

## Article

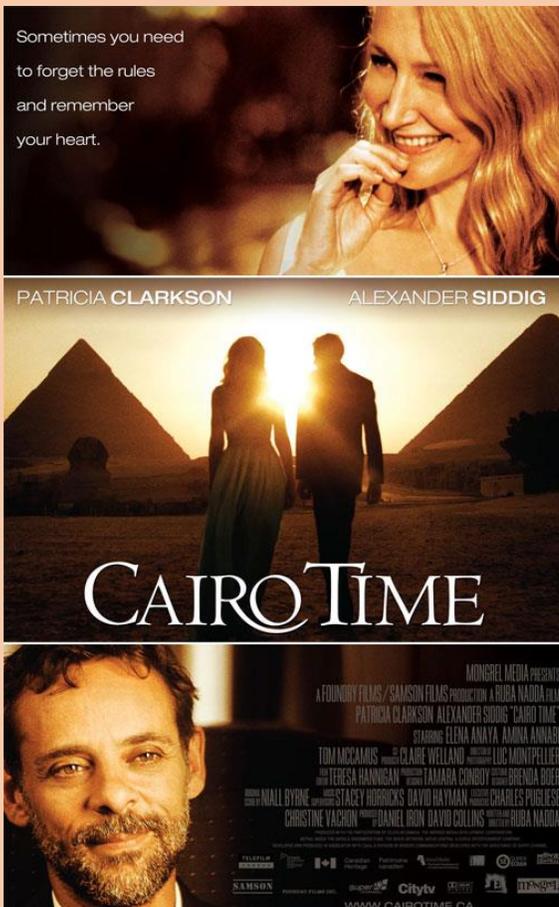
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### *Cairo Time* as ‘Re-incubation’ of an Orientalist Cairo

framework represents an extension of a far reaching lexical and contextual power relationship dynamic between a dominated margin, and an economically, politically and culturally dominant imperial center. Through assuming general imaginings of the “Third World”, this discourse contributes to shaping and delimiting topical, thematic, stylistic, and reception practices in connection with films within this category.

As the West grapples to come to grips with Arab cultures, the discussion of how popular media looks at and reviews films that are made by Arab filmmakers in the Diaspora, represents an effective tool which helps contemplate a myriad of contemporary political and ideological issues and apprehensions. In this study, I examine aspects in the construction, promotion, and the reception of possibly one of the better known “mainstream” films in the last two decades that was made by a Diaspora Arab filmmaker who lives and works in the West. Within this framework, I argue that the packaging and the popular appraisal of the film *Cairo Time*, a film made by a Canadian of an Arab origin, largely functioned as an embedded validation of a broader, traditional, and intrinsically Orientalist discourse on the region that it depicts. Within this breadth, the article provides basis for answering the question of how a work of art is ‘rearticulated’ within much wider promotional and receptive dynamics that exist within broader hegemonic spaces and moments.

As such, this study opens space for a more scientific, and less traditional ‘multicultural’ reading of the actual role and nature of Diaspora art and artists in general, and particularly Arab artists.



With some variables, western discourse in, and around films with topics pertaining to the so called “Third World”, remains largely filtered through a myriad of historical, as well as contemporary political and ideological biases and apprehensions. Similar outlooks govern western discourse on films that originate from the countries of this ‘world’, or are made by Diaspora filmmakers who originate in these countries. As such, this

Within the same context, it also argues for the need to engage wider contextual analysis of artistic performance and practices of Diaspora artists, both on the level of creative construction and promotion, as well as on the level of considering the inherent limitations of the process of receiving popular arts under capitalist hegemony.

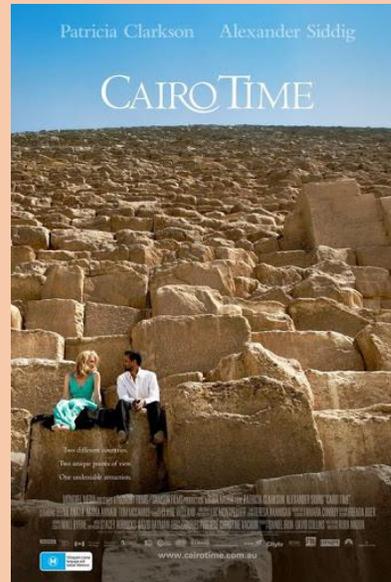
The study is twofold: on one level it surveys how a relatively successful film made by an Arab Canadian and dealing with an Arab related theme, was packaged and ultimately introduced to the public. Here I discuss how the film's own narrative and theme were highlighted and promoted, and how the film was eventually received in the reviews of printed mainstream media in North America. In the same breadth, I discuss specific elements that were used both by the promoters of the film, as well as by several critics in professional film magazines and major national and local newspapers.

