

Introduction

IN OCTOBER 2001, THE *Los Angeles Times* ran an article entitled “Death to U.S., but Not Films.” The journalists were puzzled by a paradox: while the US as a nation was largely unpopular in the Muslim world due to its foreign policy choices and military interventions, American films were loved by audiences in the region. In “societies where ‘Death to America’ is being chanted in the streets,” they explained, people flocked to *Titanic* (1997) and *The Fast and the Furious* (2001). The article resolved the conundrum by attributing Hollywood’s success to the myth-like universality of its films and their high production value, an argument traditionally developed by film historians. While the article did justice to the political value films can acquire, it failed to take into account the fact that American films had been present—and popular—in the Middle East long before US involvement in the region began. The journalists’ surprise when noting that Middle Eastern people liked US films—as many other people around the world do—can also be linked to a general misconception equating the Arab world with antagonism towards everything American, a misconception partly fed by Hollywood itself in numerous “Arab-as-Enemy movies” and in “Kill-’em-all films,” such as *True Lies* (1994) and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) (Shaheen 2008, xix). This book proposes to dispel this vision by bringing to light the very concrete relations, oppositions, and networks that have in fact intimately linked Hollywood to film professionals, state officials, and audiences in North Africa and the Middle East over the past century. Such a work of de-essentializing opens up access to the very complexity of these ties and provides lessons about transnational film exchanges.

While the press often refers to the region as the “Muslim world” and “the Arab world,” these generic terms downplay the real-life intricacies

of an area comprising twenty-two Arab states, as well as non-Arab-states, each with its own political agenda (Shaheen 2009, 8). Indeed, in this book, not all the spectators under scrutiny will be Muslim, and not all the countries Arab. This study will concentrate on the presence and circulation of US films in the North Africa and Middle East region and cover nineteen countries in three geographical areas: North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia), the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestinian Authority), and the Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen). Cinema was introduced in North Africa and in the Middle East at the same time as in the rest of the world. The French Lumière operators visited Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt in 1896, both recording and showing film scenes (Armes 2006, 14; Shafik 2007, 10; Ginsberg and Lippard 2010, xxi). The first full-time movie theaters were opened in 1900 in Egypt and Palestine; 1908 in Algeria, Persia (present-day Iran), and Tunisia; 1909 in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and Lebanon; 1910 in Syria; 1937 in Manama (Bahrain); and 1954 in Kuwait. By the early 1950s, cinema had spread all over the region, and countries such as Egypt and Iran had flourishing film industries. The North Africa and Middle East region has thus been present on the film map for more than a century now. From the early years of cinema, US films were largely present in the area. In 1926, they held 85% of the market share in the French colonies of the Maghreb, 55% of the Egyptian market, 40% of the Persian market, and 70% of the Syrian market. In 1930, they held 70% of the Palestinian market. In Iraq, 90% of films shown were American in 1937 (*Film Daily Year Book*, 1927, 1931, 1938). North African and Middle Eastern spectators' taste for Hollywood fare is thus not a novel phenomenon but has deep historical roots.

The encounter between US films and the Middle Eastern and North African audiences has been made possible through the agency of US, French, and local distributors, as well as state officials and informal players. Their strategies, collaborations, and confrontations are the topic of this book. The circulation of US films has also largely been shaped by the region's political history. The first US reels entered an area under European domination. European colonizers marked North Africa and the Middle East politically, socially, and geographically. Sealing the unraveling of the Ottoman Empire, the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, reshaped country boundaries as two colonial empires were carved. France took control of Lebanon and Syria. Great Britain took control of Mesopotamia, Palestine, Transjordan, and Egypt (Thiollet 2009, 53). The British

ruler had also established an informal protectorate on the Trucial States in the Persian Gulf in the 1820s and was an ally to the Saudi Arabian kingdom founded in 1927 (Piquet 2013, 39; Cloarec and Laurens 2007, 58–59). The Maghreb was dominated by France. Algeria officially became part of France in 1848 and was divided into three *départements*. Tunisia became a French protectorate in 1881 and Morocco in 1912 (Katan Bensamoun 2007, 379–81). Two other European powers held territories in the region: Italy in Libya and Spain in Northern Morocco. While, in cinematic terms, the region was characterized by a variety of audiences, accentuated by the social divisions imposed by the colonial order, US film distributors routinely wooed this fragmented audience and found market conditions very favorable.

After World War II, however, the political context radically changed. Nationalist movements gained strength and led their country to independence. Lebanon and Syria obtained independence in 1946, Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, and Algeria in 1962, after a bloody eight-year war. In the Middle East, countries whose independence from British rule had been officialized before World War II (Iraq in 1932, Egypt in 1937) experienced political turmoil as nationalist coups deposed British-supported monarchies: the Egyptian revolution of 1952, which brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, and the 14 July Revolution of 1958 in Iraq. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, leading to a protracted and violent political conflict with its Arab neighbors, strongly destabilized regional relations. In the context of the Cold War, anti-Western regimes allied with the USSR: Iraq after the 1968 Ba’athist coup, Libya after Muammar Gaddafi took power in 1969, and Syria after Hafez al-Assad’s coup in 1971. Lebanon bore the brunt both of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War, finding itself engulfed in a bloody civil war between pro-Western Christian Maronites and anti-Western Palestinian forces from 1975 to 1990. Power balance in the region was further altered by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The postwar North Africa and Middle East turned out to be a complex world for Hollywood film distributors to navigate, as countries experienced widespread political instability and US films became pawns in the larger political game of the Cold War.

