see whether they are indeed representative of Lebanon as a whole or only of a particular(istic) and idealized idea of it. Secondly, I measure them against other, coeval productions to both deflate some of their stereotypical representations but also to argue that national cinema cannot possibly be a univocal affair. More so in the Lebanese case where no single, majoritarian idea of national identity ever gained the upper hand and where, to this day, the concept of national belonging is still contested. Lebanese cinema, I finally find, reflected the national fragmentation and peculiarities of the country both in its industrial shape and narrative output. Which is why, I conclude, it is inaccurate to speak of "distinctively Lebanese" films versus "foreign" or "Egyptianized" ones as somewhat less representative of the national production.

As a whole, this thesis represents the attempt to counter-intuitively address some of the remonstrances that have been made over the years by scholars of Lebanese cinema. I trace the alleged shortcomings of the film industry in Lebanon back to their socio-economic roots to question the assertion that only Lebanese subjects makes for an

authentic Lebanese cinema. In line with the methodological scope of the current thesis, my conception of “Lebanese cinema” is not limited to movies only but considers the film industry in its entirety. It is by looking at its structural shape, from its early days to the mid 1970s, that I will be able to substantiate my argument and demonstrate how what are perceived to be deficiencies are actually constitutive features of cinema in Lebanon.

## CHAPTER II

### MANDATORY FRAMES: BIRTH OF AN UNPRODUCTIVE FILM INDUSTRY

“In the Lebanon of today, when we say ‘capital city’ we really mean commercial hub, when we say ‘family home’ we mean real estate speculation; when we say forest, vineyards, orange groves and olive trees we mean land for construction; when we say ‘citizen’ we mean a shareholder, when we say ‘patriot’ we mean a property owner, when we say ‘values’ we mean fortunes, when we say ‘democracy’ we mean plutocracy, when we say ‘freedom’ we mean the free market and when we say ‘sovereignty’ we mean insolvency.”

(Percy Kemp)

In this chapter I retrace the origins of the film industry in Lebanon in the context of colonialism, its economic and cultural dimension. I argue that the structural configuration of the film industry in Lebanon took in its early days is directly linked to the role the country played as an intermediary between Western products and Eastern markets. Far from being a purely transactional relation, the projection of European interests in the Levant informed the development of cinema and its cultural output to a detectable extent. I apply economic theories of development and underdevelopment to the film industry in Lebanon in order to understand how and why film distribution and exhibition have been historically stronger than production. The chapter is divided into three sections. After an introductory excursus in which I place the advent of cinema in Lebanon in the cultural continuum of unequal exchanges between East and West, in the following two sections I analyze first film production and then distribution as they developed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which roughly coincided with the colonial creation of Lebanon as a national entity in 1920.

Cinema came to Lebanon through a colonial encounter. A forty-five-second shot of Beirut's Place des Canons (Martyrs' Square) Alexander Promio realized in 1897 is the first known film made in what was then an autonomous province of the Ottoman empire. Sent by the Lumière Brothers, Promio was probably the first to project with a movie camera the western gaze onto the Levant, to capture its image on film. As a travelogue shot in the mid 1920s makes eponymously clear, *La France d'Orient*, European powers did not hesitate to consider these lands as *theirs*.<sup>24</sup> Early cinema in the colonial logic functioned as a tool of iconographic expropriation, a way to visually assert ascendancy over the colonies and impose, by military force, one viewpoint. The first Lumière and Edison screenings "closely followed the 'scramble for Africa' [...] when enthusiasm for the imperial project was spreading beyond the elites into the popular strata, partly thanks to popular fictions and exhibitions."<sup>25</sup> The same purpose was served in the Levant, where early cinema was an accessory in the staging of colonial conceit.

Newsreels and travelogues produced by Pathé and other companies cemented orientalist iconography in Europe while flaunting technological superiority in the overseas territories. The monopoly of moving images that (French) cinema exercised over Lebanon and its representation from the very beginning was to have lasting repercussions. To this very day, the relation between Lebanese cinema and France could hardly be described as equitable.<sup>26</sup> It was not only a matter of propagating stereotypes,

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<sup>24</sup> See Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> See Wissam Mouawad, "Lebanese Cinema and the Co-Production System: The Postcard Strategy," in Terri Ginsberg & Chris Lippard (ed.), *Cinema of the Arab World: Contemporary Directions in Theory and Practice* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2020).

something early cinema specialized in, but also of aspirational identification and the internalization of cultural subordination. In the colonial context in fact, “the national bourgeoisie identifies itself with the Western bourgeoisie” and its elitist conception of culture.<sup>27</sup> This paternalist relation between two specular yet asymmetrical classes is one where knowledge is introduced from a position of power, its absorption and elaboration swayed by deference.

Due to its strategic location and long history of commercial ties with Europe, Lebanon’s process of class-formation saw the emergence of a native bourgeoisie early in its modern history. Unlike “many other Mediterranean port cities that came to be dominated by Western Europeans, in Beirut Syrian Arabic-speakers succeeded in outcompeting European merchants to take the majority of the city’s foreign trade.”<sup>28</sup> It was members of this class that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century animated the cultural renaissance of the *Nahda* and which would later play a pivotal role in the creation of a film industry in Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> While capitalist relations are never evenhanded, and the subjugation of the indigenous bourgeoisie befits the exploitative logic of imperialism, native elites in the colonies have often internalized European culture and its supremacist assumptions uncritically.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilization in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.29.

<sup>29</sup> While the *Nahda* was predicated on the synergic encounter between European literature and the rediscovery of Arab classicism, the advent of cinema in Lebanon was less of a cultural exchange.

<sup>30</sup> At the same time, it is also from the ranks of the native elites that anti-colonial leaders have emerged to theorize and practice armed liberation (Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon and Thomas Sankara to name but a few).

Just as the exchange of goods follow on the power relations that regulate that transaction, so does the trading of ideas as “the manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it.”<sup>31</sup> Emblematic in this respect is Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s translation of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the first modern novel to be translated into Arabic along with its allegory of self-made civilization which helped “naturalizing liberal political economy” amongst the Levantine intelligentsia.<sup>32</sup> “In *Crusoe*,” Nadia Bou Ali observed, “Bustānī translates the ideology of capitalism as the natural telos of civilization”. It is interesting that one of the major figures of the Lebanese *Nahda* chose to translate a book that, in the words of Edward Said, was “explicitly enabled by an ideology of overseas expansion [...] and the act of accumulating riches and territories abroad.”<sup>33</sup> A book that, in other words, extolled the alleged virtues of Western civilization and its expansionary universalism. Similarly, the film industry in Lebanon, both in its shape and offer, was a vessel of European views and interests that was commercially embraced by the local bourgeoisie. Though the primary manifestation of this encounter was mercantile, its ramifications pertained the real of culture too as we will see.

Early cinema in the Levant (1920s) incarnated the elitist pretension of colonial modernism and its development was indivisible from it. While in the late 1960s and early 1970s a new generation of directors would bring revolutionary politics to the fore of their filmmaking, the beginnings of the Lebanese film industry, intended here in its

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Nadia Bou Ali, “Buṭrus al-Bustānī and the Shipwreck of the Nation,” *Middle Eastern Literatures*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2013), p. 269.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 87.



historical and infrastructural dimension, epitomize to a clear extent the dominant economic vision that governed the country from its colonial origins to the very present.<sup>34</sup> Though culture has come to be considered and studied as the preeminent site for the (re-)production of orientalist stereotypes and imperial bias, to reduce colonialism to a matter of xenophobic representations would be reductive at best.<sup>35</sup> As Walter Rodney pointed out in his study of the world's richest continent and its underdevelopment, "it is mistakenly held that Europeans enslaved Africans for racist reasons," but "European planters and miners enslaved Africans for economic reasons."<sup>36</sup>

The same held true for the Levant, as a report filed in 1919 by Paul Huveline, *Que vaut la Syrie* ("What is Syria Worth"), made incontrovertibly clear.<sup>37</sup> Silk, the Beirut port and the road that from its docks led to Damascus, made latter day Lebanon a palatable location for France's colonial appetite and the perfect spot from which to penetrate the Middle East economically. Cultural superiority complexes and economic interests have historically fed on each other with the former often offering excuses on behalf of the latter. That cultural production has proactively accompanied the colonial enterprise or even prepared it is testified by the "unparalleled magnitude and thoroughness" of Napoleon's "advance preparations"<sup>38</sup> for his planned conquest of

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<sup>34</sup> See Hicham Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> In *Culture & Imperialism* Edward Said declares: "What I want to examine is how processes of imperialism occurred beyond the level of economic laws and political decisions and were manifested at another very significant level, that of the national culture."

<sup>36</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1982), p.88.

<sup>37</sup> Huveline, after whom a street in Beirut is named, was instrumental in the founding of the law school of the Université Saint-Joseph in 1913.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.80.

Egypt. Having said that, deprived of its economic rationale (i.e. the need for cheap or free goods, resources and labor) colonialism would lose its *raison d'être*. Unless we want to believe that European powers mobilized their armies so that novelists could write books filled with racist caricatures and stereotypes.

As the following section will make clear, the cultural and economic dynamics of colonialism represent a synergic whole with the latter driving to a discernible extent the former, especially as far as the industrial shape of cinema as a commercial infrastructure is concerned (its products, as we will see, are on the contrary not always over-determined by economic forces). The penury of films directed and produced by Lebanese people is a direct consequence of the colonial management of cinema under the French Mandate, one that made sure no opportunities for self-representation were afforded to the local population. As the subsequent chapters will further elucidate, the historical circumstances that accompanied the advent of cinema in the Levant were to have lasting effects on the Lebanese film industry which will continue to be characterized by a thriving exhibition and distribution sector to the detriment of production.

### **A. Mandatory Cinema**

The genesis of Lebanese cinema is inseparable from that of the country itself and, most relevantly, from that of its economic model. “The very first Lebanese director of a Lebanese film,”<sup>39</sup> Ali al-Ariss, shot his debut feature, *The Rose Seller* (“Bayyā’ et

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<sup>39</sup> Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017), p. 66.

al-Ward”), in 1943, the year Lebanon gained its independence from France.<sup>40</sup> His second and last film, *Kawkab, Desert Princess* (“Kawkab ‘Amirat as-Sahrā”), was made in 1946, the year French troops finally decamped. As noted by his son, the film critic Ibrahim al-Ariss, “the dream of Lebanese cinema began with foreigners.”<sup>41</sup> Under the mandate, no Lebanese ever got to direct a feature film. Known for their love and generous state-support of cinema, the French behaved differently in Lebanon where cinema under their rule was strictly policed. The same double-standards applied to confessional matters: proudly secular at home, in Lebanon the French established an indissoluble link between religion and the state by institutionalizing sectarianism.<sup>42</sup>

Following the occupation of Syria, “the French sought assembly halls to spread their own propaganda, and found the postwar construction of cinemas to suit their needs.”<sup>43</sup> In a movie theatre too, the Cristal Cinema in downtown Beirut, “the celebration of May Day in the spring of 1925 provided the occasion for publicly announcing the existence of a nascent Communist movement.”<sup>44</sup> Authoritarianism was the driving principle behind France’s cinematographic policies in Lebanon which

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<sup>40</sup> While all the available sources, both on and offline, report this date, Lina Khatib in her book *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), quoting Ibrahim al-Ariss, claims that the film is from 1940.

<sup>41</sup> Ibrahim al-Aris, “An Attempt at Reading the History of Cinema in Lebanon: From Cinema to Society and Vice Versa,” in *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, ed. Alia Arasoughly (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> See Ussama Makdisi, “Reconstructing the Nation-State: The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon,” *Middle East Report*, no. 200 (Jul-Sep., 1996), 23-30; Bassel Salloukh, “A Political History of Sectarian Institutions,” in *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, ed. Bassel F Salloukh, Rabie Barakat, Jinan S Al-Habbal, Lara. W Khattab, Shoghig Mikaelian (London: Pluto Books, 2015), 1-20; Mahdi ‘Amil, *L’état confessionnel: le cas libanais* (Paris: Editions La Brèche, 1996) and Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 201.

<sup>44</sup> Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 337.

“classified cinema as a morally and politically suspect space, requiring all cinemas to register with the police and observe curfews.” Five years into the mandate the High Commission formalized by decree film censorship and in 1929 a permanent board headed by the General Security director was established (the board was composed of five members, all French).

