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### From the Field:

## Co-Producing the Memory. Cinema Production between Europe and the Middle East

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### Introduction

Over the past ten years an increasing amount of films from the Middle East have entered the international film festival circuit. Some major works like *Paradise Now* (*Al-Jana Alan*, Hany Abu Assad, NL/D/F/IL 2005), *Caramel* (*Sukr Banat*, Nadine Labaki, F/LB 2007), or *Waltz With Bashir* (*Waltz Im Bashir*, Ari Folman, IL/D/F/USA/B/CH/AUS 2008) also get theatrical releases in Europe and the USA. There they are often read as documents and authentic insights into a foreign culture.

At the same time German funds boasted about the Oscar nominations for *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir*. Michael Schmid-Ospach, then head of influential *Filmstiftung NRW* was quoted in a fund's press release of February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006: 'I keep my fingers crossed that *Paradise Now* will also take the Oscar to North-Rhine-Westphalia', and the daily newspaper *Hamburger Abendblatt* stated on March 16th 2009 that *Waltz With Bashir* was 'besides Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* and Werner Herzog's documentary *Encounters at the End of the World* yet another German iron in the award-fire'.

Due to very high production costs of cinema movies<sup>1</sup>, and a lack of funding in the region of origin, most of the financing for films from the Middle East is provided by European public funds. As ownership of a film is bound to financing, *Paradise Now* and *Waltz With Bashir* are indeed German movies.

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<sup>1</sup> The budgets of full length fictional movies of international standard produced in the Middle East exceeds 1 Mio Euro.

In this article I aim to look at the effects of co-production between Europe and the Middle East on the processes of production and the reception of the films. A short overview of *public* film policy in Arab Middle Eastern countries and Israel, as well as an example of European public media interventions in the Middle East, introduce key aspects of production and ideas behind European approaches to film-making in the region.

Using the example of *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir* as the two films from the Middle East with the widest international exposure and press coverage<sup>2</sup>, questions of the interests in cooperation, the dependencies and power structures, the themes dealt with in co-productions, and influences on narrative structure will be touched upon. Critics' readings and lobbyists' interventions are contrasted with, or put in relation to, initial project ideas and production realities.

Finally the paradox and maybe schizophrenic character a film can develop and the life it takes on between different national ideals and realities will be looked at. Whose collective memory, whose national archive will these films be part of?

This analysis is limited to the Arab countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt) and Israel. The region has a different colonial history to North Africa or the Arab Peninsula. It was immediately affected by the formation of Israel with which most of the countries have direct borders, and all of these countries absorbed Palestinian refugees.

From the European co-producers standpoint Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and the closest ally in the region. A large number of Israeli-European co-productions deal with Palestinian/Arab subjects and hence, to a certain degree, define 'Arabness' and analyze Arab issues for the European audiences.

## **Cinema as Weapon**

Movie theatres opened in different Middle Eastern countries around the 1910s. Until the Arab states in the Middle East gained independence in the 1940s only few films were produced by individuals and local production facilities were insufficient. Only Egypt established a highly commercial industry in the 1930s. Early cinema in independent Lebanon and Iraq was rather commercial and many films were produced by, or in cooperation with, Egyptian film-makers who left their country after the revolution of 1952.

The late 1960s marked a change not only in Arab film making. Throughout the world revolutionary movements gained strength. Alternative ways of film production and film aesthetics were developed and numerous manifestos were published. 'For as long as part of that [colonized, I.N.] people can have a cultural life, foreign domination can not be sure of its perpetuation' (Cabral, as cited in Massad 2006). Cinema was, in this sense, used as a weapon.

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<sup>2</sup>Nadine Labaki's *Caramel* had much more ticket sales in the international box office than *Paradise Now* or *Waltz With Bashir* though, or because, it did not stir controversy and was never widely debated.

Socialist Iraq and Syria put efforts into setting up national film industries, including the requisite film schools. Until then film-makers from the two countries studied in Eastern Europe, mainly in Moscow. The PLO set up its own film units and the Syrian *National Film Organization* produced several internationally acclaimed films, mainly on Palestinian subjects.