On another level, the study illustrates how these seemingly disparate elements of packaging and promotion reaffirm and/or reframe the film within the general context of traditional western discourse on the Arab world. I argue that Arab arts in the North American Diaspora in general, (and in this case in cinema), remain entrenched within the Orientalist western discourse on the Arab region. An important component of this article, therefore, discusses how popular reading of *Cairo Time* in the North American context variably re-positions it (as Diaspora art) within the general framework of hegemonic discourse on the Arab world and Arab culture.

### A General Framework for Reading the Film

*Cairo Time* was made in 2009 by Canadian filmmaker of Syrian origin Ruba Nadda, who also made the popular Canadian film *Sabah* in 2005. The film featured American actor Patricia Clarkson and British actor Alexander Siddig, and won awards in several film festivals, including the title of Best Canadian Feature Film in the Toronto International Film Festival (2009), the award for best film at the

2010 event of the Directors Guild of Canada, and the Genie Award for best costume design in 2010. The film was featured in many other international festivals including in San Francisco and in New York's 'Tribeca Film Festival'.



The film received clearly favorable reviews from American and Canadian film critics. According to 'Metacritic' allocation of the film's approval score, and in a sample of 26 reviews by "top" critics, 18 of those reviews were positive, 8 were mixed, and none were negative. For its part, the popular website *Rotten Tomatoes* suggested that there was consensus that the film "lingered long after the closing credits" due to the "wonderful performance" of its leading actor (Rotten Tomatoes, *Cairo Time*).

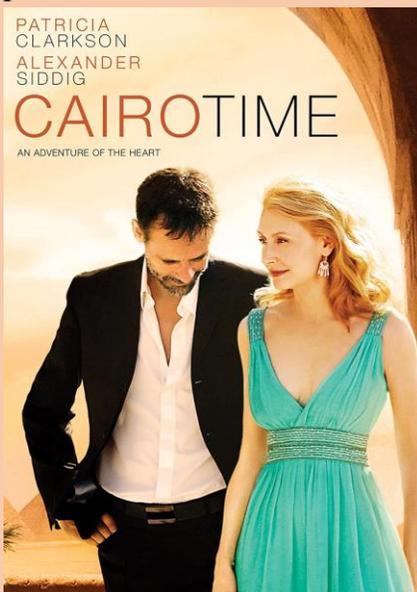
As it pertains to Western perception of films with Arab related themes or those made by Arab filmmakers (including those made for mass audiences), Orientalist discourse integrates larger global 'Western' dominated dynamics of promotion and consumption. Irrespective of the textual framework of a specific work, 'Arab' films are ultimately informed, re-framed, and re-packaged to fit images of the Orient that constitute the broader substance and institutional facets of global exhibition, promotion, and consumption.

Of course, this is not necessarily unique to Arab cinema per say. Such dynamics are in fact variably associated with most films produced or

made by filmmakers from within the region that expands between South East Asia and North Africa. Nevertheless, when it comes to Arab cinema (local or Diasporic), the Orientalist dynamic seems more persistent. This remains the case despite the major strides that were made in the West over the last few decades in relation to other ‘ethnically related’ films. This indicates that the unfinished and vigorous struggles pertaining to neo-colonial politics within the Arab world continue to feed into the centuries old Orientalist ‘imagining’ of this region.

### ***Cairo Time* within Historical Context**

I will first discuss the general historical context which fed into the film. Then, I will discuss how related key elements within the film’s text helped determine how it was marketed and introduced to audiences. To the extent that the Orientalist framework of the film was enhanced by its own narrative and textual dynamics, this framework was also equally reinforced and governed by how the film went through its promotion process. The third part of this section will discuss how the promotional components of the poster, trailer, as well as the staging of its participation in film festivals, all contributed to the process of ‘Orientalization’.



Under pretexts such as “getting rid of dictators”, “ending the Palestinian Israeli conflict”, “stopping civil wars”, “democratization”, “fighting terrorism and terrorists”, etc., direct or proxy Western military campaigns in the last few decades became hallmark features of life within the region. To consider only the history of the last thirty years before *Cairo Time* was made, and the less than few years before and after it was released, one unmistakably recognizes that the film’s textual and conceptual reconstruction of a key Arab city during an extremely volatile period of history, was destined to be filtered through a specific Western ‘imagination’ of the area.