The ideological defense of France’s so-called *civilizing mission* extended to film distribution too and in 1931, in a move to outbid American competition, “Paris ordered French film distributors to market only French-language films in French colonies, and asked American companies to dub their films into French.”<sup>45</sup> While in France “the key issue was protection of the national film industry, in the colonies the emphasis was on the dissemination of the French language” and the cultural subordination that comes with it.<sup>46</sup> French authorities ordered in 1938 that foreign films in Lebanon and Syria be subtitled in both French and Arabic, but a year later another law was passed that made only French subtitles compulsory.<sup>47</sup>

Because admission was “priced beyond the means of the poorer masses, cinema did not take hold in the Levant as a form of mass culture for the impoverished majority as in the United States” and remains to this day, in Lebanon at least, a pastime reserved for the middle classes.<sup>48</sup> Though tickets were proportionally priced according to seating,

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, “When the Thief of Baghdad Tried to Steal the Show: The Short-Lived Dubbing of Hollywood Film into Arabic in the 1940s,” in Ranzato & Zanotti (ed.), *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> See Nolwenn Mingant, “When the Thief of Baghdad Tried to Steal the Show: The Short-Lived Dubbing of Hollywood Film into Arabic in the 1940s,” in Ranzato & Zanotti (ed.), *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 199.

“workers were unwilling to shell out a third of a day’s pay, or for women, half, to see a film.”<sup>49</sup> The exclusive status associated with movie theatres served to alienate the lower classes and simultaneously build colonial loyalty, “for the urban elite of the colonized lands, the pleasures of cinema-going became associated with the sense of a community on the margins of its particular European empire.” An act of social and symbolic elevation, “the cinema encouraged an assimilated elite to identify with ‘its’ empire and thus against other colonized peoples.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, with the advent of sound, movie theatres became even more exclusionary as “class divisions were intensified between those who could understand, and therefore enjoy, European and American films, and those who could not.”<sup>51</sup> In overseas theatrical markets in fact, “the colonial language functioned as a hierarchical marker” since “mastering the language of the colonizer signified being part of the elite.”<sup>52</sup>

It isn’t by chance that the first movie theatres in Beirut were built in “the Burj,” today’s downtown, the commercial hub of the city where colonial modernity first flourished in all its splendor and violent disparity. In Lebanon, where the native bourgeoisie had long functioned as a conveyor of European values and goods, the nascent film industry reflected and embodied colonial modernism and its contradictory propulsion. Unlike western literature, which the *Nahda* had critically processed along

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<sup>49</sup> David Lawrence Livingston, “Sects & Cinema in Lebanon” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), p. 108.

<sup>50</sup> Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> David Lawrence Livingston, “Sects & Cinema in Lebanon” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, “When the Thief of Baghdad Tried to Steal the Show: The Short-Lived Dubbing of Hollywood Film into Arabic in the 1940s,” in Ranzato & Zanotti (ed.), *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), p. 45.

with the rediscovery Arab classics, the novelty of cinema had no native equivalent to interact with. Early cinema in the colonized world was a technological marvel that embodied western superiority though things would later change when the seventh art would be enlisted in the anti-colonial struggle. All the same, imperial hauteur did not go uncontested, and in the early 30s, when “the economic privileges of the mandate were alienating larger sectors of society,”<sup>53</sup> Beirut students “mounted a protest march for cheaper ticket prices, claiming them as a right just as they demanded cheaper tramway tickets and electricity rates.”<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, what was contested was cinema as a (too expensive) service, not as a cultural object. This, as we will see, was by no means accidental but rather spoke to the very place that cinema occupied in Lebanon, one where consumption rather than representation was paramount.

It should in fact be noted that the administration of cinema in Lebanon under the French mandate rested also on the “discouragement” of local film production. Several shorts and newsreels produced by Syrian and Lebanese filmmakers were heavily cut.<sup>55</sup> Although the High Commissioner Maurice Sarrail, the highest authority representing France in the mandate, had promised “no restrictions on filmmaking,” in 1934 he made it compulsory for “all filmmakers to obtain the prior approval of its office.”<sup>56</sup> Ecumenically enough, under the mandate Christian and Muslim leaders, as far as cinema was concerned, united in the name of patriarchal bigotry, with the former

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<sup>53</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 200.

<sup>55</sup> The first two films made in Syria, *al-Muttaham al-Bari* (1928) and *Tahta Sama Dimashq* (1932) were both censored by the French. See Diana Jabbour, “Syrian Cinema: Culture and Ideology,” in Alia Arasoughly (ed.), *Critical Film Writing from the Arab World* (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 201.

fighting against female nudity on screen and the latter against female presence in movie theatres.<sup>57</sup> France's cinematographic policy in mandate Lebanon can thus be described as having followed two, seemingly contradictory coordinates. One where cinema, as in the sales and exhibition of films, was commercially promoted though ideologically monitored. The other where film production, on the part of colonial subjects, was bureaucratically hindered to the point where it was effectively forbidden. It is not by coincidence that the pioneers of Lebanese cinema were all foreigners. The very "first locally made feature film in Lebanon's history,"<sup>58</sup> *The Adventures of Elias Mabruk* (*Mughāmarāt 'Elias Mabruk – 1930*), was made by the Italian chauffeur of the Sursock family, Giordano Pidutti, who had been working for Gaumont and Pathé prior to his directorial debut. Lebanon's first film studio, Lumnar Film, was founded sometime between 1933 and 1934 by Herta Gargour, a German woman who had married into the Palestinian Gargour family. Lumnar's first production, *In the Ruins of Baalbek* (1936), was co-directed by an Italian, Giulio de Luca, and Karam Boustany.

In line with its colonial function and origins, cinema in Lebanon was more of a commercial form of entertainment, for those who could afford it, than a cultural opportunity for self-representation. Movie theatres were spaces for the dissemination of the so-called *civilizing mission* where language and ideological contents were carefully policed by the colonial authorities. If on the one hand cinema as a social ritual reserved to the middle classes induced a process of identification with the colonial elite, on the other hand dissent wasn't alien to cinema as both a physical space and a service. That

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<sup>57</sup> See "Cinema, Women and the Regulation of Public Morality" in *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017), p. 56.

being said, Lebanese were effectively barred from directing and producing their own films but, as we will see in the next section, allowed to buy and sell those made by others.

## **B. Foreign Films, Local Agents**

In contrast to film production, distribution and exhibition were from the very beginning firmly in the hands of Levantine entrepreneurs. The Syrian-Lebanese Behna Brothers, spawns of a wealthy Aleppine family, set up in 1933 the first film distribution company in the Middle East, Behna Film Selections (Muntakhabāt Behnā Film), with offices in Alexandria, Cairo, Baghdad, Khartoum, Damascus and Beirut.<sup>59</sup> “The same era also saw the emergence of Lebanon’s only long-lasting movie empire, that of the Haddad family” which “opened up cinemas across Lebanon and Syria throughout the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>60</sup> Their movie theatres chain, Empire Intl., turned one hundred year-old in 2019 and is still a family business run by Mario Haddad Sr., the son of its founder, the Beirut pharmacist Georges Haddad. The company branched out into film distribution through its sister company, Empire International S.A.L. and in 1964 “became the exclusive distributor for Columbia Pictures (now Sony) in the region [...] a relationship that still stands, as does Empire’s longstanding rapport with Fox.”<sup>61</sup> Unlike production, the trade and exhibition of films was allowed to thrive under the French mandate for a rather simple reason: the films being distributed by Levantine companies

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<sup>59</sup> See Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Raphaël Millet, *Cinema in Lebanon/Le Cinéma au Liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017), p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> Nick Vivarelli, “Empire Intl. Celebrates 100 Years of Empire Building in the Middle East,” *Variety*, May 7, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/spotlight/100-years-of-empire-building-in-the-middle-east-1203207060/>



were for the most part European and American products. Most Lebanese distributors served as exclusive agents for American majors or European distributors.

“The colony’s economy” in fact, as Frantz Fanon noted, “is not integrated into that of the nation as a whole,” but “it is still organized in order to complete the economy of the different mother countries.”<sup>62</sup> Film distribution and exhibition in Lebanon was, and to a certain extent still is, a case in point. As long as the entrepreneurial activities of Lebanese businessmen benefited the Western film market, all was well. As David Lawrence Livingston observed, “with the ability to acquire a popular product regularly and at advantageous rates from abroad, local distributors and exhibitors had no need to foster local production. Indeed, they may even be hostile to it, since a change in audience viewing habits might threaten the profitability of the whole operation.”<sup>63</sup> Film distribution in other words perfectly suited the intermediary role the native bourgeoisie was assigned by the colonial administration. When in the 60s the *Centre national du cinéma* in Lebanon proposed taxing film distributors and exhibitors to fund national productions, American majors and local industry players successfully lobbied against the proposed law.<sup>64</sup>

The divide between production and distribution is not an exclusive prerogative of the film industry, the Lebanese economy as a whole having been historically oriented towards trade rather than (industrial and agricultural) production. That is because “the essential characteristics of Lebanon’s disarticulated and dominated economy feature external orientation promoted by European capital in alliance with the Lebanese

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<sup>62</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 127.

<sup>63</sup> David Lawrence Livingston, “Sects & Cinema in Lebanon” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), p. 46.

<sup>64</sup> Mario Sr Haddad, personal communication to the author, November 3, 2020 (Beirut).

bourgeoisie through trade and investment.” Film distribution in Lebanon is very much part of this economic model, having flourished at a time when the country became a “distributor of European goods and services in the Middle East.”<sup>65</sup> It is under these economic and historical circumstances that the Lebanese film industry developed its distribution and exhibition wings to the detriment of production. As we will see in the next chapter, even when, after independence, production eventually picked up, the sale of locally produced films would still follow the outward orientation of the national economy.

Starting from the mid-1950s American majors such as MGM, United Artists, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Bros, Columbia, Paramount and Universal opened regional offices in Beirut “to supervise distribution in territories such as Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and sometimes as far as Iran to the northeast, Turkey to the northwest and even Ethiopia to the south.”<sup>66</sup> Just as Beirut and its port had served as the ideal entry point for European capitals, so its theatrical market was now becoming the bridgehead for American films to conquer middle eastern audiences. It was in fact customary for majors to “develop a physical presence in the newly opened markets with local distribution offices and foreign direct investment, notably in the area of exhibition.”<sup>67</sup>

Aside from the regional offices of US majors, several independent distributors set up shop in Beirut around the same time selling films from Italy, Germany, France

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<sup>65</sup> Carolyn Gates, *The Historical Role of Political Economy in the Development of Modern Lebanon* (Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Raphaël Millet. *Cinema in Lebanon/Le cinéma au liban*. Rawiya Editions (Beirut, 2017), p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, “A Peripheral Market?: Hollywood Majors and the Middle East/North Africa Market,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 75 (Spring 2015), pp. 73-87.

and India among others. Italia Film International, set up in the mid 1950s by Joseph Vincenti, son of an Italian family from Palestine mainly active in the Food & Beverage sector, is one such company. Initially dedicated to the distribution of Italian films, over the years the company acted as the sub-distributor of A.I.P., Orion, Buena Vista International and, more recently, Disney. Other distributors in Lebanon included Sovexport Film (the Soviet Union's state agency for film distribution), Victoria Film, International Films Company, United Arab Films Co. (a Syrian company with offices in Beirut), Berdj Films, Gaumont and many others. The 1950s also witnessed the ascendance of US interests in Lebanon under President Camille Chamaoun, at the expenses of French hegemony, culminated with the application of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1958 when US marines landed in Beirut to exorcise the specter of communism and quell social unrest.<sup>68</sup>

This geopolitical and economic shift was reflected in the local film industry and in the pages of the only (Francophone) film magazine being published in Lebanon at the time, *Cinés D'Orient*.<sup>69</sup> A weekly magazine that featured film listings and reviews along with news about sports, student life and a distinct catholic slant, its editorial line visibly changed in the course of the 50s. If issues from the late 40s and early 50s dedicated ample space to French cinema and clerical affairs, as well as functioning as a

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<sup>68</sup> See Erika G. Alin, *The United States and the 1958 Lebanon Crisis, American Intervention in the Middle East* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994) and Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Founded in 1934, the francophone magazine was edited by the Jesuits of the *Centrale catholique du cinéma* (regular columns included "La semaine sportive des Kataeb"), changed its name from *Ecran D'Orient* to *Ciné D'Orient* to, finally, *Cinés D'Orient*. In its early years the magazine had a morally prescriptive character, with film reviews basically amounting to religious guidance. In 1953 the magazine was sold to Gilbert Mille (75%) and Alain Plisson (25%) who would become its editor in chief until 1975, the year *Ciné D'Orient* ceased publication.

sort of Maronite community news service,<sup>70</sup> the second half of the decade saw an increase in coverage and even page numbers dedicated entirely to film, with a clear focus on American cinema. The magazine shed its generalist tone to become more of a trade magazine as movie theatres kept opening in Beirut and American majors consolidated their grip on the Lebanese market.<sup>71</sup> Warner Brothers, Columbia, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and other majors bought advertising space on the pages of *Cinés D'Orient* to publicize their catalogues, box office results and upcoming films.

