(In)correct Narratives
of the Middle East Cinema

Middle Eastern cinema, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse history, is an extremely intriguing and multifaceted area of research. This specific region is a meeting place of a variety of traditions, cultures, and religions, which is reflected in filmmaking. In recent decades, Middle Eastern cinema has experienced dynamic development, gaining international recognition, and becoming a recognizable player in the global film market.

With this issue of "Images", both the authors and the editors were dedicated to analyzing and interpreting films and digital audiovisual forms from the Middle East: those that reflect the current social, political, and cultural reality of the region, as well as those that seek the historical origins of the phenomena which we are currently observing. The first part contains articles by scholars representing different branches of film and media studies, who have undertaken the analysis of Middle Eastern cinema and digital media from multiple perspectives. The texts compiled in this volume provide an interesting look at how filmmakers from the Middle East region use these media to explore significant existential, social and political themes, while creating narratives that cross cultural and geographical boundaries.

The issue opens with an article by independent Israeli researcher Yael Ben-Zvi Morad, who focuses on the problem of the identity of Palestinian cinema, a topic repeatedly addressed by various researchers. Ben-Zvi Morad proposes to update the periodization of Palestinian cinema with another, the fifth period in the history of its development, which she believes begins around 2010. In her cross-sectional text, the researcher traces the narrative structures in Palestinian films, which are deeply rooted and have been recurring for several decades, testifying to the subordination of the art of film to the national cause. According to Morad, national identity and the desire to preserve it is sometimes an implicit theme in Palestinian films through adopting a number of symbolic narrative figures, such as metaphors, synecdoches and metonymies. At the same time, the sophisticated art form of the productions

she describes makes it difficult to consider them propaganda works or even just overtly political. The article ends with a rather bitter statement about the limited power of cinema's influence in such a difficult socio-political context as present-day Israel.

"Is social criticism even possible in Israel today?" wonders Ido Rosen, on the other hand, who in his text explores the sources of the conservatism of contemporary Israeli Internet comedy, and more broadly, of youth pop culture in general. Although the author finds some notable exceptions, he considers the creators' subservience to the dominant, nationalist political discourse in Israel to be a somewhat common rule. According to Rosen, the blunting of the critical and satirical blade in new-media comedic (but not only) productions stems from conformism and unwillingness to oppose the 'implied optimism' that could subject the artists to rejection by mainstream domestic audiences. "It appears", the researcher writes, "that most artists who risk *cancelation* are those who are perceived as not patriotic or nationalistic enough".

A completely different angle is offered by Andrzej Szpulak's essay devoted entirely to only one film – *The Wind Will Carry Us* by Abbas Kiarostami. Through careful reading of the film's symbolic signifiers, the author interprets Kiarostami's work not as an expression of universalism and humanism (as has been done frequently), but as a medium of metaphysical exploration. Agreeing on the fundamental matters with Gayatri Devi, who read the film as the main character's spiritual journey from death to life, Szpulak interprets the work through the prism of the biblical tradition and the way of depicting supernatural reality through intense sensory experiences, which is present both in the Bible and in classical Eastern poems. According to the author, the symbolic locations in the film *The Wind Will Carry Us* are witnesses to the key events of the protagonist's inner transformation, moving from lifelessness, through sacrifice to rebirth, thus fulfilling the hallmarks of a mythological structure in a form of a biblical story of salvation.

The article *'A Voice for Iran' – Animation as a Form of Protest. Iranian Revolution 'Woman, Life, Freedom'* by Agnieszka Dytman-Stasienko provides an overview of the online graphic and animation work generated after the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in 2022. The death of a young girl, tortured and murdered in a police station, sparked outrage in Iranian society, unleashed mass protests for women's rights on an unprecedented scale, and founded the leading iconographic elements symbolizing this mass uprising, such as women's long hair, often cascading down their backs, let loose in the wind or, on the contrary – publicly cut short. Dytman-Stasienko discusses two collections assembling images and animations that have appeared online as a protest and as a proclamation to international public opinion. One of them is the Instagram collection Onimation, whose creator is an Iranian-British artist, Mehran Sanei. The second one is Archive of Defiance, a website containing works by various authors, often anonymous, previously posted on social media. The collection of this digital archive consists

of works from the first 100 days of the protests. They include works by both Iranians and non-Iranians who supported the Iranian struggle against the regime, and are arranged based on several categories: animation, music, dance, paintings (drawings, posters, photos), slogans and, finally, performance. The author of the article particularly emphasizes the power of the socio-political impact of animation, which by virtue of its aesthetics has the ability to easily hit the viewer, evoke strong emotions and create universal, transnational symbols and messages.

A sample of the works from the Iranian 'Woman, Life, Freedom!' movement is also presented to the readers of "Images". The gallery section in this issue features a unique artist – Yasi Mosadeq, whose works we have the pleasure of showcasing. Mosadeq creates graphics that support the women's protest movement in Iran, employing clear and strongly persuasive symbols associated with female figures.