Those previously mentioned years witnessed all kinds of direct and indirect forms of Western government interventions, Western supported Israeli intrusions into Arab territories, as well as continuing suppression of Palestinian revolts against Israeli occupation. Those events resulted in the death, injury, and displacement of millions of people within the Arab region. Between 1980 to 2010 the region witnessed: an Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, followed by the deployment of United States marines in support of the Israel-supported Lebanese government; two Palestinian revolts against Israeli occupation in 1987 and 2000; an American led military intervention to end Iraqi’s occupation of Kuwait which was directly followed by wide-ranging economic and political sanctions against Iraq (1990); an American military intervention in Somalia (1993); an American invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003); an Israeli war against Lebanon which was publicly sanctioned by the United States and other Western governments (2006); and an Israeli war against Gaza (2008). In hindsight, and in all the above mentioned cases, the rationalization for these Western backed wars and interventions variously informed, and was informed by the discourse of an Orient that is somewhat in need of an Occidental ‘fixing’.

### A Story of Two Disparate Worlds

The bearings of Orientalist imagining of the Arab World are never simply elements of a stereotypical outlook towards the region. Indeed, such influences occur in the context of reproaching an area which has been at the cross road of continuous conflict. Made in a historical juncture between the events that unfolded in the 'Middle East' in the period after the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 9/11 of 2001, and those that began to develop in several part of the Arab World towards the end of 2011, *Cairo Time* certainly assumes major significance.

Set in Cairo and involving a visiting Canadian magazine woman editor (Juliette), *Cairo Time* provides a classic case for an East versus West encounter. The woman's husband (Mark) works as a UN official in the war ravaged Palestinian city of Gaza. As a result of the work pressure and the volatile situation in this territory that is adjacent to the Egyptian borders, Mark is unable to spend the vacation time he promised his wife before she arrived in Cairo. The husband sends Tareq, a handsome Egyptian man who has worked for him before as an assistant, to meet Juliette at the airport and escort her through her travels in the city and in Egypt. Left on her own in a strange land with different culture and customs, the Canadian woman must learn how to adjust to "Cairo Time." As Juliette and Tareq travel various parts of the city, the two become attached to each other, and they begin to find themselves in the middle of a transitory love affair that does not seem destined for survival.

*Cairo Time* itself certainly projects self-created Orientalist elements, the most obvious of which is its narrative structure. In fact, the film is built around and motivated by the 'point of view' of a Western protagonist put for the first time in an encounter with an Egyptian social and cultural landscape. And despite the fact that the film is written and directed by a Canadian of an Arab

origin, the narrative in *Cairo Time* does not distance itself from Orientalist discourse.

In contrast to *Cairo Time*, and if we take Sofia Coppola's 2003 film *Lost in Translation* as an example, (this film was frequently referred to by several critics as they discussed *Cairo Time*), we find that 'quoting' the main characters in the latter film, plays a major role in constructing a self-reflexive and self-conscious narrative filmic structure; it allows for a critical underscoring of the voyeuristic aspects of the protagonist's perspective on the foreign Tokyo milieu. As such, the film's approximation of the sad main character who is immersed in trying to re-play the only role that he can perform (an American Hollywood star) allows the film to distance itself from traditionalist Western perspective of that character from Tokyo.

Of course, this is a far cry from *Cairo Time*, where Juliette's character is built to make her rely on the ability to consummate a romanticized relationship between an exotic 'Oriental' object of desire (as well as an 'Oriental' set-up), and a confused and captivated Occidental. The film, nevertheless, concludes with the departure of Juliette and hence the reinstatement of the 'cultural divide' which separates between the two worlds of its main characters. This parting of course is a destined outcome, which otherwise would have been susceptible to a clash. In conjunction with the film's adoption of Juliette's firmly established point of view of as its main protagonist, the separation between the main characters in the end of the film only reaffirms the perception of the impossibility of mixing between a 'naturally' modernist West and a 'naturally' inferior and backward East.

Juliette, who is a Canadian tourist, essentially performs the part of Kipling's 'White Man' assuming the burden of trying to bring the East (Tareq) into the modern world, a mission which the film 'proves' impossible given the cultural divide between the two characters. The romantic element in the film is therefore much less influenced by the artistic and interpretive intentions

of an artist depicting an encounter between two people from two different backgrounds, than by its filtering through hegemonic elements that typify political Western post-colonial approximation of the region. This key narrative component in the film assumes the form of yet another element within the Orientalist cultural assemblage of the region, which is variously consistent with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial discourse.