Tellingly, the space dedicated to Lebanese films and directors was minimal while “the tendency to shape the local market to the advantage of the majors’ films” was clearly visible on the magazine pages.<sup>72</sup> The films worth talking and writing about in Lebanon were American first, (Western) European second, and Egyptian lastly – anything other than that was a mere curiosity (things will change in the course of the 1960s when the distribution circuit in Lebanon grew far more heterogeneous). The power and prestige that representatives of US majors exerted over the Lebanese film industry is perhaps best illustrated by a panel published in a December issue of *Cinés D'Orient* in 1958.<sup>73</sup> Therein, Willy Goldenthal (Paramount), Edouard Sasson (M.G.M.), Cesar Greco (Columbia), Panos Alafòuzo (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), Edouard Cherabié (Warner Bros) and Michel Surssock (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) were each asked the same seven

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<sup>70</sup> The March 4, 1950 issue of *Cinés D'Orient* featured an editorial reporting on a meeting of the “Cénacle Libanais,” a Maronite think-tank deliberating on that particular occasion on the “*fondements moraux de la maison libanaise*” (“Moral Foundations of the Lebanese Home(land)”). For more on the Cénacle Libanais see Nadim Shehadi, *The Idea of Lebanon: Economy and the State in the Cénacle Libanais 1946-54* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1987) and Amin Elias, *Le Cénacle libanais (1946-1984): Une tribune pour une science du Liban* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2019).

<sup>71</sup> Starting from the 21 September, 1957 issue (22eme année N.48), upon request of its readers, the magazine started having a four-pages supplement in English.

<sup>72</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, “A Peripheral Market?: Hollywood Majors and the Middle East/North Africa Market,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 75 (Spring 2015), pp. 73-87.

<sup>73</sup> See “7 questions indiscrètes aux Directeurs des Sociétés Americaines de films,” *Cinés D'Orient*, 27 December, 1958.

questions which ranged from “What’s your definition of a commercial movie?” to “What are the most anticipated films of the coming season?” A commercial film, they all concurred, was the one that sold most tickets.

While interviews with studio executives and industry players are a common feature of trade magazines, the prominence of regional representatives of American studios is peculiar to a peripheral yet strategic film industry such as the Lebanese one – and a clear measure of the importance of its intermediary role. In a country where Hollywood stars and directors were a very rare sight, it was the dealers of dreams that acquired quasi-celebrity status. They effectively were the intermediary backbone upon which the Lebanese film industry, that is to say its distribution and exhibition wings, prospered. When the president of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Spyros Skouras visited Beirut for only 24 hours in September 1954 he was welcomed at the airport with the kind of ceremonial reverence usually reserved to heads of state and even met with the US ambassador.<sup>74</sup> Nine years later, a new movie theatre in Hamra, the Saroulla, was named after Mr. Skouras’ wife.<sup>75</sup>

Overseas territories were becoming increasingly strategic for American studios, something echoed in an article *Ciné D’Orient* ran in 1955: “The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer world conference established the growing importance of foreign markets.” The piece reported that during its annual conference the company’s president, Arthur Loew, announced that “revenues from abroad over the last three years reached 50 million dollars and are expected to raise in 1956,” adding that “given the improving economic

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<sup>74</sup> See “24 heures surchargées à Beyrouth pour l’infatigable M.Spyros Skouras,” *Cinés D’Orient*, 24 September, 1954.

<sup>75</sup> See “Le cinéma à l’heure du Saroulla,” *Cinés D’Orient*, 23 March, 1963.

conditions in many of these countries, we can hope that profits will double in a relatively near future.”<sup>76</sup> Thirty-five delegates from Europe, South Africa, the Middle East and India were flown to the studios for the occasion, including the director of M.G.M. Lebanon, Edouard Sasson.<sup>77</sup> Regional agents were a vital asset to Hollywood in the 50s, when the mass adoption of television in the US drove domestic attendance down and the whole film industry came to rely on overseas theatrical markets’ revenues. So much so that the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) was supplemented by the MPEA (Motion Picture Export Association) with the intent of creating a cartel able to monopolize distribution abroad.<sup>78</sup> As Janet Wasko notes in her seminal study of Hollywood’s political economy, “distribution cartels have maintained their dominance of foreign markets” thanks to the concerted efforts of the MPEA and their regional agents, which represented the interests of the same studios behind the MPAA.<sup>79</sup>

A common practice in film distribution, whereby majors entrust their catalogue to local distributors and their knowledge of the local market, “its type of audience, its seasonality and its media environment,” exclusive agency of a foreign company is also

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<sup>76</sup> *Cinés D’Orient* archives at the *Bibliothèque des sciences humaines* at Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut.

<sup>77</sup> Mr. Sasson will be found killed in his office on February 28, 1970 (“M-G-M Official in Beirut, A Lebanese Jew, Is Slain”, *New York Times*, March 1, 1970). In *Lebanon’s Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), Franck Salameh reports Sasson’s daughter claims that “her father was under tremendous pressure to begin allowing short PLO ‘propaganda footage’ headline all feature presentations at the MGM movie theatres under Sasson’s direction – all at the express and continuous objection of MGM, New York headquarters, which Sasson relayed repeatedly to PLO representative in Beirut.”

<sup>78</sup> See Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood’s Domination of the World’s Movie Screens* (London: McFarland & Company, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publishing, 2003), p. 179. Wasko also points out how “even though various expenses (the foreign distributor’s fees and expenses) are deducted before a studio receives foreign revenues, the US distributor usually reports 100 percent of the film rental as revenue. In other words, the studio is reporting more revenue than it actually receives so that a larger distribution fee can be charged.”

a feature of the Lebanese economy as a whole, heavily based on imports as it is.<sup>80</sup>

Reliance on foreign imports has characterized the history and economic outlook of post-independence Lebanon until the present. “Far from helping Lebanon to graduate as an independent nation, the French swamped the market with their own products,” actively hindering Lebanon’s economic sovereignty.<sup>81</sup>

The constitutive imbalance between film production and distribution in Lebanon is thus ascribable to the very nature of neo-colonial economics, whose aim is on the one hand to thwart industrial autonomy and on the other to boost trade and commerce (of imported goods).<sup>82</sup> After all it was a robust, national film production and “the competitive advantage bestowed on the country possessing the largest domestic market” that made Hollywood’s hegemony possible. In film, as in any other sphere of the economy, the weaker domestic production is, the higher foreign imports will necessarily be.<sup>83</sup> This correlation creates an uneven state of codependency whereby one’s own industrial development is another’s underdevelopment, with cinema being no exception. Overseas sales were crucial for the American film industry and “Hollywood studios” were in fact “were able to take projected foreign earnings into account when setting film production budgets.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, “A Peripheral Market?: Hollywood Majors and the Middle East/North Africa Market,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 75 (Spring 2015), pp. 73-87. For exclusive agencies and their role in the Lebanese economy see “Monopoly Control: The Concentration of Financial Capital” in Fawwaz Traboulsi, *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon* (Beirut: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004).

<sup>82</sup> See Geoffrey Kay, *Development & Underdevelopment: A Marxist Analysis* (New York: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1975) and Hicham Safieddine (ed.), *Arab Marxism and National Liberation: Selected Writings of Mahdi Amel* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publishing, 2003), p. 177.

<sup>84</sup> Peter Miskell, “International films and International Markets: The Globalisation of Hollywood Entertainment, c.1921–1951,” *Media History* 22, no. 2 (February 2016): 174-200.

In his militant analysis of the film industry in Africa and the Arab World, the Tunisian film critic Tahar Cheeria identified in film distribution the focal point of monopolistic practices aimed at weakening national production to facilitate the flooding of African and Arab theatres with imported foreign films.<sup>85</sup> The monopolization of the (post-)colonial exhibition circuits directly benefited domestic film production in the mother countries while simultaneously forcing the (ex-)colonies to acquire films from them. Self-representation on the big screen ran contrary to the economic logic and driving principles of neo-colonialism. After having being denied the right to film their own stories and lives under colonialism, newly independent nations found themselves in a very similar situation only this time enforced by financial rather than military means.

Nationalization of the film industry was, in Tahar Cheeria's view, the only way to oppose western cinematographic hegemony in the (former) colonies and create thus the conditions for a thriving, local film production. In a country like Lebanon, where the very notion of national interest remains highly disputed and commercial rather than national imperatives are paramount, this was never going to be an option. The country and its film industry would actually serve as a safe business haven for those directors and producers fleeing the nationalization of Egyptian cinema in the mid 1960s.

The film industry in Lebanon and its early development, as we described it in this chapter, were a more or less direct emanation of colonial interests. Its structural shape reflected and replicated to a substantial extent the intermediary role Levantine elites had played between Western products and Eastern markets. This resulted in a specular and seemingly paradoxical situation whereby film distribution and exhibition

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<sup>85</sup> Founder of the *Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage*, the first film festival to be organized and held in the Arab World, Cheeria wrote in 1968 a pivotal study about the (neo-)colonial nature of film distribution in Africa and the Arab World titled *Écrans d'abondance, ou cinémas de libération en Afrique?* ("Screens of Abundance or Liberation Cinema in Africa?")



thrived while production lagged behind. Far from paradoxical however, this feature of the Lebanese film industry is very much in line the economic imperatives of colonialism which are founded on the suppression of local production in order to favor trade of imported goods. In “Mandatory Cinema” I looked at how the colonial administration of Lebanon juridically ensured that no Lebanese was able to direct films and that cinema more generally, both as a physical and ideological space, exclusively served French interests. In spite of that, locals were able to use movie theatres for their own purposes (as in the case of the May Day celebrations of 1925) and protests against the elitist prices of cinema tickets. In “Foreign Films, Local Agents” I looked at the role that the Levantine bourgeoisie, in line with historical task, played in film distribution and exhibition. I also took into consideration the wider context in which Hollywood found itself in the postwar period when, due to the domestic decline of cinema, had to resort to overseas expansion in order to secure revenues and global dominance. Lebanon’s exposure to outside interests, as we will see in the next chapter, will determine the type and nature of film production when after independence the country started to produce “its own” films.

## CHAPTER III

### HONG KONG ON THE MEDITERRANEAN: CHRONOTOPES OF AN INTERMEDIARY CINEMA

“Enrichissez-vous!”

(Michel Chiha)

“The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.”

(Guy Debord)

In this chapter I will be looking at the post-war period when, after independence and most crucially after the nationalization of cinema in Nasser’s Egypt, films started to be directed and produced by Lebanese. Curiously, these films have not been considered by scholars and critics “authentically Lebanese” in light of the language they were acted or dubbed into (the Egyptian dialect) and because of their generic, commercial topics which did not relate to Lebanon in any evident and culturally relevant way. I will argue against this assumption by showing how these “Egyptianized” and foreign co-productions are actually a reflection and embodiment of Lebanon’s national character and economic model. To substantiate my claim, I will, as I did in the previous chapter, measure the history and developments of the Lebanese film industry against that of the country’s political and economic history. Furthermore, I will comparatively analyze the configuration and output of the Lebanese film industry with that of Hong Kong to show how the two countries’ similar colonial histories have determined their respective

cinematographic culture to a specular extent. In doing so I will once again illustrate the symbiotic relation between Lebanon's economic model and the local film industry, focusing this time on production instead of distribution. In "The Nation as a Production Facility" I look at how the service-based character of Lebanon's economy informed film production on the national level, with the country functioning more as a shooting location and co-production facility rather than a "protagonist" of Lebanese cinema. While these films have not been deemed worthy of consideration by scholars, in "From the Postcard to the Chronotope" I argue that they, however cheaply and opportunistically made, can be read as national products in their own, specific right.