Production in Lebanon more or less stopped due to the civil war (1975-90) and decreased in Egypt as a result of scarce financial cover in the largely nationalized film industry as well as the rise of TV. Only individual directors worked outside the state-run or commercial production houses. Youssef Chahine opened his own company in Egypt and after several Arab co-productions and a joint venture with the Soviet Union, he has co-produced with France since the 1980s. Lebanese directors Jocelyne Saab, Heiny Srour, Bourhane Alawyia, and Randa Chahal worked with different bodies inside the Arab World and Europe since the end of the 1970s. Saab and Alawyia do so until today. As members of the *International Organization of the Francophonie*, Egyptian and Lebanese companies can, since the beginning of local non-commercial production, apply for the cinema support program of the *Francophonie* as well as for French *Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC)* and *Fond Sud*.

Arab film-making today needs to be seen as an effort of individuals. Except Egypt whose commercial production is gaining strength again in the last few years, no country has a significant film-industry, film-institutions or film-laws. The *National Film Organization* in Damascus is still functioning and produces no more than one or two films a year. It also organizes the bi-annual *Damascus International Film Festival*. The Lebanese Ministry of Culture founded a Cinematheque in 1999 which had to be closed in 2001 due to economic and administrative difficulties. Small funds for production and post-production can be provided by the Ministry, yet the regulations for application are not published.<sup>3</sup> *The Royal Jordanian Film Commission's* main objective is to provide production services and locations to foreign producers. The country has served as location for films like Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the last Crusade* (USA 1989) or Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar-winner *The Hurt Locker* (USA 2009) among many others. It had announced the launching of a film fund accessible to Arab film-makers for summer 2009. Yet, in the wake of the international financial crisis the constitution of the fund has been cancelled for the time being. So far two feature length fiction films have been credited Jordanian, *Struggle in Jerash (Sira'a Fi Jerash)*, Wassef El Sheikh Yaseen, 1957) followed by award-winning *Captain Abu Raed* (Amin Matalqa 2007) fifty years later.

Hany Abu Assad's *Rana's Wedding – Jerusalem another Day (Al-Quds fi Yawm Akhir)*, Palestine 2002) was purely financed by the *Palestinian Film Fund* of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture. The film department of the ministry was then headed by Liana Badr, who is a co-writer of the film's script which is based on her

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.culture.gov.lb/Sections/main.ASP?page=Cinema>.

story. No other film did benefit from support of the *Palestinian Film Fund*. Iraq is not in a situation to establish public film institutions at this point. The few productions and the *Independent Film and Television School Baghdad* are funded by private investors or Western NGOs.

In fact, in all the Arab countries it is NGOs who fill the gap left by governments' inaction or cultural disarming. They are either foreign NGOs or they are Arab bodies financed by European or US-American funds. When it comes to larger cinematic productions, the director, often also functioning as local producer, is raising funds through co-production partners in Europe.

Israel on the other hand has a well functioning film-industry and a wealth of public funds. Yet the grants or loans provided are not sufficient to produce films meeting international standard in technical terms or rather the films' 'look'. Moreover, Israeli film-makers depend on foreign, namely European markets, for exhibition and refunding given the country's small size. Hence co-productions are seen as a necessity by many Israeli film-makers.

Israeli film-making dates back to the time of the pre-state Zionist settlement in Palestine. Mainly consisting of documentary films and newsreels in the early years, the Israeli film industry started producing fiction in the 1950s. To date, the country has a considerable film archive and a very high reputation abroad.

### **Peace and Co-operation**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil wars like in Lebanon or Nicaragua ended and new warfare as in Iraq, Yugoslavia, or Rwanda began. Saddam Hussein made debate on the Palestinian question a condition for peace negotiations to end the 1991 war. In fact, a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation participated in the multilateral *Madrid Conference for Peace in the Middle East* in 1991 and the consecutive talks. In parallel, secret negotiations were held between Israeli and Palestinian officials, hosted by the Norwegian government. They resulted in the *Declaration of Principles*, signed in September 1993 in Washington DC, and thus stopped the multilateral efforts of the official conference. These so called *Oslo Accords*, till the mid-2000s sometimes called 'peace agreements', were one starting point to implement numerous intervention initiatives, including media projects in the Middle East. These kinds of projects had previously been conducted in the Balkans or Rwanda.

The majority of the media projects aim at regional democratization, professionalizing of the Arab media, and dialogues for peace-building. The objectives range from 'ending unskilled, inaccurate, highly partisan reporting', 'teaching the importance of fact-checking and objectivity' to 'voicing versus invisibility, stereotyping and distorted development' (Stanley 2007: 141ff.). Their main target groups are journalists, occasionally artists and (documentary) film-makers.