A critical and ‘time-honored’ ingredient of colonial and neo-colonial discourse in relation to its former and contested ‘areas of influence’ has been the advocacy of the notion of its ‘civilizing’ role or mission towards the people of these areas. European, as well as twentieth century American colonialists and neo-colonialists always conceived of their culture as inherently superior to ‘Eastern’ or ‘Southern’ cultures. Therefore, relationships or encounters between representatives of these cultures are largely introduced within what Kipling once called the ‘White Man’s burden’; it is a cultural representation which not only manifested within the text of *Cairo Time*, but it is reconfirmed in how the film looks at, and projects itself in front of its potential audiences.

### **Packaging and Promoting an Orientalist Entertainment**

From the outset, and bestowing itself as “an adventure of the heart” and as “a quiet and disarming love story” set in Cairo, *Cairo Time*’s official poster ensures that its ‘bold’ textual allusions are not designed to provoke controversy. Instead, these story summaries are played to reaffirm what is to be expected from the film’s exotic setting: a temporary playground for an encounter between a Western protagonist and an Oriental antagonist. This ‘introductory’ promotion complements the film’s actual narrative development; one which effortlessly maintains Rudyard Kipling’s renowned conclusion in *The Ballad of East and West*, that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”.

Juliette and Tareq’s brief (and unconsummated) love affair is played to its utmost potential but it is destined to end, hence the ‘quietness’ and the ‘disarming’ demeanor suggested in the poster’s textual references. As such, the promotion of the film from the beginning ensures that potential audience are not alarmed or pushed to expect any culturally ‘unsettling’ or ‘problematic’ prospects in this regard.

Written textual components of the main poster of *Cairo Time* are further enhanced by its visual disposition. Introducing the two main characters in the films, the poster symbolically plays on stressing the deep dissimilarity between what each of these characters represents. Those characters are unmistakably distinguished from one another on various visual levels: this includes their spatial proximity to the viewer (Juliette is in the foreground and Tareq is in the background); the direction of their eyes (Clarkson is depicted looking forward to the left, while Siddig is looking downward towards the ground); and how each of them is dressed (Clarkson is in light turquoise dress, and Siddig is in a dark black suit).

Various aspects of the film’s disposition can be also found in its official trailer, where the focus is on an inter-textual play of meaning which offers a soft and romantic description of an adventure set within a distinctly Oriental exotic landscape. The trailer reverberates similar ‘reassuring’ expressions of the textual quotes cited in the poster; this in addition to the clip’s visual references to the pyramids, camels, veiled women, the desert, the congested and chaotic streets of the city, the traditional wooden sailing Egyptian ‘Faluka’ boats and the Nile river, the Shisha (known in the West as the Hookah), and finally the belly dancing and dancers. Once again, the trailer passes on to us the film’s theme in the context of incorporating the two written textual poster references about the “adventure of the heart” and the “quiet and disarming love story”.

At film festivals where it was featured, *Cairo Times* similarly and skillfully played the presence of its two ethnically and racially ‘different’ star actors: the exotic ‘Arab-looking’ Alexander Siddig (of Sudanese origin) against the glamorous ‘white’ Patricia Clarkson. For their part, VIP and press publicity packages in these festivals were ensured to include colorful, sparkling “gift-sets”, photographs and paraphernalia featuring images of Egypt’s traditional touristic and ethnographic landscapes. As such, the film also fit well with those in the competitive and largely more ‘open’ world of Western film circles. The name and the actual presence of the Oscar nominated and method actor Patricia Clarkson, as well as director Ruba Nadda, a Canadian woman filmmaker with Syrian-Arab background, all worked well to validate the film’s open-minded demeanor in the eyes of the ‘liberal’ audiences and crowds in art-house theatres and film festivals. In the end, the film (both in terms of its narrative structure as well as its promotional and marketing strategy, corresponded well with what is expected from a cultural ‘product’ compelled to positively resonate among Western audience.

### **The Film in North American Reviews**

For its part, popular North American reviews of *Cairo Time* indulged traditional and widely circulated textual references associated with a specific discourse of the Arab region. In this section, however, I will avoid dwelling on the obvious when it comes to issues relating to stereotyping. Instead, I will focus on how these readings function as integral elements within which the multifaceted capillary living network of hegemonic power is propagated and re-inscribed vis-à-vis the Arab region in general and in relation to Cairo in particular.

The review samples of the film were picked from sixteen mainstream popular American and Canadian film and arts magazines, and in major national and local newspapers.

In examining how popular printed media in North America reviewed and repackaged the film, I will focus on specific areas illustrating the discursive modes of Orientalism as they pertain to *Cairo Time*. As such, I will elaborate on how these critical reviews of the film interact with the film and with its promotional bearings, to produce a cohesive Orientalist outlay of the film for general public consumption.

