

## **Arab Film-Days: What has been possible already before the change**

With the program “Before the Storm” Goethe Institute brings independent cinema from Arab countries to Germany. At six evenings, from June 17<sup>th</sup> till 22<sup>nd</sup>, short and feature length films give an insights into the time before the “Arab Spring”. Irit Neidhardt, one of the curators of the series, spoke with Regina Peper on Hollywood on the Nile, a new generation of film-makers and the “Arab Spring”.

### **Which role do cinema and film play in the cultural life of the Arab world?**

Principally it is very similar to Europe, if possible, people go to multiplex theatres, buy popcorn and Cola and watch the latest Hollywood productions. Due to the scarcity of screens and sometimes relatively high ticket prices many people watch the films on DVDs which, thanks to piracy, are affordable to most of the people.

Anything else depends on the particular country: The film industries in the individual Arab countries differ much more than the European industries, for example. Though slightly reduced, one can say that only Egypt has an own film-industry. All other countries produce with the support of European film funding. In North Africa and Syria rudiments of public film-funding can still be traced. Nearly nothing is left though from the departure after the decolonization, the cinéclub-movement and the manifestos which rooted in the debates on the Third Cinema. This departure took place at the time when West-Germany re-introduced public film funding which today guarantees financing of the lion's share of productions. The slogan ‘Culture as Weapon’, which was directed against heteronomy is forgotten. Culturally the Arab states disarmed. As far as cinema is concerned Hollywood plays the lead role.

### **What kind of films will be shown in Arsenal?**

In Arsenal a selection of short films from the ‘Arab Shorts’ program of Goethe Institute will be shown. Films which can be much freer and more experimental than feature length works for the big screen because of the conditions of their production.

Moreover there are four evenings with screenings of independent Egyptian films which were discussed in the film scene and among intellectuals before the change because they disobeyed official as well as market demands of film production. They did so by not asking for permits of the censorship, the syndicate or the police, by developing the stories in workshops or by doing more or less without the all dominating stars. It is the works by Ibrahim El Batout and by Ahmad Abdalla who both completed two films for theatrical release which are independent in this sense. The continuity, the fact that they did it again, proved that alternatives are possible.

### **What is the relation between the films and the dramatic change that we experience in the Arab world?**

All the films of the program were produced before the change. They reflect debates and movements in their countries of production and show that no regime manages to close free spaces hermetically. As far as Egypt is concerned Mubarak has reigned with the help of emergency laws for 28 years, but only in the last seven to five years he tightening up laws massively. Immediately the first critics started calling the system dictatorial and increased political organization of the civil society. With respect to film this was expressed by the evolvment of a new generation of independent creatives who could represent a broader part of society than the generation before due to new technologies and reduced production costs. This means that parts of the society always defended spaces of freedom vehemently and directly opposed against political constrictions, always by the means of their field of activity, by striking, by petitions to the high constitutional court, by demonstrations or by arts and culture. At screenings at Arsenal this time “Before the Storm” will be reflected with the directors, using the example of their films.

**What are the challenges the filmmakers, El Batout and Abdalla, face in the actual situation?**

I think that everybody who has created or defended free spaces in the past years, is confronted with the challenge to deal with the incredible speed of the change and simultaneously identify where s/he can relax. They did a lot of groundwork. They are the ones with the routine and whose experience should be of central interest now. At the same time their position changed completely. In the years of increasing constrictions they had developed this enormous potency that helped to shift the power relations. The responsibility resulting in this has to be realized, digested and thought through. There is a lack of time for this though because of the elections that are called already for September and everyday life that is turned head over heels.

Producer Mohammed Hefzy said in a press release for the documentary-compilation 'Tahrir Square', that it was natural that the world is looking at Egypt now. Hence he had produced this film that shows the revolution from the perspective of its makers and through nobody else's perspective. Saying this he touches a very important point, namely the instrumentalization of the revolution or of the - very heterogeneous - movement, which interestingly is never called Intifada, and the power of the images. To keep the power of definition and to shape the future self-determinedly is a huge challenge.

**And how can international organizations of cultural mediation join this period of transition?**

I find the Tahrir-Lounge at the Goethe Institute in Cairo a very good way of supporting. The institute is operating in town since decades but it is not its change or revolution. To offer a room where people can meet and discuss I regard as attentive.

In the context of the role of international organizations of cultural mediation I think of Palestine, the euphoria of the mid 1990s and the misery we face today. The first Intifada was a struggle for self-determination as the revolt on Tahrir Square was. It addressed not only the occupation but also the PLO leadership in Tunis which ruled its people in Palestine

without any connection to the situation on the ground. The Palestinian delegation at the official peace negotiations which began in Madrid in 1991 consisted of representatives of the Intifada. They did not know that in parallel secret negotiation took place in Oslo, which finally ended in the installation of the Palestinian Authority. In order to support the so introduced democracy – a notion that was not defined – institutions of the donor states taught various classes in democracy. It seems as if the strong democratic self-organization that the population had set up over the previous years became meaningless as soon as official structures existed.

The international institutions and NGOs stayed in the country and more and more fascinating projects are coming along. The Palestinian site talks about an NGOization of the society and the respective privatization of national interests. This leads to increasing resentment and resistance. The two best known projects that are supported by international institutions, the Freedom Theatre and the Cinema Jenin were already attacked by Molotov Cocktails. Juliano Mer Khamis from the Freedom Theatre was assassinated in front of his theatre in April this year, after receiving repeated death threats – or warnings. The Guest House of Cinema Jenin currently disadvises internationals to visit, graffiti in town demand 'internationals out'. This is a very worrying development, which was predictable though. If it would be possible prevent this for Egypt, much would be gained.