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Ajami

Abstract

This is a review of *Ajami* (2009).

Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani both co-wrote and co-directed *Ajami*, Israel's submission to this year's Best Foreign Film category at the Oscars. Their film is set in present-day Ajami, a crime-ridden, half-demolished and multi-ethnic neighborhood in the old Arabic city of Jaffa. Today, Jaffa is part of the Tel Aviv municipality: it was annexed by the Israeli state in the 1950s. At that time, in an effort to 'gentrify' Ajami in the modern style of Tel Aviv, Israeli bulldozers began demolishing its old infrastructure. There was a public outcry because Ajami's cultural heritage was threatened. The demolition ceased, but very little, if any, reconstruction followed. The Ajami neighborhood is the socio-economic wasteland that remains. Copti and Shani's film follows its inhabitants as this dehumanizing environment takes its toll on their lives.

Ajami is a tapestry narrative that follows the lives of five different people through five respective "chapters," weaving each of these stories into the tragedy that unveils in the film's final scenes. It first follows Omar, the powerless 19-year-old 'head' of a Muslim Arab family, as he tries to negotiate a blood feud that has been hoisted upon his family because of his uncle's involvement in a gang shooting. Chapter two follows an illegal Palestinian boy named Malek as he tries to earn enough money to pay for his mother's life-saving surgery. Both Omar and Malek are forced to rely upon the patronage of a local Christian Arab businessman, Abu Elias. Binj (played by Copti) is a Christian Arab that also works for Elias. The third chapter of the film follows Binj as he struggles to overcome his Arab-past and

assimilate into his Jewish girlfriend's life in Tel Aviv. Chapter four follows Dando, an Israeli cop, who patrols the hostile streets of Ajami, looking for his suspiciously disappeared brother. All these narratives come together in chapter five through the eyes of Nasri as he narrates his older brother Omar's involvement in a drug-deal gone wrong.

Those unfamiliar with Middle Eastern culture need to pay close attention to subtle cues within the film in order to appreciate its understated commentary on social identity and religious difference. The strength of the film is that it leaves religious themes in the background, while still foregrounding the way that they intertwine with more concrete issues such as drugs, crime, gangs, family ties, discotheques, hospital bills and illicit relationships. However, in order to notice these dynamics, one must pay attention to background cues in the setting: a crucifix hanging from a rear-view mirror, a religious icon on an apartment wall, the way that outsiders react to spoken Arabic or Hebrew, the presence of the hijab, etc. Paying attention to these cues will help the viewer understand the way that religious identities are playing into the narrative tensions that Copti and Shani foreground through personal relationships.

Copti and Shani's talent for understatement makes the film an effective protest against the way that religious identity tends to over-simplify the complexity of life in Ajami. It is exactly this understatement that brings the senselessness of religious and ethnic violence into focus. The characters are not displayed as

Muslims, Christians, or Jews; they are rather presented as friends, lovers, and even enemies: always as individuals that constantly transgress simplistic categories. Within this multi-dimensional presentation, Copti and Shani unveil the tragic way that religious categories tend to reappear, most often violently, as reiterations of similarity where difference tends to prevail.

Ajami could thus be viewed as a demonstration against the way that religious identity plays into the *oversimplification* of socio-economic and cultural conflict. Perhaps one of the film's central symbols is shown in a scene where Omar and Nasri go to Ajami's outskirts in order to learn how to shoot a gun. Their target-range is perhaps the most distinctive landmark of present-day Ajami: a massive pile of refuse that stands between the city and the sea. During the Israeli demolitions, refuse was piled on Ajami's shores and never removed. Today it stands at 20 meters high and blocks residents' view of the Mediterranean. *Ajami* is a film about living at the borders of identity in a complex culture and the peril that accompanies the hope for new vistas.