Renderings of the concept of ‘clashes of civilizations’ as the primary source of political conflict in the post-Cold War world (variously advanced by Samuel P. Huntington, Bernard Lewis and others over the last three decades), fit well into much of contemporary mainstream Western political characterization of the nature of turmoil within the Arab region. In fact, the way in which this concept was discursively applied by several Western governments in their dealings with the region over the last thirty years, basically rearticulates the same Orientalist framework which was described by Edward Said in the late 1970s: this is a context which, in the broad Western hegemonic discourse, pits an irrational, fanatical, violent, anti-women, anti-progress, anti-democratic, inferior Orient, in contrast to a humane, developed, rational, and secular Occident. In further vindication of Said’s description, Western descriptions of their interventions within the region over the last thirty years also seemed to depict an Orient that is to be feared, and therefore in need to be controlled.

When western reviews of *Cairo Time* depict the ‘cultural clash’ between the worlds of Juliette and Tareq, they essentially rehash the familiar and centuries old cultural spar between an Oriental East and the Occidental West. Concepts of the social and cultural landscape of the Arab region in general and Egypt in particular are largely incorporated as reflections of a homogenous entity. While the film is set in Cairo, reviews of the film tend to refer to this setting in lexis and descriptions that may well refer to and fit any ‘Oriental’ setting. In other words, Cairo itself becomes an arena which

encapsulates notions of homogeneity which are usually associated with any 'Orientalist' backdrop.

In most reviews, the film's geographical references are described in a way that can be applied to any setting, and ranging anywhere between the Asian Moslem East, through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, to North Africa and the Sub-Saharan Africa. The Egyptian 'image' per se is depicted not a reflection of itself, as much as an Orientalist mindset which is re-fashioned by Western imagination of the 'East' and the Arab region in general. In other words, the Cairo setting is distinguished for not being part of the Occident.

Ultimately, the description of the film's setting perfectly reduces the complex and heterogeneous region into an imaginary world of homogeneity; in other words, the reviews introduce a re-imagining of Cairo not through describing the intrinsic aspects of its identity, but rather through an ontological designation which repositions it within a predominantly Western perspective of yet another Oriental location.

However, before we delve into how most North American reviews conceived of the film, it is important to point out that a few of these were indeed cognizant of certain critical contextual considerations that went beyond the simplistic framework of the East and West divide. In the following sample, *The Boston Globe's* Wesley Morris (August 20, 2010) seems more nuanced about describing the film's narrative approach. She argues that the Syrian-Canadian filmmaker had to contend with the "world's perceptions of Arab culture." More importantly, however, the writer concentrates on the protagonist's own failure to deal with a world that transcends the background of her bourgeois class shell which she is used to: Juliette's reaction to the Cairo culture, remains "a kind of bourgeois delusion", Morris says. Therefore the issue of the 'divide' as established by the protagonist, as Morris sees it, is not one that is based within her cultural background, or is

instigated by her affront with Oriental culture, but is one that is actually inscribed within her privileged class background. In the end, the film makes some attempts to tackle social issues, Morris concludes. But the filmmaker "appears to have come [to Cairo] for the same reason as her heroine: sightseeing."

Most reviews of *Cairo Time*, however, seemed less nuanced in their reading of the film than Morris's review suggested. As mentioned earlier, setting descriptions of Cairo in most reviews remained mostly focused on its non-Occidental character, in other words, as an urban face of an 'Other's world. In this context some reviews tended to reduce the complex and heterogeneous city into another manifestation of an imaginary world of homogeneity. In addition to the general 'strangeness' of the place, the cultural demeanor of the city is particularly associated either with exotic oddities of the locale, or with familiar generalizations about a hostile anti-women atmosphere.

Describing the place where Juliette finds herself in after she recognizes that her husband will not be meeting her as promised, Stephen Rea (September 23, 2010) of *The Miami Herald* illustrates a "sprawling city, with its broad river and baking temperatures, its mosques and markets, its mix of ancient and modern, East and West." Similarly, but with more details, *Variety's* Alissa Simon (September 20, 2009) looks at the film's ability to "encapsulate" and capture the specificity of the Cairo locale, including the "city's landmarks and hidden charms", and the songs and the music of classical Egyptian singers such as "Um Kalthoum and Abdel Halim Hafez". But those elements, the writer suggests, only "deepen the exotic atmosphere" which is already present in the "slightly breathless, old-fashioned feel" of the city, the chaos of its congestion, noise and traffic, and the "the sensual quality of its distinct beauty". Both writers seem to present a recurring conceptualization of an Arab city, not through describing intrinsic aspects of its rich history, as

well as its cultural, social, and religious heterogeneity and diversity, but rather through describing an ontological Other's designation replaced within a Western imaginary of yet another Oriental location.