At the same time a large number of Arabs state that Western mainstream media, like CNN, BBC and others bracket them within such categories as 'terrorists', 'terrorist supporters' or 'Islamic fundamentalists' and draw an undifferentiated image of Arabs and Muslims (e.g. Matar 2007). Against this background many media intervention programs lack credibility in the region, especially with the critical intelligentsia.

In 1992, the European Union (EU) launched the Mediterranean (MED) Programs, one of them MED-Media, for media professionals. The programs aimed at intensifying political and economic cooperation between the newly created EU and its neighboring region, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. Due to nepotism in the EU administration the program was interrupted for several years and was picked up again in 1998 (European Parliament 1999). MED-Media focused on support for co-operation between Palestinians and Israelis in the post-Oslo processes. Application for funds was possible, if Israelis and Palestinians submitted joint film/cinema projects. *The Inner Tour (Ha- Tioul Ha-Pnimi, 2001)* by Israeli director Ra'anana Alexandrovitch is one of the very few completed works that was initiated by MED-Media and got some wider exposure. Many Palestinians rejected the program. At a time when they were shaping their society, the project ironically forced them to co-operate with those they sought independence from. Or in other words, this democratizing project enforced cross-border co-operation before borders were agreed upon and before power relations were balanced.

Furthermore, Israel had bilateral co-production agreements with several European countries, which allowed Israeli producers to apply for additional European funds which were not accessible to Palestinian film-makers from the Occupied Territories. This imbalance resulted directly from the occupation and the subsequent absence of a Palestinian administration.

Political conflict, imbalance of power and transnational misunderstandings mark the way of MED-Media projects, renamed Euro-Mediterranean (Euromed) projects in 1998. *Greenhouse*, for example, one of twelve projects supported by the Euromed-Audiovisual program, stirred a lot of controversy and directly strengthened the *Palestinian Campaign for Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel*. Headed by an Israeli film organization, the project was originally a training initiative for Arab and Israeli documentary film-makers. Besides serious allegations against the Palestinian project-partner in a different context<sup>4</sup>, very practical questions arose: e.g. how can Syrians or Lebanese even theoretically participate in the workshops? The solution provided was that meetings would take place in either Jordan or Egypt, countries accessible to all MENA (Middle East North Africa) partners. Yet most of the Arabs could not accept that representatives of a public Israeli entity chair a training initiative on Arab soil as long as occupation continues. There was little understanding from the side of the EU

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<sup>4</sup> More about the activities against the Greenhouse and the Palestinian Campaign for Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel can be found here:  
<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=137&key=greenhouse>. Greenhouse website:  
<http://www.ghfilmcentre.org/>

project management. Furthermore, *Greenhouse*, after restructuring, is the only project still operating with EU grants after the ending of the Euromed-Audiovisual II funding period in 2008.

### **Co-production for the big screen**

Throughout the world only a very small number of film-makers succeed in completing a feature length film that makes it to the top festivals and captures the cinemas. Despite the honor for the director and the producers to participate in such an internationally prestigious event, festivals are tough market-places. Only works of the highest possible international standard, yet not (too) commercial, make it into the official selections. The films' subjects have to be relevant, which usually means that the story has to be about a timely subject or deal with a universal question in a new and critical, yet audience-friendly way.

In recent years a growing number of films from the Middle East have been selected for official competitions of top European festivals and have been awarded with prestigious prizes: Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention (Yadon Ilaheyya)*, Pal/F/D 2002) won the Jury Award in Cannes, *Atash* by Palestinian director Tawfik Abu Wael (Israel 2004) was awarded with the prestigious International Critic's Award at the *Semaine de la Critique* in Cannes together with Keren Yedaya's *Or* (Israel/F 2004) which received the *Camera d'Or* in the same festival section. *Jelly Fish (Meduzot)*, Etgar Keret and Shira Geffen, IL/F 2007) won the award three years later. *Lemon Tree* (Etz Limon, Eran Riklis, IL/F/D 2008) received the Audience Award at Berlinale's Panorama section and *Lebanon (Levanon)*, Samuel Maoz, IL/D/F 2009) took the *Golden Lion* in Venice in 2009. *Waltz with Bashir* won the hearts of the critics and the audience in Cannes and *Paradise Now* the Amnesty International Award as well as the Blue Angel for the best European film (sic!) in Berlin.

Though several other Arab feature length movies got some visibility at European international Film Festivals such as Venice, Cannes or Locarno the awards are distributed to Israeli and some Palestinian film-makers.

Using two case studies, conditions of production as well as the reception of these award winning films will be looked at closer.