While the circulation of US films was strongly destabilized by the region’s political sea change from the 1950s to the late 1970s, technological evolutions provided additional challenges from the 1980s onwards with the advent of the VCR and the consequent spread of film piracy. In the past two decades, the development of formal and informal circulation paths, from DVDs and satellite television to Internet streaming and downloading,

in fact became the major determinant of US film's presence, superseding the influence of the political context. Although the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq war and subsequent US military occupation revived anti-American feelings, US films have remained largely popular among North African and Middle Eastern audiences. Similarly, this presence and popularity does not seem to have been impacted by the major political movement of the past decade, the Arab Spring of 2011, which led to a transition toward democratic governance in Tunisia, but morphed into an Arab Winter, with the advent of civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq, and the tightening of state control in Egypt. While, in the postwar period, regime changes had a strong impact on US films distributed in movie theaters, the recent political turmoil had little impact on films now circulating largely through a variety of formal and informal paths.

Uncovering the rich, complex, and hitherto unexplored relation between Hollywood films, its distributors, and the North African and Middle Eastern film markets since the 1910s required gathering primary sources spanning over a century. For this project clearly focused on Hollywood distribution companies and their films, I first turned to US sources. The press articles gathered by the archivists of the Margaret Herrick library in Los Angeles provided information as far back as the 1930s for certain areas. Press clippings from the *Motion Picture Herald*, *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter* conveyed how the North African and Middle Eastern markets were viewed at the time by US distributors. A second major source was the US State Department archives in Washington (NARA). I had access to the communications to and from US ambassadors in the region from 1910 to 1977. Compared to the press articles, the diplomatic telegrams provided an unvarnished description of the situation. They also systematically analyzed the presence and circulation of US film both in the specific local political context and in relation to the larger US diplomatic aims. The industry perspective on the possibilities and challenges in each market was completed by a systematic reading of *Wid's Year Book* (1920–1921), the *Film Daily Year Book* (1922–1970), and the *International Motion Picture Almanac* (1964–2014). Given the colonial history of the region, French archival sources also proved invaluable for the first half of the twentieth century. I was additionally granted access to the Pathé archives in Paris, which furnished an overview of the distribution strategy of one of the earliest key players of the international film world. The French diplomatic archives in Nantes then provided a sporadic but useful depiction of cinema in Morocco, Syria, and Lebanon. Most importantly this state source was very revealing about the vision of

cinema within the colonial project, notably through the numerous censorship reports for Morocco. Finally, the French Cinémathèque library provided invaluable primary documents such as the *Middle East Motion Picture Almanac* (1947) and the *Annuaire du cinéma pour le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord* (1952).

The late 1970s and 1980s proved to be the most difficult period to document. However, I could rely on Margaret Herrick library press clippings as well as volumes written by film players and researchers in North Africa and the Middle East (Cheriaa 1978; Megherbi 1985; Nouri 1986). I also uncovered a series of publications from the Centre interarabe du cinéma et de la télévision at the French National Library. These local sources brought light on the place of cinema in the struggle for independence, as well as the way US cinema and distributors were considered by local film professionals and state officials. Researching the early twenty-first century posed another challenge. Information was accessible from varied sources: the US press, notably the short-lived magazine *Variety Arabia* (2011–2012), the local papers accessible online, such as UAE's *The National*, and the EuroMed Audiovisual II 2010s *Project of Statistical Data Collection on Film and Audiovisual Markets in 9 Mediterranean Countries*. Such information was, however, often factual. Figures do not tell the entire story. I thus set out to complete those sources by interviewing distributors of US films in the area. Their routinely operating in English and French, the two languages that I speak, made the interview process easier. The book thus draws on about two dozen interviews with film professionals: North African, Middle Eastern, and US film distributors, film policy executives, and exhibitors. Veteran film distributors such as Antoine Zeind in Egypt, Mario Haddad, Sr., in Lebanon, and Najib Benkiran in Morocco provided long-term accounts of the presence and circulation of Hollywood films in their countries, as well as a healthy balance to the book's perspective.

All through the project, I also reached out to professionals and academics from North Africa and the Middle East. In collaboration with Patricia Caillé and Abdelfettah Benchenna, I created MENA Cinema, a research project with the aim of igniting new academic interest in documenting the past and current history of film industries in the region. Through international conferences, professional roundtables, and panels at international academic organizations such as the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), the MENA Cinema project created a momentum, bringing together confirmed and young academics, as well as film professionals, from all over North Africa and the Middle East, as

well as Europe and the US. As the project drew to a close, the research group HESCALE, led by Caillé and Claude Forest and hosted at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University in Paris, was created to promote research on the history, economy, and sociology of film in Africa and the Levant. Four major publications, Benchenna, Caillé, and Mingant's *La circulation des films: Afrique du Nord et Moyen-Orient* (2016), Caillé and Forest's *Regarder des films en Afrique* (2017), Forest's *Produire des films: Afriques et Moyen Orient* (2018), and Caillé and Forest's *Pratiques et usages du film en Afriques francophones: Maroc, Tchad, Togo, Tunisie* (2019), are paving the way for what we hope will be a new and dynamic research field and a place of intercultural dialogue.