For her part Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* (August 20, 2010) compares the film to *Lost in Translation* in that Cairo plays a role unto itself which seems immersed "in an ethereal, slightly dazed sense of dislocation." But Juliette's visit to Cairo, according to Hornaday, is one that cannot be compared to a Tokyo visit where there remains a level of predictability in what the location might hide. This stems from what she sees as the cultural, social and political civility that governs Tokyo's relationship with its visitor. In contrast, and in the case of Juliette, her geographic and psychological journey through Cairo is one that never makes clear where she is going or where she intends to go.

For the *Christian Science Monitor* critic Peter Rainer (August 6, 2010), it is the depiction of 'strangeness' in the protagonist's Cairo location which makes the film watchable. The power of the film for Rainer stems from how it conveys the feeling of a stranger traveler who suddenly enters into an "alien environment". But this is not any alien environment; indeed it is an environment that is typically associated with a specific kind of 'Orient'; according to Rainer it is where the bored Western woman waiting for her husband discovers that, if "unaccompanied", she becomes "a magnet to roving males with grabby hands", and where everywhere "she ventures surprises await." Similar theme is replicated by Peter Howell of *The Toronto Star* who describes Cairo (October 9, 2009) as "a city and society where males view a woman walking alone, especially a blond foreigner, as an invitation for trouble."

Other reviews are less adamant in how they implicate characterizations of the unwanted attention that Juliette encounters on the streets of Cairo. Lou Lumenick of the *New York Post* (August

6, 2010), for example, presents a more nuanced description of Juliette's situation; her uncomfortable encounters on these streets, he suggests, are ones that are encountered by "a woman trying to see the city on her own", hence by avoiding the straightforward suggestion, as in other reviews, that this is a symptomatically Arab or Moslem social dilemma.

Andrew Schenker of *Slant Magazine* (August 1, 2010) also provides a somewhat nuanced critique of the film's stereotypically Western perspective of Egyptian culture: "[...] the film provides an easily graspable outsider's perspective for the Western viewer to identify with, so that he or she can comfortably regard Egyptian culture as something hopelessly "other," even if [the filmmaker] later attempts (unsuccessfully) to undercut this perspective." The writer further argues that Ruba Nadda's effort to challenge her audience to delve into a better understanding of a typically exoticized culture, like Egypt, fails. Juliette's supposed "expanded consciousness" and her change of character as she is introduced to the "real" Egypt after she meets her Husband's friend Tarek still leaves her, as well as the film audience, remained in the end incapable of transcending the boundaries of viewing an Egyptian 'Other'.

But as Edward Said consistently argued, conceptual generalization of the 'Orient' reiterates an occidental imagining of Oriental locations and societies as ones that are frozen in time. Indeed they naturally represent monolithic and backward entities that are also static. In this regard, for a writer to recognize a stereotype does not necessarily indicate a grasp of the nature of Orientalist discourse as a cohesive ingredient of a wider hegemonic ideological framework. *Cairo Time* represents "the bafflement of the Western liberal stranded in a Muslim country whose practices are in conflict with her own sensibility" suggests Schenker. For the writer, the Cairo that he describes still does not assume the specificity of a historical or political moment. Since it is part of a

“Muslim” (read Oriental) country, the assumption is that negative attitudes towards women in the city, for example, are part and parcel of a social practice that is integral to the place’s inherent ‘reality’. And in this regard, it does not matter how much of these attitudes have been historically associated with or advanced by specific ideological and political fundamentalist groups and movements, many of which have been in consistent historical concord with Western political agendas within the region.

Schenker further describes how in the first part of the film *Juliette* is shown travelling through the city while almost totally oblivious to its local “costumes”: “Fun Fearless Female brashly wanders the streets of Cairo with no head covering, thus inspiring the congregation of a sinister swarm of men whose lascivious designs are as aggressively forthright as the group that plagued Monica Vitti in *L’Avventura* [Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960].” Once more, for Schenker it is irrelevant that the Italian film is set in the 1960s, while *Cairo Time* is set in 2009, because ‘Cairo time’ (pun intended) essentially reflects an ‘Oriental’ time, which is not expected to change much over real time.