#### **A. The Nation as Production Facility**

In line with its service-based economic model, Lebanon was a place where films were shot rather than produced, a cinema, to borrow Hady Zaccak's words, "made in Lebanon, but not Lebanese."<sup>86</sup> The primary marker of this alleged non-national character was language. Lebanese cinema "suffered from 'Egyptianization' – films were seen to have to follow the Egyptian model and even to have Egyptian dialogue to be successful."<sup>87</sup> A large number of the films made in Lebanon from the late 1950s to the late 1960s were either acted in or dubbed into Egyptian Arabic. The "Golden Age" of Lebanese cinema and its timid industrialization roughly coincided with the nationalization of the Egyptian film industry in 1963. Expropriation of private and foreign assets had been an early priority of the Nasserite project, set in motion by the

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<sup>86</sup> Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996), p. 51.

<sup>87</sup> Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p. 23.

clamorous nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. A year later, in 1957, “the National Organization for the Consolidation of Cinema was set up by the Ministry of National Culture and Guidance,” which had legislative and budgetary powers over Egyptian film production.

With the creation of a state-subsidized film industry in Egypt, “more and more private producers and companies were being pushed out,” with many of them finding a safe haven in Lebanon.<sup>88</sup> Rather than artistically or politically exiled, those members of the Egyptian film industry that relocated in Beirut did so to pursue their commercial activities.<sup>89</sup> This would partly explain the very mainstream nature of the “Egyptianized” films produced in Lebanon at the time, many of which, it must be noted, were still directed by Lebanese directors (the most prolific of them all being Mohammed Selmane, considered to be the “father of Lebanese cinema” by the Egyptian singer Mohammed Abdel Wahab).<sup>90</sup> Writing in 1966, Farid Jabre noted how “between October 1964 and June 1965, only nine Egyptian films were shown in Lebanon” as opposed to seventy-eight the year before. According to him, 1963 was the year “the Central Cinema Organization started regulating the production of films in Egypt.”<sup>91</sup> Why did the number of Egyptian films distributed in Lebanese theatres drop so

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<sup>88</sup> Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), p. 54.

<sup>89</sup> Many of them kept working in Egypt too and there are no records alluding to any form of political pressure exerted on them.

<sup>90</sup> Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>91</sup> Farid Jabre, “The Industry in Lebanon 1958-65” in Georges Sadoul (ed.), *The Cinema in the Arab Countries* (Beirut: Interarab Center of Cinema & Television, 1966), 175.

dramatically from one year to the next? Some have adduced the overtly politicized content of Egyptian films under Nasser's pan-Arabist ascendancy to be the reason.<sup>92</sup>

That Lebanese audiences, which for the most part were composed of members of the middle and upper classes, might not have been the intended target of Nasser's pan-Arab socialist message seems plausible enough.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, it seems unlikely for the whole national production to have thematically shifted from one year to the next. Perhaps some sort of contractual dispute between Lebanese and Egyptian distributors might have accounted for the sudden drop in the number of Egyptian titles in Lebanese theatres. Be that as it may, while it is virtually impossible to retroactively determine the exact causes behind this drastic shift, what available data show is that the dwindling number of Egyptian movies being distributed was balanced out by "Egyptianized" films produced *in* Lebanon. The year 1963 marked in fact a conspicuous rise in the production of films (nine, almost twice as much as in 1962) that would peak three years later, in 1966, when more than twenty films were made, most of them shot or dubbed in the Egyptian dialect.<sup>94</sup> According to Jean al-Kassan around 100

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<sup>92</sup> See Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996) and Raphaël Millet. *Cinema in Lebanon/Le cinéma au liban*. Rawiya Editions (Beirut, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> In regard to the palatability of Nasser's pan-Arab message, it should also be noted that in the early 60s the majority of Lebanon's middle and upper classes was Christian. The latter, especially in its Maronite component, wasn't exactly in favor of Nasser's politics. See Yusef Sayegh, *Entrepreneurs of Lebanon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Salim Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War: The Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism," MERIP Reports, (No. 73, 1978); Michael Johnson, *All Honorable Men: The Social Origins of War in Lebanon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001); Claude Dubar & Salim Nasr, *Les classes sociales au Liban* (Paris: Fondation nationales des sciences politiques, 1976); Jean Ducruet, *Les capitaux européens au Proche Orient* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

<sup>94</sup> See infographic in Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d'un cinéma vers l'inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996), p. 53 and Raphaël Millet. *Cinema in Lebanon/Le cinéma au liban*. Rawiya Editions (Beirut, 2017); Roy Armes, *Arab Filmmakers of the Middle East: A Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

films were produced in Lebanon between 1963 and 1970, “54 of which were in the Egyptian dialect.”<sup>95</sup>

While many film scholars have blamed this wave of “Egyptianized” films for having somehow deprived Lebanese cinema of its national character (or of the chances of building one), it is worth contemplating how intimately related to the country’s political and economic dynamics this phenomenon was. Though often used to opportunistically exculpate domestic players of their responsibilities and depict the country as the helpless victim of foreign machinations, Lebanon’s exposure to external factors and powers is a matter of historical course.<sup>96</sup> The country’s tenuous sovereignty having hung precariously between contrasting geopolitical interests, both regional (Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia) and international (France and the US most notably). Its own economic model, predicated as it is on the intermediary role of the country in the context of peripheral capitalism, made Lebanon structurally susceptible to outside influence.<sup>97</sup> One of Lebanon’s founding fathers, the banker, publisher, statesman and economist Michel Chiha theorized in his *Propos d’economie libanaise* a sort of neo-liberal doctrine *avant la lettre* arguing in favor of the country’s intermediary role.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p.25.

<sup>96</sup> In her book *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008) Lina Khatib speaks about “a prevailing myth during the Civil War, which still resonates in Lebanon today, that of ‘the war of others on our land’.” A myth that, according to the author, “serves to absolve the Lebanese of all responsibility for the war and its atrocities.”

<sup>97</sup> In *The Historical Role of Political Economy in the Development of Modern Lebanon* (Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies), Carolyn Gates describes “peripheral capitalism as a particular development of a ‘non-Western’ social formation historically defined by its relations with dominating Western imperialism.”

<sup>98</sup> See Michel Chiha, *Propos d’economie libanaise* (Editions du Trident: Beyrouth, 1965), Toufic K. Gaspard, *A Political Economy of Lebanon: 1948-2002* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2004); Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004) and Hicham Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

“Chiha’s decisive influence resides in the initiation of a number of measures which established the extroverted economic system based on trade and services” that continue to define the Lebanese economy to this very day.<sup>99</sup> An open and supposedly free market meant that “Lebanon has been globalized since the 1950s,”<sup>100</sup> economically as well as culturally.<sup>101</sup> Framed within this political and economic context, the “Egyptianization” of Lebanese cinema during its “Golden Age” rather than a cultural aberration appears as a quintessentially national phenomenon.

As the Egyptian government enlisted the seventh art in its national project of pan-Arab socialism, Lebanon, in compliance with its economic vocation, offered refuge to those film entrepreneurs who favored profit over propaganda (or didn’t mind taking a remunerative break from the latter). Unlike other former French colonies like Algeria, where cinema was politically mobilized by the state-sponsored effort of cultural decolonization, in Lebanon the seventh art was first and foremost a commercial service.<sup>102</sup> Lebanese “manufacturing was overwhelmingly concerned with the production of consumer goods,” and so was its film industry.<sup>103</sup> Egyptianized films served in fact a very practical purpose, that of finding a bigger audience beyond its

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<sup>99</sup> Fawaaz Traboulsi, “Michel Chiha and the Lebanese Ideology” (American University of Beirut: Unpublished Paper, 2019).

<sup>100</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon* (Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East, 2014), p. 25.

<sup>101</sup> In his analysis of cultural consumption and media power in Lebanon, Marwan Kraïdy observes the early “globalization” of culture in a society historically torn between East and West. See Marwan M. Kraïdy, “Globalization *avant la lettre*? Cultural hybridity and media power in Lebanon,” in *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraïdy (London: Routledge, 2003), 276 – 295.

<sup>102</sup> See Ahmed Bedjaoui, *Cinema and the Algerian War of Independence: Culture, Politics & Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004), p. 94.

domestic one and increase thus box office revenues. By virtue of its early development and massive output, Egyptian cinema has circulated widely throughout the Arab world on the big screen first and the small one later. Consequently, the Egyptian dialect became a sort of *lingua franca* for Arab spectators which, for the most part, can understand and therefore enjoy films acted or dubbed in Egyptian.<sup>104</sup>

For film producers and directors working in 1960s Lebanon, an “Egyptianized” film would represent a much safer investment than one acted in the local dialect for the simple reason that it could be sold and distributed throughout the Arab-speaking world. The “Egyptianization” of Lebanese cinema responded to the very characteristics of the Lebanese film market, linguistically reflecting both the cultural and economic aspects of its intermediary function. An heteroglossia of Arabic idioms can at times be found in Lebanese productions of the time where actors from Egypt, Syria and Lebanon often acted each in their own dialect (an example being the 1966 comedy *Funduq al-‘Ahlām* by Albert Najib featuring Sabah and the Syrian comedian Duraid Lahham).

“In Third World post-colonial or revolutionary states, such as Burkina Faso, Algeria and Cuba, state support for the moving image has served a more properly political function linked to the project of building a new independent nation and forging a national identity. South East Asia brings to light yet another permutation, for here state involvement has traditionally been aligned with more regionally focused commercial imperatives.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007) and Magdy Mounir el-Shammaa, “Shadows of Contemporary Lives: Modernity, Culture, and National Identity in Egyptian Filmmaking” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2007).

<sup>105</sup> Metter Hjort & Duncan Petrie (ed.), *The Cinema of Small Nations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 12.



Allegorical comparisons have been frequently deployed to describe Lebanon and its supposedly exceptional character. The “Switzerland of the Middle East” or the “Paris of the Orient,” as their terms of comparison suggest, stressed the country’s presumed affinities with European civilization, or alleged such, while setting it apart from its Arab neighbors. The semantic symbolism of these geo-cultural aliases again points to the intermediary role that modern Lebanon played between Western values and Eastern clients. Were we to find a metaphorical basis for comparison to meaningfully frame the Lebanese film industry, and invert this Eurocentric tendency, Hong Kong could be a productive analogy. Like Lebanon, the former British colony has been characterized by economic laissez-faire, and its film industry too has benefited from the influx of talent coming from outside.<sup>106</sup> “During the war-torn 1930s and 1940s Shanghai film companies fled to the relative tranquility of the British colony,” laying the foundations of the Hong Kong film industry.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, Lebanese cinema’s “Golden Age” wouldn’t have been as gilded without the input of foreign talent and capital. That “some Lebanese economists wished to see the country transformed into a Singapore or a Hong Kong of the Middle East” is not entirely coincidental as several were the similitudes between the two countries’ economies and, I here argue, film industries too.<sup>108</sup> Not only do Hong Kong and Lebanon share a colonial background and its ancillary economic configuration, but also a geographical and demographic size which, when it comes to film production, has

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<sup>106</sup> See Fujio Muzuoka, *Contrived Laissez-Faireism: The Politico-Economic Structure of British Colonialism in Hong Kong* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004), p. 129.

determined to a substantial extent its shape and output. Although both countries boasted the “highest film attendance per capita,”<sup>109</sup> globally in the case of Hong Kong and in the Arab world for Lebanon, film production as well as distribution were dependent on outside markets.<sup>110</sup> The size of domestic audiences, however prone to cinema-going, was not enough to financially justify the domestic production of locally specific films, both thematically and linguistically. In the British colony “foreign sales drove local production” and “film producers had to aim for export.”<sup>111</sup> Likewise, in the former French mandate film producers hoping to break even could not possibly count on the Lebanese box office alone, which is why locally produced films were often dubbed or acted in Egyptian.

Curiously, a specular linguistic issue also pertained to the Hong Kong film industry where “the majority of the classic Shaw Brothers productions were released with Mandarin dialogue tracks,”<sup>112</sup> since Cantonese-language movies “had an audience of eight to ten million viewers” while “the Mandarin audience, even with China closed, was significantly larger.”<sup>113</sup> The British colony turned out to be “an ideal location for Mandarin-language film production, since many talented Shanghai filmmakers had

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<sup>109</sup> Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 65.

<sup>110</sup> In 1964 there were in fact 210 movie theatres in Lebanon (which then counted just over 2 million inhabitants) and 32 million tickets were sold the same year with “an average of 16 entries per inhabitant, way ahead of Syria coming in second at five entries per inhabitant.” See Raphaël Millet. *Cinema in Lebanon/Le cinéma au liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017)

<sup>111</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 40.

