

Winning Undergraduate Essay

Escaped from the Harem, Trapped in the Orient: An analysis of the multiple gazes in Nadine Labaki's movie Where Do We Go Now?

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Throughout history, the majority of artists have been men, and quite often the women in their works have been featured as passive objects of male sexual desire. This sort of one-sided dynamic is ubiquitous; it can be detected in the vast majority of Western nude paintings, and even modern advertisements tend to conform to the same pattern (Berger, 1977). As a consequence, feminist discourse of the representation of women in visual culture has focused on the concept of male gaze. However, the proliferation of images in modern times has given rise to a “broad array of gazes and implied viewers” (Sturken, 2005, p. 87). Women are no longer simply objectified, nor is the business of directing the gaze relegated to solely a male domain.

Nadine Labaki's latest film *Where Do We Go Now* (2011) offers a perfect example of the multiplicity, and often complexity, of gazes. The celebrated Lebanese director tells the story of an unnamed Arab village co-inhabited by Muslims and Christians. Amid escalating tensions between the two religious groups, women of the village, tired of the incessant fighting, decide to unite forces to pacify their aggressive men. The film has earned several high-profile accolades in the West and has even been dubbed by some critics as feminist artwork.¹ While the film clearly departs from the Orientalist tradition of depicting Arab women as passive, mysterious lovers, it is important to question whether or not the film merits such praise. Particular elements of the movie – the fact that objectification of women is still present (though

in an unexpected way) and the fact that gender roles are portrayed as opposing binaries, cast doubt on the so-called revolutionary nature of the film. Finally, wittingly or unwittingly, the film seems unable to resist engaging with Orientalist clichés, thus rendering the people and their environs into an object of an “othering” and exposing them to a degrading gaze.

Gender Roles under Gaze: Active Women, Foolish Men

Traditionally, women have predominately been cast as sexual objects in cinema. As Mulvey (2003) has argued, objectification is accompanied by passivity, and while women serve as erotic spectacle, it is the men who advance the storyline. Admittedly, Labaki's movie seems to depart from this convention to some extent. Firstly, women are the clear protagonists of the film, the story is told from the women's point of view and their actions fuel the course of events. Though the village they inhabit is clearly led by men, Labaki implies that the women pull the strings from behind the scenes. By destroying the television and burning newspapers, women become the ultimate arbiters of information. Likewise, their collective power is demonstrated on many occasions when they successfully distract their men from violent behavior. This is demonstrated in a scene where a group of women slyly wait for the men of the village to become transfixed by a staged belly dance performance, so that they may use the opportunity to bury a large quantity of weapons at a secret location. Finally,

the relative ease of the women's ability to change their religion from Muslim to Christian or vice versa appears to position them as possessing significant clout in their community. That said, the final scene of the film features a solemn funeral for one of the sons of the village, where we see confused men asking the women where the body should be buried – on the Muslim or Christian side of the graveyard? Counter to the tone of the film, in Labaki's ending, the women are more inclined to allow the question of *Where Do We Go Now* be determined by the men of the village and thus patriarchal dominance is re-established.

Secondly, Labaki completely avoids any hint of sexual objectification of the Arab women living in the village. There is a marked lack of sex scenes or sexual innuendoes directed at the women in the film. The nascent love affair between the leading



Image 1 - Amal dreaming of her crush, the man renovating her café.

female protagonist, Amal (played by Nadine Labaki), and the man renovating her café, is based on mutual attraction which avoids casting Amal as a mere object of his sexual desires. In fact, Amal is shown daydreaming about her crush, an unexpected reversal of the trend of women being on the receiving end of the gaze (see image 1). Labaki's treatment of the village women is somewhat sanitized, casting them as noble mothers and heroic caretakers of the family, which recalls traditional attributes linked to femininity. Confined to this role they often attract a respectful or even admiring gaze from the male members of the family. There are several scenes where motherhood is clearly venerated as sons obey their mothers and freely express their love for them.

However, all these redeeming qualities are applied solely to the Arab women in the movie. Halfway through the film, female villagers decide to hire a group of Ukrainian dancers to entertain their men in an ultimately successful ploy to distract them from fighting. These "other" women are clearly treated as sights, and their bodily movements become objects of pleasure for the men (see image 2). Dressed in mini-skirts and tight tops to please the audience, their physical beauty is turned into a commercial product. More significantly, the Arab women participate in this objectification when they first encounter the Europeans. Staring through binoculars as the dancers descend from a bus, the Arab women adopt a voyeuristic gaze (see image 3). Soon after, we hear one of the Arab women criticizing the Ukrainians' small breasts and mocking her "anorectic" thinness. Although the Ukrainian women are admired by the villagers, especially the men, they are set apart from the women of the village in that they derive their status solely from their physical appearance.