Other reviews focus on how the film privileges a harmless and disarming viewpoint for the audience towards an otherwise threatening environment. After describing how on the one hand the film vividly captures “the sheer crush of people and vehicles on the streets – the noise, the smoke, the semi-predatory attention paid to a Western woman by local men”, A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* (August 5, 2010) marks on the other hand the “disarming gentleness” and the “graceful elegance that survives amid the chaos”. What Scott does not mention, is that the ‘disarming’ element that he is referring to, informs and is informed by the film’s privileging of the point of view the audience through their assuming of the point of view of the film’s main protagonist; a privileging which is enhanced by Juliette’s ability to maintain a distant relationship with city and with Tareq and her ability

to uphold them as ‘Objects’ for her voyeuristic pleasure, journeying, and examination.

For other reviews, the uninterrupted sense of the main character’s controlling (albeit dreamy) relationship with the Egyptian landscape, and inadvertently with the Egyptian antagonist, strengthens the film’s seductive vision of Cairo, as Sura Wood from the *Hollywood Reporter* (October 14, 2010) suggests. But this outlook is reinforced further by the film’s hiding of some aspects of the ‘reality’ of the region, Wood seems to suggest. The fact that film offers no hints of “terrorism” or “Anti-American sentiment” (which Wood assumes are ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ components of the Arab landscape), is what ultimately allows it to offer a disarming and non-threatening “showcase for the Pyramids of Giza, the Nile and the ancient city”, one which is fit for “the Cairo tourist bureau”.

Peter Travers of *The Rolling Stone* (August 4, 2010) welcomes the film’s ability to envisage Cairo’s setting both as exotic and as threatening. He suggests that the film indeed presents us with a “seductive” environment which “lets the sensuous tempos of Cairo life seep into Juliette’s system, and ours”, as such reiterating a persistently familiar image of the Orient both as a “haunting and hypnotic” place. But in the end, this place is incapable of drowning Juliette into its abyss, he suggests. It is a place, where ‘you’ are slowed down, tested and seduced, but it is incapable of overpowering you. If anything, it simply reconfirms your superiority towards it as David Lewis of *The San Francisco Chronicle* points out (August 27, 2010):

Perhaps like Cairo itself, the film forces viewers to slow down, to feel the power of those seemingly small yet life-changing moments that we don’t always see coming. And as we watch Juliette head off to a special place in those last frames, one more thing is confirmed: Good things come to those who wait.

In his allusion to Juliette's return home at the end of the film where "good things come to those who wait", Lewis subtly reminds us that the seductiveness of this place is destined to be repositioned within its 'innate' and 'eternal' setting within the boundaries of the East and West divide.

This same theme is echoed, albeit more clearly, in another review. Peter Howell of *The Toronto Star* (October 9, 2009) suggests that the film in the end maintains the autonomy of its two main characters, and by extension all the cultural connotations associated with them. Such autonomy, however, stems from the fact that Juliette and Tareq are bound by "geography, circumstance and fate", which is stronger and much more resilient than their relationship, suggests Howell. Other reviews see weakness in the film's projection of Juliette's character vis-à-vis her relationship with Tareq and ultimately with Cairo. They also see an acutely contradictory element in how a sophisticated Westerner like Juliette is presented vulnerable in the face of the seductive power of Tareq.

Karina Longworth of *The Village Voice* (August 4, 2010) agrees that the film presents Tareq as a "seductive (yet chaste) exotic-man-reinvigorat[ing] middle-aged-wife's-libido fantasy". But Longworth is scornful of how the film spends lots of time placing its protagonist in artificial situations by way of stressing the theme of her culture-shock. The writer sees this as something hard to believe, especially coming from a journalist, who is supposed to understand how she is looked at by men in this Cairo setting:

Would a real journalist be so naïve as to not understand that her body—identifiably Western and comparatively exposed—would draw unwelcome attention to itself on the streets of a Muslim country? Juliette's Stupid Tourist episodes lead to loneliness, frustration, and humiliation, which in turn prompt her to seek out Tareq, who is seemingly always up for long walks and longer conversations[...]

Another review is equally baffled by how the film handles Juliette's affair with Tareq. Comparing how romance between people from different cultural backgrounds is handled in *Cairo Time*, in the Tokyo-based film *Lost in Translation*, and in the European-based *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), Liam Lacey of *The Globe and Mail* (October 8, 2009) sees "something obviously stereotypical about the attraction between the privileged Western woman and her handsome, quiet suitor." In her explanation, however, the writer rehashes one of the most emblematic stereotypes about the region and about Moslem countries in general. She suggests that for a journalist, Juliette seems strangely not ready for her Egyptian vacation: "Doesn't Frommer's [a famous American touristic guide] have anything to say about Western women travelling alone in the Middle East?", Lacey asks?