<sup>112</sup> Steven Schwankert, “What’s the Deal with Mandarin and Cantonese,” *China Film Insider*, February 28, 2017, <http://chinafilminsider.com/chinasplaining-mandocanto/>

<sup>113</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 41.

sought refuge in the territory.”<sup>114</sup> The use of Mandarin and the Egyptian dialect was both an historical contingency and a commercial ruse in two countries where cinema received no public subsidies and was therefore compelled to be financially self-reliant.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the globalized flows – be they linguistic, cultural or economic – that traversed both countries were also reflected in their films which consequently appealed to transnational audiences. Interestingly enough, Hong Kong movies became extremely popular in the early 70s in Lebanon, so much so that *Cinés D’Orient* published a dossier on the kung-fu craze in December 1972.<sup>116</sup> It was the Indian distributor M. Nari Samatani that kickstarted the craze when he sold *The Big Boss* (1971) to Khaled Itani, owner of the Piccadilly, Saroulla, Orly and Byblos cinemas in Beirut. The film was a huge box office success, “the likes of which we haven’t seen in quite some time,” which was followed by a plethora of Hong Kong productions that dominated the Lebanese box office for several seasons in a row.<sup>117</sup>

After having described the way in which Lebanon’s (and Hong Kong’s) economic model has determined the orientation of its film industry, I will now take a closer look at the films that were produced during the so-called “Golden Age” of Lebanese cinema. By doing so I wish to highlight the link between industrial arrangements and cinematographic output not so much to prove the over-deterministic sway of economics over culture, but to dialectically relate these two realms. Though immersed in the stereotypes and tropes that commercial cinema often thrives on, the

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>115</sup> See David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

<sup>116</sup> See “Pourquoi le karaté?” par Nadia Dawalibi et Alain Plisson. *Cinés D’Orient*, 23 December, 1972.

<sup>117</sup> “Pourquoi le karaté?” par Nadia Dawalibi et Alain Plisson. *Cinés D’Orient*, 23 December, 1972, p. 6.

films co-produced in Lebanon at the time, I argue, can be seen as genuinely national products. Rather than in the intention of their directors, their “distinctively Lebanese” character lies in the material circumstances that historically framed the making of these films and informed their content.

## **B. From the Postcard to the Chronotope**

Though Hong Kong very much like Lebanon for the Middle East served as the launchpad for the “economic penetration into China,” its economy, while still subordinate to colonial interests, was not relegated to trade and banking only (especially after 1949, when in mainland China communism triumphed).<sup>118</sup> Industrialization was encouraged in the British colony, something that was reflected in the local film industry too, best exemplified by the Shaw brothers’ monopolistic empire. After founding and running a successful film business in 1920s Shanghai, the four brothers Shaw - Runje, Runme, Runde and Run Run – relocated to Hong Kong in 1958 where they established Movie Town, once the largest privately-owned studio in the world according to Wikipedia. Like early Hollywood moguls, the Shaw brothers “focused their initial attention on exhibition [...] moving into film distribution and finally production.” In the absence of a “stable domestic market” their movie business “became much more reliant on international operations.”<sup>119</sup> If the output and organizational might of Hong Kong cinema cannot be realistically compared to the Lebanese one, the two film industries present similar characteristics also when it comes to production. They both were

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<sup>118</sup> Fujio Muzuoka, *Contrived Laissez-Faireism: The Politico-Economic Structure of British Colonialism in Hong Kong* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 31.

outwardly oriented in the dual sense that their films catered to outside markets and that, in the Lebanese case, foreign crews used their facilities when shooting on location in the land of the cedars.

Money was flowing into Lebanon. The product of the economic boom and the lifestyle it encouraged was perhaps best embodied by the thriving Casino du Liban, which attracted gamblers from the entire Middle East and beyond. As a result, the Casino featured in numerous movies [...] not only did Lebanon provide an exotic backdrop for spy thrillers and orientalist dramas, but it also provided accessible production facilities, experienced multilingual technicians and trained actors. Lebanon had an active local film industry where, in addition to Arabic, both English and French were widely spoken, making it easier for foreigners to work there.<sup>120</sup>

The unregulated circulation of capital, eased by the introduction of banking secrecy in 1956 and tax breaks, was something that the Lebanese film industry both offered and reflected. On the one hand film was yet another product to be consumed on the market, historically receptive towards foreign imports. On the other hand, the iconographic clichés of the “Switzerland of the Middle East” found a representational space on the big screen, be it in Lebanese films or in foreign (co-)productions shot in Lebanon. As Samhita Sunya observed, “Beirut’s prominence as *both* production location and distribution hub spills over into its narrativization as plot device and its visualization as *mise-en-scène*.”<sup>121</sup> Lebanon, and its capital in particular, became veritable chronotopes of an intermediary cinema. First introduced as a conceptual tool by the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the chronotope offers, in Vivian Sobchak’s words, a way for “comprehending historically the phenomenological relation between text and

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<sup>120</sup> Raphaël Millet. *Cinema in Lebanon/Le cinéma au liban* (Beirut: Rawiya Editions, 2017), p. 76.

<sup>121</sup> Samhita Sunya, “On Location: Tracking Secret Agents and Films, between Bombay and Beirut,” *Film History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall 2020), pp. 105-140.

context in a way richer than that afforded by generic analyses.”<sup>122</sup> The chronotope, as its etymon suggests, evokes a time and place where text and context are no longer separate and where fictional images acquire documentary value, not because what is shown is “true,” but because the socio-economic forces at play in the making of that image are made intelligible. Cinema of the 1960s in Lebanon, for the most part, was populated by affluent individuals sipping cocktails by the pool or speeding by on fancy American cars. The country on film was often reduced to the hotel district in Beirut, the St. George bay, the Casino du Liban and a few panoramic shots of Baalbeck, Mount Lebanon or Byblos. Poverty, emigration and hardship were nowhere to be seen. True, the Lebanese economy in the period that stretched from the mid 1950s to the beginning of the Civil War in 1975 witnessed a spectacular expansion, but as the Lebanese economist Toufic Gaspard observed, it amounted to “growth without development.”<sup>123</sup> A handful of endogamous families monopolized the country’s wealth and national imagination, the “Republic of Merchants” being a private membership club from which the majority of Lebanese citizens were excluded.<sup>124</sup> The glamorous lifestyle on display in films such as Mohamed Selmane’s *Lebanon by Night* (“Lubnān Fi-l-Layl” – 1963), Youssef Maalouf’s *The Millionaires* (“Al-Meliunirah” – 1965) or Peter Bezencenet’s *24 Hours to Kill* (1965) was in fact the exclusive preserve of the upper middle-classes.

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<sup>122</sup> Vivian Sobchak, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir” in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genre: History and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 129-170.

<sup>123</sup> Toufic K. Gaspard, *A Political Economy of Lebanon: 1948-2002* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2004), p. 67.

<sup>124</sup> See Yusef Sayegh, *Entrepreneurs of Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Mahdi ‘Amil, *L’état confessionnel: le cas libanais* (Paris: Editions La Brèche, 1996); Claude Dubar & Salim Nasr, *Les classes sociales au Liban* (Paris: Fondation nationales des sciences politiques, 1976) and Carolyn Gates, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of an Open Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

Rural areas, the south and the periphery of Beirut were inhabited by a mass of impoverished working people which Father Sim'an Duwayhi, during a speech in Parliament, referred to as "miserable individuals who constitute a source of corruption, petrification and illness that sap the moral, human and spiritual values of Lebanon."<sup>125</sup> As for the ethical rectitude of the Lebanese ruling class, suffice here to report the words of Kamal Dib who, reflecting on the vicissitudes of the newly independent country between 1943 and 1975, pointed out that "the distinction between criminals and business people became blurred, as many individuals were both."<sup>126</sup> Crime, albeit of the stylish kind, features prominently in the films from the "Golden Age," with the Lebanese capital preempting the Reaganian hedonism of 80s Miami in more ways than one.

If the stereotypical cinematic image of crime associated with the Arab world is one of badly-lit alleys, deception and menacing turbans, the iconographic cliché attached to Lebanon and its capital was one of lawless opulence. While still plagued by orientalist clichés of all sorts, the criminal milieu we find in Lebanese films, and to a greater extent in foreign co-productions shot in Lebanon, is one where the materialist perks of the "Switzerland of the Middle East" are on glossy display. Criminal activities are not conducted in the shady part of town, but by the pool of the Phoenicia Hotel. Bad things happen in Beirut, but in very exclusive locations. In *Spies Strikes Silently* (1966), a Spanish-Italian co-production directed by Mario Caiano shot on location in Beirut, a couple sitting on the terrace of the Phoenicia hotel has the following conversation. The woman tells one of the protagonists, "you talk as if you owned the whole place" to

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<sup>125</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), p. 149.

<sup>126</sup> Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004), p. 91.

which the man candidly replies: “regrettably there is hardly anything that cannot be bought with money.” Money talks louder than images in the films made in Lebanon during the “Golden Age.” Hardly an exclusive prerogative of Lebanese capitalism, the lucrative complicity between crime and finance found in Beirut an iconic setting as its “nightlife provided the backdrop for deals struck among warlords and financiers – usually during endless cocktail parties.”<sup>127</sup> Having skipped its Keynesian phase altogether, Lebanese capitalism embraced the neoliberal doctrine long before Milton Friedman won a Nobel Prize for it in 1976. Long before said doctrine was even tested to the tune of torture in Pinochet’s Chile and then triumphantly championed by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Economic laissez-faire and its predatory corollary, coupled with the financialization of the economy, the core of neoliberal economics, are among the founding principles of post-colonial Lebanon as exemplified in this passage from *Propos d’économie libanaise* by Michel Chiha: “after having exchanged shells and bombs, men want to exchange merchandise again [...] we fight one another to open or close a market. We knock a man out to turn him into a client while waiting to knock him out again if he looks for another supplier. Such is the law of necessity and profit, of fraternity and civilization (28th August, 1945).”<sup>128</sup> Whether the sanctification of the profit motive is conducive to fraternity remains to be discussed, but one thing is for sure: the Lebanon of the 60s acquired a mythical reputation as the ultimate location for wheeling and dealing under the Mediterranean sun. As Beirut surged in the popular imagination as the hub of unregulated finance and money laundering, film was quick to pick this up and turn it into a veritable cinematic chronotope.

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<sup>127</sup> Kamal Dib, *Warlords & Merchants: The Lebanese Business and Political Establishment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004), p. 100.

<sup>128</sup> Michel Chiha, *Propos d’économie libanaise* (Beyrouth: Editions du Trident, 1965), p. 26.



“Honest in life, but criminals in Lebanon” read the title of an article *Cinés D’Orient* ran in 1964 when Mickey Rooney and Lex Barker were in Beirut to shoot *24 Hours to Kill* (1965). Directed by Peter Bezencenet, the film was one of the many crime flicks that were shot in Lebanon throughout the 60s and early 70s.<sup>129</sup> Virtually all of them feature in their plot a criminal of some sort and caliber seeking refuge in Beirut or conducting illicit business under the Lebanese sun. In the derivative aftermath of the first James Bond movie, *Dr. No* (1962), the tiny Mediterranean country served as a prime location for its many spoofs (the highest profile one being Val Guest’s 1965 spy flick *Where the Spies Are* starring David Niven and Françoise Dorléac). Fictional spies and felons flocked to Beirut on their way to either jail, the cemetery or the high life. The most famous of them all is arguably Jean-Paul Belmondo, who after having found fame as the lead character of Jean-Luc Godard’s debut, *À bout de souffle* (1960), reunited with its co-star, Jean Seberg, in *Backfire* (“Échappement libre” – 1964). Directed by Jean Becker, the film chronicles the titular escape of a gold smuggler as he tries “to transport a stolen fortune to a new hideout” passing by the Lebanese capital through its port where his solid-gold car is first sequestered but then cleared. Another French production, Georges Lautner’s *La Grande Sauterelle* (1967) features a very similar plot as its protagonist, while trying to escape from a hit man, organizes a kidnapping in Beirut. Interestingly, crime did not seem to have brought any shame to the Merchant Republic of Lebanon, quite the contrary. Many of these films were not only co-produced in collaboration with local studios, but were even supported by the Ministry of

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<sup>129</sup> Samhita Sunya has listed thirty-seven foreign productions which featured sequences shot on location in Lebanon that were produced between the mid 60s and the mid 70s, see Samhita Sunya, “On Location: Tracking Secret Agents and Films, between Bombay and Beirut,” *Film History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall 2020)

Tourism (*Conseil National du Tourisme Liban*) and MEA (Middle East Airlines).<sup>130</sup>

The latter's logo can in fact be spotted in many of the co-productions shot on location throughout the 60s. Aerial mobility, film stardom, money laundering and the touristic stereotypes of the country were cinematographically sublimated into the chronotope of "The Switzerland of the Middle East." It should be noted that the Lebanese authorities were very much aware of the depiction their country was given in foreign films. In the February 1966 issue of the Arab Film and Television news bulletin was in fact reported that preliminary control of scripts for co-productions were to be made mandatory by law.<sup>131</sup>

Co-productions were also discussed and even championed during a roundtable on "The Problems of Lebanese Cinema" which was broadcasted in 1963 on Radiodiffusion Libanaise and whose transcript was then published on *Cinés D'Orient*.<sup>132</sup> Chaired by Alain Plisson, *Cinés D'Orient*'s editor in chief, the roundtable featured Henri Moukheiber, Mario Haddad of Empire Cinemas and the two film critics Goux-Pelletan (*L'Orient*) and Wafic Ramadan (*As Sayad*). They all agreed that co-productions would be a good way to "learn the techniques from the westerners and forward our ideas" according to Moukheiber, but also to rouse "an interest in Lebanese subjects by showing Lebanon first" in the words of Mario Haddad. The latter also added that "ideally these co-productions would utilize Lebanese talent in the process." Only Mr. Ramadan seemed skeptical as he warned against the risk of producing "postcard

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<sup>130</sup> The Baalbeck Studios, founded sometime in the early 60s are credited in many films shot in Lebanon by either Lebanese, Egyptian or foreign directors.