Despite this seemingly straightforward objectification of Ukrainian women, the gazes in Labaki's movie are complex and not susceptible to easy generalization. Instead of passive submission to the desiring male gaze, women turn it into a tool to advance their own aims. One particular scene shows men in a local café engaged in a heated discussion about their weapons, when a



Image 2 - Ukrainian women performing belly dance for the villagers.

buxom blond dancer joins their table their veneer of machismo disappears. The men are shown to be clearly perplexed and are so taken with her that they don't notice the recorder she cleverly leaves behind in an attempt to give women of the village access to their private conversations. In this instance, as well as the previously mentioned belly dance scene, Labaki succeeds in showing that the men's masculinity is both potent and permeable. Nevertheless, such emancipatory elements do not trump the fact that in order to reach these goals, women still have to participate in the sexual objectification of their bodies, thus conforming to the rules of a patriarchal society.

Even if the movie manages to confront some conceptions linked to female representation in cinema, it is hardly a trailblazing original as it continues to indulge in a simplistic binary representation of men and women. While the village women grieve for the death of loved ones and desperately seek peace, the men are cast as reactionary characters who can be provoked to fight in a matter of few seconds (see image 4). Just like a pile of dynamite, they appear to be waiting for any external incitement, with little capability for

common sense. She portrays the men as predictably hapless slaves of implied biological impulses: unable to resist urges of violence or sexuality. This one-dimensional representation is not only offending to men but implicates a larger problem: no adequate explanations are offered to explain the sectarian tensions between the villagers, except for antiquated religious prejudices, and the simple view that men are the root of all social problems. Unfortunately, Labaki indulges in an unsophisticated "men will be men" attitude that leaves no room for examining the possible political or economic grievances that often contribute to conflict.

Orientalist gaze: Between Fairytales and Conflicts

Despite some critical commentaries of *Where Do We Go Now*, overall the film was well-received with Western audiences. It garnered several awards, including Special Mention (Prize of the Ecumenical Jury) at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 and People's Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival during the same year.² The Guardian described the narrative of the film as "splendid",³ and Huffington Post deemed the combination of "an amazing soundtrack" and "magical Mediterranean scenes" as the "perfect follow-up for her [Labaki's] masterpiece *Caramel*" (Rothe, 2012)

Such resounding praise raises the provocative question: was the film so well received in the West



Image 3 - Female villagers staring at the Ukrainian dancers descending from a bus.

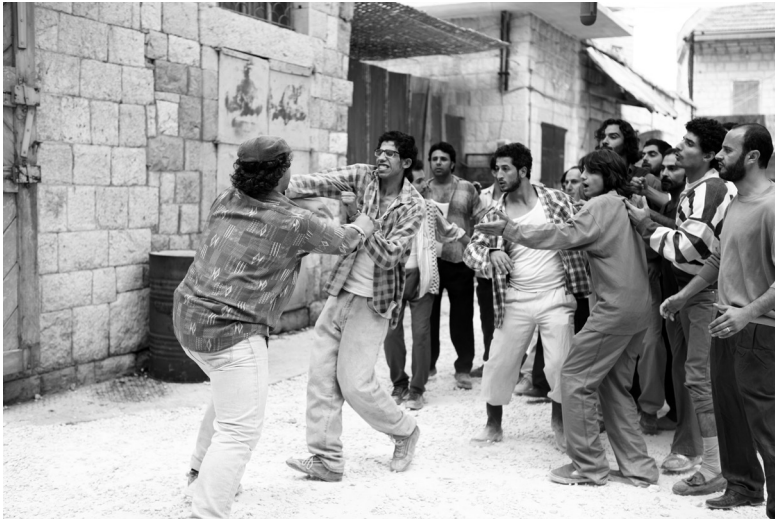


Image 4 - Men fighting over who has the right to wear the grey cap, worn by the man on the left.

thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just and Christian". Labaki's film offers a "native informer's" account of almost all of these manufactured differences.

To start with, Labaki's mise-en-scène features a distant and pristine village in the middle of nowhere – a nod to the image of the exotic yet underdeveloped East. The landscape might be magically beautiful, but primitive conditions force the villagers to live in a manner some Western countries did decades ago. For instance, although the village receives a new television (a Western symbol), a

because it panders to a traditional view of the Orient? Indeed, a closer look at the film reveals numerous Orientalist depictions of the Arab world. According to Edward Said (1978), Orientalism means imaging the East and the West as opposite entities where "the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen,

significant amount of time is dedicated to finding a place where an actual satellite signal can be reached. Despite the hardship associated with life in the village, images such as this correspond to Western nostalgia for a more natural way of life and this longing finds a romanticized manifestation in Oriental imaginary.⁴



Image 5 - Belly dance performance.



