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INTRODUCTION | CINEMAS OF THE ARAB WORLD

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The term ‘Arab Cinema’ is being used here purely for convenience. The Arab world may be bound by language and religion, but it is in no sense homogeneous, neither in its history nor in its customs. Yet, over the years, what has largely been common to many Arab countries in the field of cinema is a set of shared problems: decline in film production, closure of halls, censorship, issues of distribution, diminishing investment, narrowing of the domestic market and the invasion of American films and television programmes. The Arab film industry has also had to deal with the pervasive and longstanding influence of Egyptian cinema to which several countries were called upon to adjust in an earlier day.

For all that, a large number of Arab films have, in recent years, made a mark in the international arena. This has been achieved in the face of many odds – economic, material and psychological. The films continue to grapple with their past and, increasingly, with their present: a past linked to their colonial experience, war and displacement, and a present that is trying to shape an identity. The colonial yoke may have been shed but the region is now battling turbulent issues of another kind.

But there is a bright side to the picture. A number of special funds have been set up, especially in the UAE, to help finance Arab films. For instance, the Dubai Film Market has launched an initiative called Enjaaz, designed to support the post-production of features and documentaries by Arab filmmakers with a focus on the Arab world, Arab history and culture.

The Abu Dhabi Film Festival has given space to new voices from the Arab world. And through its new Sanad Fund, it has offered generous grants for development and post-production of features and documentaries to both new and established Arab filmmakers. The Festival's Executive Director Peter Scarlet believes that there has been no "comparable trend towards artistic independence ... since the late 1960s." These filmmakers," he says, "are breaking the mould and developing a new cinematic vocabulary that is unique to the Arab region."

There's more: the Aflam Qaseera Short Film Production Fund – open to GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) - promotes emerging writers, directors and UAE-based production companies; and the the Abu Dhabi Film Commission's Sasha Grant - an international screenwriting competition ending in a production grant - open to Arabic-language entries for the first time this year, where forty percent of the entries were in Arabic.

The Dubai Film Institute, too, has vowed to support filmmakers from MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries, including Arabs from the Diaspora, by financing at least 10 Arab feature films per year, apart from short films or television series.

Widescreen attempts an engagement with these cinemas by asking questions on a variety of topics that are pertinent to this region – from censorship to the new cinema, from the position of women to questions of identity, and from the implications of foreign funding to the diversities and similarities of the cinemas of these countries.

About the Guest Editor: Latika Padgaonkar has taught at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and has worked as a foreign correspondent for the Indian news daily *The Telegraph*. She was the executive editor of *Cinemaya*, The Asian Film Quarterly and the Director of the Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema. A member of the Editorial Board of *Wide Screen*, she writes on cinema and literature for various newspapers, journals and websites, and is a regular at film festival juries as a member of the NETPAC team. She has translated two books and edited four, including two on Asian cinema and one on Kenji Mizoguchi.

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