<sup>131</sup> See *Informations-News*-اخبار, No. 14 - 2nd year, 15th February, 1966 (Beirut: Arab Film and Television Center).

<sup>132</sup> See "Table ronde sur les problemes du cinema libanais," *Cinés D'Orient*, 20 April, 1963.

movies that way.”<sup>133</sup> The economic predisposition of Lebanon and its film industry towards co-productions and location shootings was obviously one important, internal factor. At the same time, “runaway productions,” that is American films shot on location abroad, had become an industrial trend in postwar Hollywood born out of the need to industrially survive a domestic decline in film-going.<sup>134</sup>

The mass adoption and consumption of television in American households, the need to diversify their offer and “the need for authentic foreign backdrops, cheap labor, tax incentives, foreign subsidies, and coproduction deals laid the groundwork for Hollywood to make movies abroad in the postwar era.”<sup>135</sup> While the main destination for Hollywood productions in the 50s and early 60s was primarily (Western) Europe, of the roughly forty films that were shot in Lebanon between 1964 and 1975 the vast majority were European B-movies (mostly Italian, Spanish and West German) followed by Egyptian, Turkish, Iranian and even Indian (co-)productions. Anglophone films that were at least partly shot on location in the Switzerland of the Middle East were a relative minority. Regardless of nationality, these films are thematically linked and share an infatuation with the chronotope of Lebanon outlined above. When “truly Lebanese” films, or alleged such, will finally be made in Lebanon, their national authenticity will be celebrated as a much-needed antidote to the “Egyptianized films” and foreign co-productions that had flooded the market. But was the Lebanon depicted in these films the whole of it?

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<sup>133</sup> “Table ronde sur les problemes du cinema libanais,” *Cinés D’Orient*, 20 April, 1963, p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> See Daniel Steinhart, *Runaway Hollywood: Internazionalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>135</sup> Daniel Steinhart, *Runaway Hollywood: Internazionalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p. 7.

While in the previous chapter I surveyed the origins of the Lebanese film industry and established the role Lebanon's economic model played in shaping it, favoring distribution over production, in this chapter I have looked at the so-called "Golden Age" of Lebanese cinema. The latter was a time when, as the country experienced an economic boom, films started to be shot and (co-)produced in Lebanon, especially after many Egyptian industry players relocated to Beirut following the nationalization of cinema under Nasser. Unanimously dismissed by scholars as "commercial" and "Egyptianized," these films, I argued in this chapter, can actually be seen as meaningful reflections of Lebanon and its economic model. To substantiate my claim, in the first section, "The Nation as Production Facility," I described how Lebanon's service-based economy determined the orientation of its film industry. Films in Lebanon were in fact shot and co-produced for the most part, as the local film industry shaped up to be more of a production facility than a veritable "Hollywood of the Middle East." In the following section, "From the Postcard to the Chronotope," I look at the products of this industry to argue against the claim that they were not "authentically Lebanese." Though produced with a transnational audience in mind, or simply co-produced on behalf of foreign directors, these films bear in their very frames and production modalities the signs of Lebanon's political and economic history. Following up on this, in the next chapter, I look at those films that supposedly represented Lebanon "distinctively" and were not commercially geared to a generic pan-Arab audience. Though universally considered to be Lebanese films through and through, I am cautious to take their national character at face value.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIPOLAR NATIONAL CINEMA: “F” IS FOR FAIRUZ AND FEDAYEEN

“To create one country is one thing; to create a nationality is another.”

(Kamal Salibi)

In this chapter I will be questioning the notion of “National Cinema” by taking stock of those films that were, and still are, considered “distinctively Lebanese” by scholars and critics alike. Furthermore, the Lebanese government’s lack of interest in the national film industry and the consequent lack of public funding and infrastructure will be analyzed as a constitutive rather than defective feature. I will argue that far from being representative of the country as a whole, these films reflect the fragmentation and multiple identities that make up *any* nation, Lebanon included. More specifically, I will look at how Lebanon’s economic and political history can be read against the light of these films and their contentious representations. In some instances, the mythological constructions of Lebanese nationalism are deflated, in other cases they are propped up, but in any case, what emerges is the image of a country whose national identity is contested. As the title of this chapter polemically hints at, the national cinema of Lebanon is traversed by opposing but not necessarily binary currents. In the course of this chapter I will be also comparatively looking at the impossibility to reduce any given country to a univocal essence, both historically and cinematographically.

Unlike neighboring Syria, “where since the early 1960s the state has been actively invested in and held monopoly over film production,” in Lebanon the relationship between governmental bodies and national film production can be

described as one of mild indifference.<sup>136</sup> Although the Lebanese government took a passing interest in the local film industry in 1964, when production had started to pick up, by establishing the National Center for Cinema and Television, its overall involvement in cinema has historically amounted to very little.<sup>137</sup> Rather than an instance of administrative negligence, the Lebanese state's apparent disinterest in cinema can be traced back to the absence of a single, majoritarian version of nationalism and to Lebanon's economic model. Propped up by what Kamal Salibi described as "a polite fiction of national unity,"<sup>138</sup> the Lebanese Republic was born out of a political compromise unofficially ratified by the National Pact, "an informal verbal agreement between Bishara al-Khoury and Riad al-Sulh, the only written trace of which is found in the ministerial declaration of 7 October 1943."<sup>139</sup> The pact defines Lebanon as a "country with an Arab profile that assimilates all that is beneficial and useful in Western civilization,"<sup>140</sup> with 'Arab Profile' replacing "the (Muslim) demand for unity with Syria, and the cultural links with the West replacing the (Christian) demand for French military presence or Western protection in general."<sup>141</sup> Traversed by three main brands of nationalism, which can be schematically boiled down to Syrian Nationalism,

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<sup>136</sup> Rasha Salti, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," *Kosmorama*, 237, (Copenhagen: The Danish Film Institute).

<sup>137</sup> See Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2008) and Afif J. Arabi, "The History of Lebanese Cinema 1929-1979: An Analytical Study of the Evolution and the Development of Lebanese Cinema (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1996).

<sup>138</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>139</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press (London, 2012), p. 110.

<sup>140</sup> See Farid el-Khazen, *The Communal Pact of National Identities* (Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 1991).

<sup>141</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press (London, 2012), p. 111.

Lebanese Nationalism (and its Phoenician variant<sup>142</sup>) and (Pan-)Arabism, Lebanon had no unified, state-sanctioned national identity to propagandize through cinema.<sup>143</sup> This national bipolarism set Lebanon apart from other Arab countries, like Syria and Egypt for instance, whose “quest for/obsession with the national” characterized their cinematographic efforts and policies from the very beginning, however contradictorily.<sup>144</sup>

In the “Switzerland of the Middle East” commercial imperatives rather than national aspirations shaped the local film industry, its structural outline and output.<sup>145</sup> Though routinely lamented as the ultimate drawback afflicting the Lebanese film industry, the lack of public subsidies and state support more generally is on the contrary one of its constitutive features. However regrettable for some, the lack of government support is by no means anomalous in a country constitutionally opposed to any form of

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<sup>142</sup> While Arab nationalists saw Lebanon as a historical part of the wider Arab World and called for full independence from France, the Lebanese nationalists (or Phoenicians), who pushed for closer ties with the West, claimed Lebanon apart as the direct descendent of ancient Phoenicia, a civilization that predated and, in their view, had very little in common with Arabs. The Christian Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi noted how “Phoenicianism in Christian Lebanese circles developed more as a cult than a reasoned political theory.” It should also be noted that “Christian had been overwhelmingly involved, since the late nineteenth century, in the formation of secular Arabism [...] it was the French, in their efforts to prop up their Greater Lebanon scheme of 1920, who suppressed the emergence of secular Arabism and Syrianism among Lebanese Christian intellectuals.” (Kais M. Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, p.30).

<sup>143</sup> To be sure, national identity is inevitably a construction and its essence always spurious and bastardized, irrespective of its degree of unanimous adoption. What’s distinctive about the Lebanese case is the rough demographic equivalence between two very different, incompatible dare we say, visions of nationalism. See Kais M. Firro, “Lebanese Nationalism versus Arabism: From Bulus Nujaym to Michel Chiha,” *Middle Eastern Studies Journal* 40, no. 5 (May, 2006); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 2016); Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>144</sup> Sabry Hafez, “The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema” in Vitali & Willeman (ed.), *Theorising National Cinema*, (London, British Film Institute, 2006), 226.

<sup>145</sup> “it was the presence of a mountainous terrain that led the French poet and historian Alphonse de Lamartine to call Lebanon the Switzerland of the Levant, long before the law on banking secrecy enacted in 1956 gave another dimension to the analogy” wrote Samir Kassir in his book *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

state intervention in the national economy. Michel Chiha vehemently defended the idea of a national economy free from state interference, lest it monopolistically “impose its own will” on the market and its alleged freedom.<sup>146</sup> “The economic destiny of the country, as he saw it, was to become the warehouse and financial and services center of the Arab world.”<sup>147</sup> Though opposed by different economic views and political currents, it was Chiha’s neoliberal ideology *avant la lettre* that would unilaterally prevail and shape the socio-economic outlook of Lebanon to this very day. It was under the aegis of the “Republic of Merchants” and its socio-economic myths that Lebanese cinema entered its “Golden Age.”<sup>148</sup> That being said, the Lebanese films produced during this period were anything but univocal in representing the nation and while the lack of state support determined their production, it did not super-structurally delineate their narratives.

### **A. The Mountain, Between Myth and Realities**

Interestingly, when Lebanese cinema consciously addressed matters of national concern many of the myths surrounding Lebanon and its so-called “Golden Age” were deflated. Considered by many to be the precursor of contemporary arthouse cinema in

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<sup>146</sup> Michel Chiha, “Nationalisations” in *Essais Vol. 2*. Fondation Chiha Beyrouth (Réimpression, 1994), p. 57.

<sup>147</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 179.

<sup>148</sup> In his study *A Political Economy of Lebanon 1948-2002: The Limits of Laissez-faire* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), Toufic Gaspard points out the contradictory character of the Lebanese economic boom, describing it as “growth without development.” Most pertinently, as far as this thesis is concerned, Gaspard notes how for instance “although literacy was increasing, it was increasing with little ‘cultural’ content” and that the image of “Lebanon as a cultural regional center” was a misleading one. An image predicated on “presenting Beirut as the reflection of general development conditions in Lebanon,” a proposition the author deems “manifestly incorrect” as the differences between the capital and the rest of the country were abysmal.



Lebanon, Georges Nasser's *Where To?* ("Ila Ayn", 1957) is effectively the first authorial, cinematic vision of the country and one of its enduring afflictions: emigration. Perceived as such on its release, the film was praised by critics for being "the first Lebanese film to represent reality."<sup>149</sup> Though the theme of forced emigration is as old as Lebanese cinema itself—Giordano Pidutti's debut feature being about a Lebanese man returning home after having lived abroad—Nasser's film, unlike those of his predecessors, has not been lost and the fact of having been the first film to play at Cannes undoubtedly cemented its reputation.