### **Almost Paradise**

The international success of *Paradise Now* is remarkable and somewhat heavenly at first glance. The film tells the story of two young Palestinian men who have been recruited for a suicide mission on Tel Aviv and focuses on their last days together. When they are intercepted at the Israeli border and separated from their handlers, a young woman who discovers their plan causes them to reconsider their actions.



After a very cinematic introduction to the protagonists and the story's setting, the film becomes rather verbose, explaining motivations for such suicide missions. Pros and cons are discussed in a model democratic manner as if to introduce the foreign viewer to the subject.

Hany Abu Assad, born in Palestinian Nazareth inside Israel, went to study airplane engineering in Holland in the late 1980s, yet moved into film-production. *Paradise Now*, his fourth feature length film as director, was originally meant to be a story about the 90 minutes spent between a suicide bomber reaching the place of attack and striking, a time in which nobody knew what the wo/man might do or feel. It was supposed to be a reflection on prejudices, fantasies and fears. Based in Amsterdam, Abu Assad repeatedly found himself in situations where he was asked to explain suicide bombing. Being confronted with the strong emotions of his Dutch fellows and his own, he started to think about turning the subject into a film with a satirical approach.<sup>5</sup>

Other Arab directors also report about the pressure to constantly explain politically motivated violence. Mahmoud al-Massad, who lives in The Netherlands as well, tells in his director's statement for *Recycle* (E'adat Khalq, Jor/NL/D/CH/USA 2007):

'As a European-based film director from Zarqa, Jordan, I wanted to find out why extremism seems to breed so easily in my hometown. So I returned to Zarqa after eight years to research a film that would examine cultural conflicts between Islam and the West, and find options other than those presented by the media, which tends to present two sides to a story and then forces us to choose one. [...] As I travelled around Zarqa, I realized the people who were opening up to me, and perhaps even those who were threatening me, were asking themselves the same questions. It was while trying to negotiate the maze created by media interpretation and the reality of the situation and find answers that I met Abu Ammar. He was a man who showed me that even those considered most extreme are not as one dimensional as the world might think. The focus of my film changed, and *Recycle* was born'. (Wide Management 2007:4)

Abu Assad applied to a number of European funds, which expressed interest provided some conditions were met. Basically, the story needed to explain the phenomenon of suicide bombing to a European audience. The decision makers of the contributing German funds, for example, said that they need to support films which are interesting for German audiences, because it is taxes, thus public money that the funds use to support the production. Another important aspect for the funders was the need to comprehend the story, given the delicate subject matter.<sup>6</sup> The support from European film funds was essential to make the production possible. Pre-sales of distribution rights on the basis of the script enabled the producers to provide the best possible equipment, pay professional personnel, and

<sup>5</sup> I had several conversations with Hany Abu Assad on *Paradise Now* between 2001 and 2003. The narratives of project development published in the countless interviews with the director after differ a lot from the informal conversations we had when the film was not more than an idea yet.

<sup>6</sup> Conversations with funds' staffers.

guarantee – on the technical level – an international standard ‘look’ of the film. Yet, the other side of the coin is the pressure to satisfy the extremely high expectations. How to tell this local story to a global audience? How to reflect a current and disturbing phenomenon in my home country with public and private investors abroad? How many concessions to make for reaching the goal of producing a film that can reach transnational audiences? These are questions Arab directors are constantly confronted with and many times they are the only Arab in the core production team.

The permanent presence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in European mass-media feigns a feeling of knowledge and familiarity with the subject to the viewers. Furthermore, reporting by a third party, usually perceived as neutral, pretends overview and fairness. When it comes to investing public European money in Arab films, or more precisely a film by an Arab director, the film’s political direction becomes pivotal. In the preamble of the guidelines for film support of *Filmstiftung NRW*, for example, it says:

“Filmstiftung are bound to refuse support to screenplays or film projects whose content glorifies war and physical or psychological violence, incites racial hatred, or is pornographic and a moral endangerment to children and young people”.<sup>7</sup>

It is not primarily German law which defines what glorification of war or incitement of racial hatred is, it is German ‘common sense’ and foreign policy. In France as well the issue of Israel/Palestine is delicate and in The Netherlands, the third co-production country of *Paradise Now*, political tension is high since the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh.