On yet another level, *Cairo Time's* presentation of the male antagonist more specifically couples him with the region's exoticism itself. In this regard, some reviews appear appreciative of how the film structures a 'feminine' (albeit Western) gaze towards Tareq and towards the film's Cairo setting. Indeed, these reviews appear to welcome a reversal of cinema's classical voyeuristic male affirmation of the main 'object of desire'.

As we saw earlier, the film's promotional poster presented a particularly distinguished image of Tareq as the film's antagonist. In essence, the poster rendered what can be described as a "feminized" image of Tareq. The male antagonist is presented in the background coyly looking down in a gesture provoking a Western spectator's curiosity for an erotic Other. In the foreground is Juliette looking slightly sideways but with her face very clearly depicted for the viewer.

In their description of Tareq, some reviews observe a similar description of Tareq's position within the film. In essence, however, these reviews reiterate a depiction of an exotic Oriental "object of

desire” who is seductive, yet who is manageable and harmless and who in the end remains within a reasonable range of control. *Entertainment Weekly*’s Owen Gleiberman (August 5, 2010) describes Tareq as a “tall, courtly Egyptian who wears his non-Western ways lightly but firmly.” For Stephen Rea of the *Miami Herald* (September 23, 2010), Tareq is particularly depicted as “a gentleman, a native accustomed to, and a little impatient with, Westerners visiting his country, armed with their tour books and sense of entitlement.” The fact that the control element in the hands of Juliette stems from her position as a Westerner, however, seems rational for Rea considering that it allows the positive disposition of Juliette’s role as woman within the film! According to Rea, Tareq has no qualms with being a tour guide who sees “his city through the filter of [a] New Yorker”.

In the end, and to rearticulate Edward Said’s general characterization of Orientalism, my survey here clearly described how Western printed reviews of a work by an Arab Canadian filmmaker sifted through specific regulatory codes, classifications, and interpretations that reaffirm an imagined Oriental Arab setting. These reviews inform and are informed by long standing Western epistemological discernments of the Arab region, its history, and its people, and they stand to fill in for the textual absences that could escape the filmic text itself.

### **By Way of A Conclusion**

As cultural practice, film tends to work on various levels: in addition to pointing out possible choices for settling narrative dilemmas, and in the end assuming (one way or the other) a specific stance in relation to specific historical, social, ethical, and political questions, film ultimately mediates views and perspectives, and offer popular learning about social and political issues and dilemmas. This mediation occurs in conjunction with various interactive components, including the filmic ‘text’ (mainly the precise organization of the film and its codes and sub-codes); ‘a production

process’ (where a wide range of determinants shape the actual creation of films and ultimately mold the cinematic text itself); a ‘promotion’ and ‘marketing strategy’ (where the film makes choices about how to present itself to audiences in ways that ensure positive expectations, and hence, provide bases for good audience reception). The fourth element relates to ‘reception’ (audience and critical reaction and assimilation of the film in the context of various historical and cultural expectations and determinants).

The discourse on Arab related films in the Diaspora (exemplified in this study in the film *Cairo Time*), reincorporates specifically familiar critical texture. In its sum, this discourse does not simply engage these films as cultural and experiential byproducts made by filmmakers who happen to come from a different region of the world; in fact, this discourse amounts to an old constellation which is ultimately a re-confirmation of the predominant ideas about an Arab ‘Orient’. As such, Diaspora art as cinematic practice represents yet another organic element in the formation of popular culture as hegemonic consensus.

Made by a woman who comes from the Canadian Arab Diaspora, *Cairo Time*’s filmic text, its packaging, as well as its media reception are largely filtered and ultimately re-fashioned through hegemony of post-colonial/neocolonial popular culture in the West, and less so by the artistic and interpretive intentions of the artist. While this film’s own internal textual codes and structure might have played a major part in how it was eventually conceived and received within its North American milieu, the consistent (although occasionally variable) aspect of how Arab ‘related’ work of art is approached remains overwhelmingly bound by the hegemonies of today’s wider prevailing Orientalist Western discourse on the Arab region.

Therefore, while popular Diaspora arts (including film) indeed function as organic elements in forming popular culture, they also operate within the limitations of the cultural politics of consensus:

ones that are not subjectively determined, but are rather informed by the social and political elements of a hegemonic consensus within specific historical moments and geographies. Ultimately, Diaspora artists are faced with the task of articulating ways to negotiate and even subversively defy aspects of hegemonic assimilation and re-incorporation.

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