The film tells the story of a family man from a mountain village that decides to leave for Brazil in search of fortune only to return twenty years later poorer than when he'd left. Ashamed for "not having made it," the unnamed man does not have the courage to return to his family and will instead sleep in an abandoned house nearby. While the father goes unrecognized by his own family members in the film, the spectator, by the film's internal logic, knows who he is. The old man will befriend his own, unwitting son who has also decided to leave Lebanon for a better future abroad. In this bitterly circular film, the myth of the resourceful and entrepreneurial Lebanese émigré is unromantically demolished.

The film also lucidly depicts the unhealthy dose of internalized blame that comes with "failure," one so strong as to prevent the poor man to even reunite with his own family. The poor man's psychodrama exposes the meritocratic hypocrisy that drives the myth of the entrepreneurial immigrant. Nasser's *opera prima* effectively illustrates how "emigration is the process by which Lebanese society hides its high rates

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<sup>149</sup> *al-Arusa* film magazine (April 1957) quoted in Ghenwa Hayek, "Where To? Filming Emigration Anxiety in Prewar Lebanese Cinema," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 51, No. 1 (February 2019): 186.

of unemployment and rids itself of the human surplus.”<sup>150</sup> The idea for the film came to the director after he witnessed Lebanese immigrants living in poverty when studying filmmaking in the United States.<sup>151</sup> In the documentary *Un certain Nasser* (2017) by Badih Massaad and Antoine Waked, the director recalls being taken aback by the reality of emigration and the tales of successful go-getters he’d heard back home in Lebanon. Such was the discrepancy between the two versions that he decided to make a film about it.

Another aspect *Where To?* disputes is the idyllic representation of the mountain, which plays such an important role in Lebanese national myth-making. Nasser’s film calls “into question the mythology of the mountain by reinserting the material reality of labor and the visual realities of previous economic cycles of boom and bust into the visual landscape.”<sup>152</sup> Mountain life in *Where To?* is one made of sacrifice, hard work and little reward. Though still ethnographically careful to render the Lebanese mountain in all its cultural details, the director doesn’t shy away from the harsh realities of what it actually means to work the land and hardly making a living out of it. Nasser’s anti-mythological depiction of the mountain is a stark contrast to the one we get in the “Fairuz Trilogy.” Considered to be among the “very few serious Lebanese productions of the mid 1950s to 1960s period,” *Bayya’ al-Khawatem* (“The Ring Seller,” 1965), *Safar Barlek* (1967) and *Bint al-Hariss* (“The Guardian’s Daughter,” 1968) were all cinematographic adaptations of the Rahbani Brothers musical plays.<sup>153</sup> Directed

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<sup>150</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press (London, 2012), p. 160.

<sup>151</sup> See Ghassan Koteit (ed.), *Georges Nasser: le cinéma intérieur* (Beirut: Les éditions de l’ALBA, 2018).

<sup>152</sup> Ghenwa Hayek, “Where To? Filming Emigration Anxiety in Prewar Lebanese Cinema,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 51, No. 1 (February 2019): 188

<sup>153</sup> Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p. 23.

respectively by Yussuf Chahine, the first, and Henry Berakat, the following two, the films featured Fairuz and an idealized, if self-reflexive view of the Lebanese mountain.<sup>154</sup>

One of the tropes of Lebanese nationalism, which was born to counter Arab nationalism in the wake of WWI, was the designation of Mount Lebanon as a historic refuge for (Christian) people fleeing persecution at the hands of Islam in the Syrian hinterland.<sup>155</sup> Historians and historical evidence have largely disproved this theorem by, firstly pointing out that those fleeing persecution in Syrian “were not only Christians,” but “there were also dissident Muslims, among them Twelver Shiites and the Druzes.” Secondly, these people often “sought refuge in a territory which was actually under Islamic control.”<sup>156</sup> The idea of Mount Lebanon as a safe haven for Christians, mostly Maronites to be precise, is then less of an historical reality than nationalistic fantasy. One that the Rahbani’s musical plays have indirectly contributed in forging, at least on the level of popular imagination.

In his study on popular culture and nationalism in Lebanon, Christopher Stone observes how behind their confessionally neutral façade, the Rahbani’s plays and, most notably, their characterization of the mountain is incontrovertibly Christian (though not exclusionary so). Their work’s concern with Lebanese-ness was by no means incidental,

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<sup>154</sup> Assi Rahbani revealed in an interview how he had personally helped both Chahine and Berakat, both Egyptian Christians with Lebanese ancestry, to recover their Lebanese citizenship while they were working in Lebanon, quoted in Christopher Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbanis Nation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>155</sup> See Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Kais M. Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

<sup>156</sup> Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 134-137.

but, as they themselves reiterated on several occasions, quite deliberate. The abovementioned cinematographic trilogy that was adapted from their musical plays is no exception. Tellingly, the only film out of the three to explicitly mention the characters' religious sect, though within a clearly ecumenical frame, *Safar Barlek*, is set in Ottoman times. The relation of Muslim and Christian communities vis-à-vis the very conception of the Lebanese nation was arguably too thorny a topic for the play/film to be set in the present. So much so that the play/film is actually set at a time when Lebanon as such did not yet exist, but its (mountain) people were united in its defense. That being said, the geographical idea of the country is still one limited to the mountain, the symbolic heart of Christian nationalism. Neither the South, nor the Bekaa Valley, nor the coast or Beirut are featured in these films (an exception being *The Guardian's Daughter*, where the guardian, after losing his job in the mountain village is forced to get a job at the port of an unnamed coastal town only to finally return to his rightful and dearly missed home by the film's end). The idea of the nation that emerges from the "Fairuz Trilogy" is one that, "through elision, came to mean a village, Christian and in Mount Lebanon."<sup>157</sup> The fact that Rahbanis' Lebanon was such a particularistic creation did not prevent it from being embraced nationally and, as it happens, even beyond the country's borders. In a film market that had been historically dominated by foreign imports, the "Fairuz Trilogy" did extremely well at the box office in Lebanon. All the three films at the time of their release played for multiple weeks on end and remain to these days among the very few Lebanese productions to be known by the wider public. While the popularity of the musical plays first and the films later testifies to the appeal of Rahbanis' Lebanon beyond the confines of the Christian mountain, "for many to

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<sup>157</sup> Christopher Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbanis Nation* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 75.

identify with this project meant *learning* to identify with it.”<sup>158</sup> That these films have been canonized as “distinctively Lebanese” indicates, at least in part, that this learning process wherefore a particularistic and confessionally biased view of Lebanon becomes *the* national one had successfully taken hold of the popular and critical imagination.

The “Christian mountain” and its ascendancy over the national imagination is the ideological reflection of a socio-economic condition, one that saw the Maronite bourgeoisie as the dominant force in Lebanese society at the time. The “Golden Age” of Lebanese cinema coincided in fact with the consolidation of economic power in the hands of the upper classes of the sect that France had designated as the leading one. The fact that business and the government’s top positions were the exclusive preserve of (the wealthy) members of the Maronite community, does not mean that Christians in Lebanon represented a cohesive whole, nor that their political views were uniform. Georges Nasser’s film for instance problematizes some of the myths surrounding the “Christian mountain” and the entrepreneurial spirit of its people. If the Rahbani’s plays and films exemplify to a certain extent the predominance of Christian Lebanon in the national culture and imagination (though one that was trans-confessionally adopted), their particularism is also the negative reflection of what was left out.<sup>159</sup>

## **B. Whose Lebanon?**

However hegemonic the national imagination encapsulated in the “Fairuz Trilogy” may have been, the social realities of Lebanon could not possibly be relegated

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<sup>158</sup> Christopher Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbanis Nation* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 83.

<sup>159</sup> As noted by Stone in his study, the Rahbanis’ presence at the Baalbeck Festival, which is what consecrated their art nationally, was initially opposed by the organizers since the festival was to feature foreign acts only in order to demonstrate Lebanon’s cultural belonging to the West.

to a bucolic mountain village. As the contradictions of a society piously devoted to the holy ghost of capitalism began rippling through its surface, cinema registered its effects. Intrinsic to the pluralistic qualities of the medium and its ultimate irreducibility to a single meaning or dimension, film was bound, even if deprived of public subsidizes, to reflect the complexity of Lebanese society.

“Cinema can be thought of as pertaining to a national configuration because films, far from offering cinematic accounts of ‘the nation’ as seen by the coalition that sustains the forces of capital within any given nation, are clusters of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory.”<sup>160</sup>

These forces, it must be added, can also be found at the margins of a given geographical territory. Shot in and around the popular area that comprises Mar Mikhail, Qarantina and Bourj Hammoud, Gary Garabedian’s *Garô* (1965) was the first film to unsentimentally depict the underclass that populated the suburbs of Beirut. Shot on location, the film is a gritty, hyper-realist noir chronicling the criminal exploits of the titular protagonist (played by Mounir Maasri), a bandit out of necessity rather than vocation. Garô’s father is unjustly arrested after having found himself near a crime scene by chance and the unpaved streets of his neighborhood do not seem to offer much in the way of opportunities. After a stint in jail, Garô escapes to Damascus first and then Aleppo only to return to Beirut and finally be killed by the police. Based on the real life of the homonymous bandit/folk hero which had gained considerable attention in Lebanese media at the beginning of the 60s, Garabedian’s film bluntly departs from the

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<sup>160</sup> Valentina Vitali & Paul Willeman (eds.), *Theorising National Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), p. 7.

iconographic clichés that had characterized Lebanese productions up until then.<sup>161</sup> Gone are the symbols of the “Switzerland of the Middle East” and the of the Lebanese mountain, in their stead we have the dusty, materially deprived streets of the capital’s working class neighborhoods. Though the film’s realism is somewhat impaired by the Egyptian dubbing, the unadorned naturalism gives it an almost documentary feeling. According to Alain Plisson, previewing the film for *Cinés D’Orient*, *Garó* is “the first attempt of our young cinema to avoid romanticized and conventional subject to show a piece of Lebanese life.”<sup>162</sup> It would remain also the last one for quite some time to come.

Its technical and stylistic shortcomings notwithstanding, Garabedian’s film occupies an important place in the history of cinema in Lebanon if only for having shed light on a section of Lebanese society that had been ignored until then and would soon after come to militant prominence. The late 1960s in Lebanon, like elsewhere, were a time of social and political turmoil when the winds of revolt swept the lower strata of society. The increasing weight of the banking system at the expenses of other productive sectors of the Lebanese economy resulted into deepening class differences and, consequently, conflict. In their 1976 study, *Les Classes sociales au Liban*, Claude Dubar and Salim Nasr noted how by the early 1970s the agricultural sector had been basically infiltrated by the financial sector which controlled everything from production, to the sale of equipment, insecticides and fertilisers, up to the distribution of products. “Half of the Lebanese population made their living from agriculture at the end of the 1950s, but by 1975, only 20% remained engaged in the sector,” their working and

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<sup>161</sup> See Hady Zaccak, *Le Cinéma Libanais: Itinéraire d’un cinéma vers l’inconnu 1929-1996* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996).

<sup>162</sup> Alain Plisson, “Garó va revivre et mourir à l’écran,” *Cinés D’Orient*, 24 September, 1965, p. 8-9.

living conditions in steady decline.<sup>163</sup> Which is probably why those who did not emigrate, rose up. The year of our Lord 1968 witnessed a major agrarian movement in the ‘Akkar plain where peasants revolted against the semi-feudal conditions they were working and living in.

The industrial sector too was run over by a wave of strikes and mobilizations. In November 1972 workers at the Ghandour biscuits and chocolate factory went on strike to “demand a wage increase, equal pay for men and women workers, the recognition of the shopfloor committee and their right to trade union organisation.”<sup>164</sup> On 11 November 1972 the police shot at demonstrators killing Fatima al-Khawaja and Yusuf al-‘Attar, each belonging to two different leftist formations (the Lebanese Communist Party and the Organisation for Communist Action respectively). On 22 January 1973 tobacco planters occupied the premises of the Régie tobacco consortium in Nabatiyeh and the following day two peasants were shot dead by the army during a demonstration. Unconcerned with sectarian affiliation, Lebanon’s lower classes mobilized and fought to demand better living and working conditions. Retrospectively, *Garo* can be seen to have captured a pre-political frustration that if in the film, and in the real-life case of the bandit, had found an outlet in crime, it would later materialize in the form of working-class militancy.