Abu Assad likes to position his films in the no man’s land between fiction and reality, he likes to confuse and take the viewer to his own reality rather than to a reality that the audience already knows. He prefers the grey zone in which new views and thoughts can be developed (Neidhardt 2006). What are the grey zones on the backdrop of the realities of film financing? How subtle can he be if the audience he has to reach for recouping production costs have probably never seen an image of a Palestinian’s banal daily routine?

*Paradise Now* has stirred little controversy, in fact, since its November 2005 opening in US theaters. The film has prompted no boycotts. It has elicited no complaints that it is “carrying the original terrorists’ intended message to every theater in the world,” as conservative pundit Charles Krauthammer fumed about Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*, or that it “echoes the conventional wisdom found in Berkeley’s faculty lounges and Barbra Streisand’s sitting room,” as the *San Diego Union-Tribune* dismissed the George Clooney vehicle *Syriana*. Instead, and despite conveying an uncomfortable political message more forthrightly than either *Munich* or *Syriana*, *Paradise Now* has received measured praise from American reviewers. (Allen 2006)

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.filmstiftung.de/English/guidelines\\_for\\_support.php](http://www.filmstiftung.de/English/guidelines_for_support.php).



Allen explains the rather positive reception of *Paradise Now* in the USA, where it was awarded with the *Golden Globe* for the best foreign film and nominated for an *Oscar*, with its understated staging. Film reception is embedded in a local/national culture of the recipient. Compared to Hollywood movies, of which quite a number deal with the Arab World and 'terrorism' since the 1970s, *Paradise Now* is pretty much a film in a 'grey zone' as Abu Assad put it.

In Germany, alongside the USA the closest ally of Israel, the film caused a lot of controversy though. Its proponents liked the human approach and the film's realism. They found it important to show that Palestinians are 'human beings'. The opponents found the movie too one-sided. The choice to tell the film from the perspective of the suicide bomber was seen as the director's 'Palestinian propaganda' (see e.g. Ebbrecht 2005). Though Martin Kloke has understanding for the 'unbalanced character' of *Paradise Now* because of the director being Palestinian, he cynically adds that 'it seems to be part of this realistic authenticity that the Israeli side is barely taken into consideration, and if so only as 'victimizers' or 'water-poisoners' and criticizes that 'any kind of multi-perspectivity and cognitive uncertainty that would have integrated the Israeli society in its complexity' is missing (Kloke 2005). The controversy was heated up when national education centre *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* published tuition material and recommended *Paradise Now* for cinema education at schools. In fact, the material was taken off the market due to massive protests.

### **Animating Memory**

Plenty of similarities can be found between *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir*. *Waltz with Bashir* also took home the *Golden Globe* for best foreign film and was nominated for an *Oscar*. Both films are co-productions with France and Germany, and both are placed in the grey zone between reality and fiction. The readings though, differ vastly.

*Waltz with Bashir* documents the struggle of the filmmaker, Ari Folman to come to terms with the gaps in his memory surrounding the part he played in the 1982 Lebanon War, and the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of *Sabra and Shatila* in Beirut. The entirely animated documentary starts with a sequence of Folman's friend's nightmares. From the very beginning the borders between memory, reality, and fantasy are blurred. As increasingly common in documentary film formats, about half of the film's scenes are reenacted or staged. These parts, Folman's inner eye images, recall Eran Riklis' *Cup Final (Gmar Gavia*, IL 1991) or Haim Bouzaglos' *Cherry Season (Onat Ha-Duvdevanim*, IL 1991) as well as news reports. The former being fiction films which equally deal with the tension between banality and stress of Israeli soldiers' daily grind during the Lebanon invasion.

Tel Aviv based Folman participated in the war as a young soldier on duty. When he turned forty, he felt tired of serving his annual reserve duty, where he directed and scripted comedy films for the army. He attended sessions with a psychologist to get the release order. After the sessions ended and Folman obtained his discharge, he realized that he had told the psychologist 'everything' he had done in the army but remembered nothing about the Lebanon War. This was when the idea for the movie was born.

The animation, Folman said, gave him 'the freedom he wanted as director' (Pandora 2009). He started talking with his friends about their war memories, something he had never done before. His researcher placed an ad in the internet, looking for men who served during the first three months of the war and were ready to talk. The stories of a hundred men were filmed by Folman's team. With this material in hand the director went to the countryside, locked himself in for six days and scripted the film (ibid.).

The *New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and Television* was the first fund to support the project, other financiers, mainly Israeli and Western TV stations, joined in to complete financing and help access markets. Not much is written or told about the production and financing of the film other than commenting on the singularity of animating a feature length documentary.