Image 6 - Women grieving for their loved ones, lost in previous conflicts.

Partly due to the famous tropes associated with the book *Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*, the East has captured the Western imagination with temptations of mystery and exotic wonderment.⁵ Perhaps the most stereotypical image of the Orient is the harem, a place confined to women only, it has become the obsession of many Western male artists who imagine it as a secret palace of pleasures. The *Arabian Nights* has also been a source of inspiration for some Western artists who have traveled to the East in the hopes of taking part in a magical, fairytale-like experience. If this was the expectation of Western viewers of *Where Do We Go Now*, Labaki does not disappoint them. In addition to attractive belly dancing women (see image 5), the director further engages with Orientalist logic by hinting that a supernatural current runs through the village. For instance, sacramental wine turns into blood, which then inexplicably finds itself on the foreheads of children celebrating their confirmation. This is followed by the mystical presence of goats in the local mosque. The clincher, though is when we see also a statue of Virgin Mary shedding tears of blood.

Simultaneously with the image of the mystical Orient, another picture of the East is formed: that of the land of irrational, violent barbarians. The basic theme of conflict is central to Labaki's film,

it both begins and ends with the image of a graveyard where too many villagers have been buried as a result of mindless armed confrontations (see image 6). The possibility of new conflict is omnipresent and always brimming beneath the surface, as if it was a natural feature of the village. In media interviews, Labaki states that her intention was to create a universal message of the absurdity of violence: "This conflict does not only happen in Lebanon. I see it everywhere. I can be in Paris in the Metro and see how people

are scared of each other" (Hornaday, 2012). Yet, grounding the film as opposing camps of Muslim and Christian aligns with an Orientalist premise that considers Islamic and Christian civilizations distinct and incompatible. According to Edward Said, Islam was a "lasting trauma" for Europeans, and a shortcoming of Labaki's movie is that it does not inspire much hope for this trauma becoming cured (Said, 1978).

Conclusion

Although Labaki's film offers refreshing moments where women are shown to be in control in a patriarchal society, it does little to remove the objectifying gaze on women. Instead it is merely redirected on another, more narrowed group of females, in this case the Ukrainian dancers. Furthermore, if the aim of feminism is to oppose all limiting gender roles and norms, including those regulating the lives of men, Labaki does little to further this goal by offering a simplistic image of women and men fighting on opposite sides.

Thus, instead of renegotiating the concept of gaze, *Where Do We Go Now* offers an example of how deeply Labaki remains attuned to Western sensibilities of the Orient, which ultimately renders the film a rather toothless tribute to feminism. Orientalist images have been, and continue to be, a constant element in many Western works of art, as

women's oppression in "other" lands tends to flatter the West's sense of its own equalitarianism. What is peculiar about this film is that the director is Lebanese. This seems to imply that though the Arab countries achieved political independence decades ago, at the more general cultural and psychological level, Western domination ensues and is perhaps internalized to a certain degree. Just as women should critically analyze their role in cinema and in visual culture in general, Arabs should examine the way they are portrayed in works of art that originate from their own community. The first step

to challenging stereotypes is to examine images of self—this is exactly where Arab artists have such an essential role to play. In Labaki's movie, however, the Arab women might have escaped from the harem, only to be trapped in the traditional, Western image of the Orient.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Toronto film festival 2011: Where Do We Go Now? wins fans' award. (2011, September 9). *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 18, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/sep/19/toronto-film-festival-where-do-we-go-now>.
2. See awards for Where do we go now? IMDb. Retrieved December 16, 2012, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1772424/awards>.
3. See Kermode, M. (2012, June 24). Where do we go now? – review. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 12, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/jun/24/where-do-we-go-now-labaki-review>.
4. See Kamal el-Din, T. (n.d.). Orientalist imagery in the visual arts. Retrieved December 16, 2012, from http://www.google.com.lb/url?sa=t&src=js&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CDkQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Finhouse.lau.edu.lb%2Fbima%2Fpapers%2FTania_Kamal_el-Din.pdf&ei=sezNUKuEOseftAasilHQDA&usq=AFQjCNEkVP60XcUML5Xf3TAEcmYfn9Sw5A&sig2=2kblxZ7kKLICyKANRVwqgw&bvm=bv.1355325884,d.Yms.
5. See Kamal el-Din, T. (n.d.).

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