Trained in the US and the UK, Gary Garabedian was one of the pioneers of television in Lebanon, he worked on seminal TV shows such as *Sandouk Alferje* (“The Magic Box,” 1963 - Compagnie libanaise de Télévision) and *Mouzakarar Boulis* (“Diaries of a Policeman,” 1963), having also launched the career of famed comedian

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<sup>163</sup> Traboulsi, Fawwaz (2012). *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press, p. 160.

<sup>164</sup> Traboulsi, Fawwaz (2012). *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press, p. 168.



Abu Salim (Salah Tizani).<sup>165</sup> He would rise to tragic fame after dying along with other crew members on the set of *Kulluna Fida 'iyūn* (“We are all Fedayeen,” 1968). While shooting a scene of a fictional incendiary attack in a nightclub – the “Esther Bar” in Tel Aviv in the script, the Stereo Purgatoire bar in Hazmieh in reality – a real fire went off killing the director and a few others. The film would be completed by Sahib Haddad, director of the editing department at Baalbeck Studios, and according to a report which appeared in the March 7, 1969 of *Achabaka* magazine, Garabedian’s crew had asked Yasser Arafat to preside the film’s premiere.<sup>166</sup> *We Are All Fedayeen* was one of a very successful bunch of films produced in Lebanon that popularized on the big screen the Palestinian cause. Inaugurated in 1967 by the documentary short *The Fedayeen* by Christian Ghazi (the film would be destroyed and forever lost during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982), this cinematographic wave coincided with a surge of popular support for the Palestinian resistance, in Lebanon and internationally, which with the Cairo Agreement of 1969 had been officially allowed to operate from Lebanese soil.<sup>167</sup>

In the span of only three years, five “Fedayeen movies” were produced and released in Lebanon, among them Rida Myassar’s *Al-Felestini ath-Tha’er* (“The Revolutionary Palestinian,” 1969), Antoine Remy’s *Fedaki ya Felestin* (“For the Sake of Palestine,” 1969) and Tayissir Abboud’s *Al Jaraz al Awada* (“The Bells of Return,” 1970). Quickly and often cheaply made, these films were schematic to the point of

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<sup>165</sup> See Zaven Kouyoumdjian, *Lebanon on Screen: The Greatest Moments of Lebanese Television and Pop Culture* (Beirut: Hachette Antoine, 2017).

<sup>166</sup> The studios were the major sound stage and post-production facility in Lebanon at the time. The studios was bankrolled by the CEO of Intra Bank, the controversial Palestinian financier Yusuf Baidas. Correspondence between the Palestinian Resistance and the studio archived by UMAM suggests the existence of a privileged relationship between the two in the late 60s/early 70s.

<sup>167</sup> See Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power & Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

caricature but expressed a genuine, mounting solidarity towards the Palestinians and their struggle, something corroborated by their popular success. For a section of Lebanese society, the Palestinian cause was something that went beyond internationalist solidarity and “rather than alliance between two autonomous entities, the Lebanese left and the Palestinian resistance, it would be more accurate to speak of a process of osmosis.”<sup>168</sup>

Compared to the specific regionalism of the Rahbanis’ cinema, the Fedayeen movies incarnate a diametrically opposed idea of national cinema, one where even the concept of sovereignty, the ultimate fetish of all nationalists, is implicitly questioned. Can a film about Palestinians be even considered Lebanese? Is the Palestinian cause also a cause of the Lebanese people? What exactly determines the nationality of a film? These are questions implicitly posed by these films, questions that found ampler resonance in the political debates and struggles that traversed Lebanese society in the late 60s and early 70s. Rather than mutually exclusive aspects, the Christian mountain and the Palestinian refugee camp are, as a matter of historical course, an integral part of the same country, regardless of what one may think of either politically. Paradoxically, given the animosity of parts of the Maronite community towards the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, refuge, though under different historical circumstances, was what both, the Maronites and Palestinians, found in the land of the cedars. Mainly accused of having brought misery and war to Lebanon, the Palestinian exodus following the Nakba first and, to a lesser degree, after the 1967 defeat, brought to Lebanon considerable fortunes. The country “benefited from the transfer of salvaged personal and corporate assets and, above all, by the diversion of transit trade from Palestinians ports.”<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 486.

<sup>169</sup> Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 355.

Palestinian capital, “estimated at 150 million Palestinian pounds, flowed heavily into Lebanon followed by a large number of wealthy Palestinians.”<sup>170</sup>

One member of the Palestinian bourgeoisie that ended up in Lebanon after the Nakba was Yusuf Baidas, founder and CEO of Intra Bank and the financial empire once attached to it. Baidas was also the main backer of Baalbeck Studios, Lebanon’s biggest film production facility. The studios were established in 1956 by Badih Boulos, a Palestinian businessman. In the ambitious words of its founder, the studios were to become a “civilization center for the Middle East” as well as “cinematographic city,” much like Cinecittà or Hollywood.<sup>171</sup> Availing itself of the contribution of German engineers, the studio was equipped with state-of-the-art production and post-production facilities. Aside from feature filmmaking, Baalbeck Studios also developed weekly newsreels in 35mm that were sent in, through embassies presumably, from as far as Iraq and Jordan.<sup>172</sup> According to the grandfather's first cousin of George Clooney’s wife, Najib Alamuddin, the first chairman of Middle East Airlines, the main financial backer of Baalbeck Studios had personally talked with the then president Charles Helou about his plans for a Hollywood of the East. Baidas “told President Charles Helou: ‘the climate is perfect for pictures 320 days a year, that is why I bought Baalbeck Studios and a big piece of land for a whole new complex of studios and luxury apartment hotels for stars making the pictures...the world’s biggest movie companies were enthusiastic about my plans.’”<sup>173</sup> While the studios never turned into a Hollywood of the East, the

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<sup>170</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 114.

<sup>171</sup> Hady Zaccak. *Le cinéma libanais: Itinéraire d’un cinéma vers l’inconnu (1929 – 1996)* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996).

<sup>172</sup> See Hady Zaccak. *Le cinéma libanais: Itinéraire d’un cinéma vers l’inconnu (1929 – 1996)* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq sarl, 1996).

<sup>173</sup> Najib Alamuddin. *The Flying Sheikh*. Quartet Books (London, 1987), p.144.

productive regime that kept them afloat was modeled after a service-based economy, very much like the Lebanese one. The studios in fact did not really function as a Hollywood studio, but served as post-production facility, recording studio and sound stage. That Baalbeck Studios were behind the production of both the “Fairuz Trilogy” and Garabedian’s *We Are All Fedayeen*, offers a material hint that the national imaginaries they respectively incarnated were by no means mutually exclusive.<sup>174</sup> Suffice it to say that when in the early 1970s “the Christian population started to acquire military weapons, they were typically purchased in a Palestinian camp.”<sup>175</sup> Unlike national and sectarian essentializations, the political economy of both media and war points towards a material dimension where divisions are suddenly less inflexible.

As we have seen in this chapter, when “distinctively Lebanese” films and subjects finally came to fruition their representation of the nation was anything but uniform. In some instances, films that dealt with Lebanon and Lebanesness were partisan depictions of one among many visions of nationalism and the indirect expression of the economic ascendancy of one sect over the others. In other instances, they were direct confutations of the myths surrounding a particular brand of Lebanese nationalism. In other cases again, the very concept of “Lebanesness” was put into question by the films’ very subject matter. The absence of state subsidizes for the local film industry, when it came to *auteur* cinema, meant that the films shot by/in/about Lebanese ended up reflecting those forces within society that vied for power. It could be argued that, given the lack of paternalist supervision that comes with public funding,

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<sup>174</sup> See Monika Borgman and Lokman Slim, *About Baalbeck Studios and Other Lebanese Sites of Memory* (Beirut: UMAMA Documentation & Research, 2013).

<sup>175</sup> Sami Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 508.

Lebanese films in the late 1960s were actually unmediated renditions of the socio-economic forces able to materialize their views on screen. It is not by chance that by the late 1960s those films that weren't purely commercial reflected the increasing polarization within Lebanese society, namely the fracture between pro-Palestinian Arabism and Christian nationalism. Rather than looking at these two camps as hermetically sealed and mutually exclusive, I argue that the history and dynamics of the Lebanese film industry problematize essentialized assumptions regarding ethno-religious allegiances. While it is demographically true that these two camps were also defined by sectarian distinctions, by looking at the political economy of their cinematographic representations we can see how religion in the Lebanese context is a marker of socio-economic relations rather than the other way around.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

“Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave and eats a bread it does not harvest.”

(Gibran Khalil Gibran)

The question of cultural and national sovereignty in a colonial context is, to an historical extent, a legitimate one. Colonialism, in both its economic and political manifestations, is in fact based on depriving the native subject of any agency or selectively allowing instrumental forms of it. As anti-colonial ideologues have argued, national autonomy and consequent sovereignty are necessary steps on the way to liberation, though they should not be the last ones, the same thinkers also warned. Complexes of cultural inferiority are part and parcel of the colonial package and such is the violence with which they are inculcated that they've lived on past the official end of colonialism. The aspiration to affirm one's own cultural identity in the face of subjugation has been accompanied by the inversely symmetrical need to conform to the dominant colonial order and interiorize the “civilizing mission” in all its toxicity. It's not by chance that one of the most lucid proponents of decolonization, Frantz Fanon, was a psychiatrist who analyzed the internalization of colonial standards. Due to its Eurocentric genesis and development, the history of cinema in the Levant is indivisible from that of colonial modernity. The (un)conscious desire to see one's country be represented on screen, I argue, is a legitimate and historically understandable phenomenon.

The aim of this thesis was to explore how the economic history of Lebanon and that of its film industry compared. I found that many of the perceived drawbacks allegedly afflicting cinema in Lebanon are attributable to the very nature of the country's economic model. Which doesn't necessarily mean that they can't be seen as shortcomings, but that the root causes behind them can be actually determined by looking at the economic model of both Lebanon and its film industry. I also argued against looking at the lack of government support and the absence of a conventionally understood national cinema as an impediment only. These aspects, I argued, should be seen and studied as constitutive rather than defective features of the Lebanese film industry whose shape and output I analyzed in parallel. I proposed we take into serious consideration even the cheapest and most bluntly commercial products and see them, through the lenses of the political economy of media, as cultural artifacts that speak to at least some of the defining features of Lebanon.

The industrial circumstances that surrounded their production and their narrative content can indeed illuminate the economic edifice that has presided over the first century of the Lebanese nation. I have purposefully avoided (almost) any mention of sectarianism for I believe that a political economy of cinema in Lebanon tells us more about class relations than it does about sectarian ones (which have and continue to overlap and intersect in contradictory ways). That is not to say that sectarianism has no place in the history of Lebanese cinema, but its investigation, I felt, would not have shed any significant light on those aspects I set out to explore.

Finally, by looking at those films that have been canonized as "distinctively Lebanese" I discovered that their alleged national character was partial and biased at best. This is by no means a peculiarly Lebanese phenomenon, since the cinema of *any*

nation, even those where the state has a totalitarian grip on society, is not a fixed, monolithic entity but a site of cultural contestation from which different views of the same national space emerge. In the Lebanese case, where the limited number of films directly addressing the nation has often been lamented, I suggest that this absence is in itself a powerful indicator of what constitutes Lebanon economically and, consequently, nationally too. I have done so in the conviction that the political history and economy of cinema in Lebanon was one possible way to understand this country, not to pity it.

I happened to be writing this thesis at a time when Lebanon's economy and entire economic model has been literally disintegrating, dissipating any residual illusion regarding Lebanese people resilience and entrepreneurial spirit. As the "Switzerland of the Middle East" quickly morphed into the "North Korea of the Global Financial System," my methodological intuition was somewhat validated, albeit by a social tragedy of catastrophic proportions. The ruthless centrality of a neo-liberal doctrine *avant la lettre* in every aspect of Lebanese society is now more evident than ever, and painfully so. It isn't by chance that culture was one of the first victims of this ongoing crisis. An emergency fund was set up by Fondation Liban Cinema, with financial support from France, to support those Lebanese filmmakers in the middle of shooting or producing a film. A similar fund was established by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture in partnership with Netflix. A century after its birth, the Lebanese film industry operates along very similar economic and geopolitical coordinates of those that defined its origins. What remains to be seen is whether Lebanon's economic model and the film industry that so closely resembles will survive intact the ongoing catastrophe or will come out completely transformed.



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