Decoding the film, the public relation material, and reviews gives the impression that Folman faced less reservation than Abu Assad. If applying the same ethical, or political, standards to both productions, some aspects stand out. Whereas *Paradise Now* is told from the perspective of a *fictitious* suicide bomber, *Waltz with Bashir* is written from the perspective of a *real* ex-soldier who visualizes, or reenacts, memories of murders conducted by the army he served in, in his presence, maybe by himself. Folman calls the massacre of *Sabra and Shatila* 'the worst thing that humankind can do to each other' (The Match Factory 2008: 7) and scripted it as his film's climax. In the light of this cruelty the invasion itself, the consequential occupation of private Lebanese houses as well as the destruction and murder by the Israeli army that are shown, though as staged memories, seem negligible. Folman talks to his friends to discover his own role in this war, never to discuss, reflect, or question, nor to exchange or share memories or views with them. There is no notion of multi-perspectivity.

As much as the Israeli Other is almost physically absent in *Paradise Now*, the Lebanese Other is in *Waltz with Bashir*. We see the Palestinian Other, in Lebanon, briefly as victims of the massacre conducted by the Lebanese Other in *Sabra and Shatila*. Otherwise the Palestinians are named as 'the terrorists', never as 'Palestinians', which caused no protest. Moreover the film was celebrated by the international press. 'Waltz With Bashir is an extraordinary, harrowing, provocative picture. We staggered out of the screening in a daze', Xan Brooks wrote in *The Guardian*. *Le Journal du Dimanche* wrote 'The artistic choice made by Folman

(animation) brings an apocalyptic and surrealistic dimension to this universal and moving film'. And Jason Solomons claims in *The Observer* 'It's a shattering war film, full of guilt and shock, and finding a new medium for expressing and exploring familiar themes' (www.waltzwithbashir.com). Asked about his feelings regarding *Sabra and Shatila* today Folman himself states:

'One thing for sure is that the Christian Phalangist militiamen were fully responsible for the massacre. The Israeli soldiers had nothing to do with it. As for the Israeli government, only they know the extent of their responsibility. Only they know if they were informed or not in advance about the oncoming violent revenge' (The Match Factory 2008:7).

This explanation by the director is identical to the reading by many Lebanese, who had watched the pirated DVD in their country. They criticized that Folman sees himself as the victim. For Israeli historian Tom Segev 'the film "Waltz with Bashir" belongs to the kvetch genre: 'Oy, how traumatic that massacre in Sabra and Chatila was for us'' (Segev 2009).

## Conclusion

Many of the films from the Middle East that have been getting wider international exposure in the last ten years are Israeli or Palestinian. All of them are co-productions and mostly deal with subjects that Europe associates with the region, namely occupation, war and terror as the list of the award winning films above reflects. Whereas other Arab fiction films that make it into competitive sections of major international festivals like Cannes, Venice or Locarno, are nearly invisible even to the professional audience.

The media intervention programs and training initiatives for Arabs reflect hegemonies and dependencies. Taking into consideration the absence of a public cinema infrastructure in the Arab World and thus the lack of institutional representation or backing for film-makers leads one to question to what degree the director can control her/his story. Or in other words, to what extent the films, which are read as national works, can reflect debates or atmospheres in their country of origin at all? The decoding of films, not only from the Middle East, is in many cases national, as the case of *Paradise Now* showed. Critics' reactions to *Waltz with Bashir* suggest that the reading of the film is connected to the actual political experience *within* the region versus political assumptions *about* it, a rather regional reading. An aspect entirely missing in the Western decoding process of films from the Middle East is the question who was involved in the encoding. The critics, who translate the film to the wider audience, focus on the films' subjects or manipulations, rather than on the economic and institutional backing of the creation and thus interests behind it.

After completing the film it is solely the director who has to defend the work as a

statement from and about her/his country. Regardless of formal ownership and the involvement of co-producing states these films are marketed as documents from and about the country in which the story takes place.

The majority of co-productions by directors from the Middle East, like the majority of films produced at all, get little attention. It is the films with international recognition, be it by box office numbers or debates that are remembered. One could easily assume that *Paradise Now* will become part of a Palestinian collective memory. Yet, without physical archives in the Arab countries, and Palestine not even being a state, how long will the co-produced movies be accessible as part of cultural heritage? In French and German archives the film rolls will be stored and made accessible, it is in Europe where Arabs will still have to look for their cultural memory in the distant future.

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