The article written by Ewa Linek examines the works of the promising young Saudi director Meshal Al Jaser, who in his films tackles the same problem of oppression and disempowerment of women in his own country. The author describes and analyzes two of Al Jaser's short features – *Is Sumiyati Going to Hell?* (2016) and *Can I Go Out?* (2017), whose storylines focus on the characters of young women, and indeed on the limitations they encounter on a daily basis. Both films were originally uploaded to YouTube, as in the case of Saudi Arabia this is the most efficient and most convenient way of film distribution. The second film 'consists of five episodes, and in each of them the female protagonist must overcome a specific obstacle to achieve her goal of getting out of the house for a few hours. Each episode simultaneously reflects a particular problem that the oppressive culture poses to women in Saudi Arabia. It also reveals the deeply rooted relationships in Middle Eastern culture between members of an average Saudi family'. According to Linek, social criticism becomes apparent in Al Yaser's films not only through cinematic plots but also through the filmmaker's skillful use of the aesthetics of the grotesque. And through that lens he achieves his intended goal – that is, he makes 'what is perceived as the norm and obviousness in his native culture (…) becomes caricatured, unbearable and difficult to accept'.

The core part of the volume is supplemented by Grzegorz Fortuna Jr's article *The Cinema of the Middle East on Polish Screens*, in which the author compiles and interprets data on the distribution of Middle Eastern films in Poland in the 21st century. The picture of the presence of this cinema on our screens that emerges from the statistics collected by Fortuna is, unfortunately, rather bleak. Only a handful of Middle Eastern films have managed to garner audiences of several thousand in recent years, and, surprisingly, the technological changes associated with the digitization of the film distribution market have not improved this situation. As Fortuna states, 'Despite eleven times wider distribution, *The Salesman* gathered not eleven but twice as many viewers as *The Color of Paradise* or *Kandahar*. *The Wild Pear Tree* gathered

only a few hundred more viewers than Ceylan's early films, which were still distributed on celluloid'. Overall, two national filmographies – Iranian and Israeli – turn out to be the most popular in Poland, which is rather unsurprising, although it should be noted that the indicators proving this thesis concern only theatre distribution.

In the varia section, readers will find texts devoted to the relationship between film and literature, both in terms of adaptations per se and broader literary connections. Jakub Rawski compares film adaptations of *Salem's Lot*, directed by Tobe Hooper (1979) and Mikael Solomon (2004). The author, deeply rooted in the tradition of popular culture semiotics (Eco, Latman), makes it clear that the films in question should not be treated in the category of a postmodern game with the viewer. He focuses on comparing individual aspects of the adaptations, such as characters, or space, and also relates the vampiric themes present in the films to their image established in culture. In a similar tone, Luchino Visconti's literary inspirations are the subject of the text by Jędrzej Sławnikowski. Juxtaposing the presentation of the fate of families, specific characters and considering the impact of historical events in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and Luchino Visconti's *The Damned*, Sławnikowski identifies a key opposition: decline is internal in the Buddenbrooks family and external in that of the von Essenbecks in the latter film. In addition, the author draws attention to literary parallels with Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. However, it is Mann's work that is perceived as the most important point of reference in Visconti's films. Also referring to literary inspirations is Marcin Maron's analysis of *The Main Thing Is to Love* by Andrzej Żuławski, which focuses on the motifs of love and metaphysical evil. According to the author, Żuławski portrays love as a force of moral transformation, while at the same time depicting it as an insatiable aspiration resulting from human imperfection. The film – like Dostoevsky's novels – explores the issue of the dualism of human nature, revealed in the face of the experience of love. Maron also discusses numerous intertextual references, emphasizing the cinephile foundations of Żuławski's work.

In the varia segment, we also publish texts by Iwona Morozow and Katarzyna Garwol, who choose as the subject of their research the topic of new media and cultural changes brought about by platforms, different ones for both authors. Morozow uses the methodology of in-depth interviews with people from the film industry to analyze the impact of the most prominent streaming services (HBO Max and Netflix) on global, as well as local, changes in the film production process. She describes the complex interrelationships of cooperation between independent filmmakers or companies and large production corporations, while pointing out the aspect of the necessity to maintain a balance between commercialization and the quality and cultural significance of the content produced. Garwol, meanwhile, focuses on issues related

to the functioning of visual artists on the Instagram platform, also taking into account the issue of art monetization. She examines the types of posts and the number of people observing individual accounts, from Poland and worldwide, to provide an overview of the marketing models and creative strategies used in the successful management of social media profiles. On the one hand, these allow the account owner to build a relationship with their audience and present their art, and on the other, to sell it as well. Marek Hendrykowski's essay *Morphology of Plagiarism* draws attention to the dangers of the development of new technologies. Discussing the problem of plagiarism in a broad cultural, scientific, and artistic context, the author argues that the proper object of plagiarism are the merits and not the substance of the plagiarized text. Hendrykowski notes, among other things, the importance of monitoring and responding to cases of plagiarism in the age of the expansion of artificial intelligence.

***

The diversity of the Middle East is beautifully captured by the photographs from various parts of Kurdistan, featured in the *Shadow of Kurdistan* series, which complement this issue of "Images". The photographs by Murat Nayar depict the everyday lives of people in a region where the territories of Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq intersect. For Murat, who was forbidden to speak his native language in his youth, photography became the key to discovering his roots – as the artist himself writes.

We sincerely hope that the texts collected here will not only provide inspiration, but also prompt in-depth reflections on the complexity and dynamics of contemporary media in the Middle East region. We are confident that these texts will become a valuable source of knowledge and a catalyst to further research both for academics and all who are fascinated by this diverse and dynamically developing part of the world.

Stanisław Bitka*, Adam Domalewski**,
Maciej Pietrzak***, Adrianna Woroch****

* Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3824-310X.
** Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4313-5146.

*** Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7301-425X.
**** Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4237-3756.