Drawing mostly on Western institutional and press sources, balanced by conversations with film professionals and academics from North Africa and the Middle East, this book is an effort in multicultural media studies, a field in which “multiculturalism means seeing world history and contemporary social life from the perspective of the radical equality of peoples in status, potential, and rights” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 6). As Shohat and Stam expand, “Multiculturalism decolonized representations not only in terms of cultural artifacts—literary canons, museum exhibits, film series—but also in terms of power relations between communities” (5). This book thus offers to bring to light the multifarious relations between Hollywood and North African and Middle Eastern film professionals, foregrounding the evolution of the circulation of US films depending on local political, economic, and cultural specificities and their evolutions. It proposes a very exhaustive exploration of the complex and multiple intercultural relations at play around the circulation of Hollywood films in North Africa and the Middle East over the past century. What it does not propose, however, is a definitive story. Access to local papers as well as film and diplomatic archives in North Africa and the Middle East would—and will—offer complementary, alternative, and challenging visions. This study thus purports to be one voice in larger conversations on cinema in North Africa and the Middle East, as well as on film industry and film distribution studies

Middle Eastern film studies has been gaining momentum under the impetus of Roy Armes (2001, 2011), Josef Gugler (2011) and, more recently, Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard (2010, 2020). This book will contribute to the field by proposing an economic perspective and a regional scope. Due to the highly charged political situation in many countries of the region, academic literature has mostly focused on the political resonances of North African and Middle Eastern cinema, with

works such as Shohat's *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989) and Khatib's *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (2008) Aesthetic and political analyses have also been the heart of encyclopedic efforts, especially Leaman's *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (2001), Dönmez-Colin's *Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (2007), Ginsberg and Lippard's *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema* (2010), Gugler's *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (2011). I contend that bringing an industrial perspective in the conversation can be fruitful. Studies dedicated to the industrial issues of production, distribution, and exhibition do exist, but mostly date from the 1960s and 1970s. They were written at a time when cinema was seen as a means to develop a strong identity for newly independent nations. This activist approach can be particularly felt in Cheriaa's *Ecrans d'abondance, ou cinémas de libération en Afrique* (1978), and endured in Megherbi's *Le miroir aux alouettes: Lumière sur les ombres hollywoodiennes en Algérie et dans le monde* (1985) and Nouri's *À la recherche du cinéma irakien* (1986). Only the film industries in Iran (Issari 1989; Devictor 2004; Sadr 2006; Naficy 2011–2012) and, to a lesser extent, Morocco (Jaidi 1995; Dwyer 2004; Carter 2009) have continued to be the object of industry-centered documented research. For other countries, I gathered information in sporadic encyclopedic efforts (Sadoul 1966; Kamalipour and Mowlana 1994) and in French academic Yves Thoraval's almost single-handed effort to document this industrial history (Thoraval 1996, 2000, 2003). This political economy approach places my work in line with that of a new generation of scholars such as Morgan Corriou and Kaveh Askari. Studying the industrial issue of distribution additionally invites a shift away from traditional national case studies and the adoption a regional perspective. While this book will examine national specificities, it will mostly be exploring the dynamic exchanges, collaborations, and competitions at play between the different film industries and markets. Through the history of the circulation of Hollywood films in North Africa and the Middle East, I thus also propose a history of the regional film market, which is another way of writing the history of cinema in North Africa and the Middle East.

Theoretically, the book is firmly grounded in the US tradition of film industry studies. Historical accounts developed from the 1980s onwards, such as Balio's 1985 *The American Film Industry* and Kerr's 1986 *The Hollywood Film Industry*, provided a useful framework to think Hollywood major distributors as players with their own traditional practices and helped in considering how these practices were applied to North

Africa and the Middle East over time. The political economy approach developed notably by Wasko was also a strong inspiration to conceptualize issues of balance and asymmetry of power. The book follows the tradition of giving prominence to the circulation of films through the Hollywood majors, since they have the most visible archival presence and their strategies can be traced over time, but it does refer to independent companies each time information was available. The book is not, however, simply about distribution by these companies, but about the circulation of US films. Lobato's *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, with its exploration of "alternative distribution networks" and "issues of access and agency" (Perren 2013, 168) has indeed been a strong influence. The story of film circulation in North Africa and the Middle East is as much a story of informal, secondhand, and alternative circulation as a story of official distribution. The shift in focus from distribution to circulation led to foregrounding the role of individual agents. I concur with Brannon Donoghue's assessment of "how invisible most of the international mid-level management and practices are to the academic community and general public" (2017, 11). This focus on a midlevel "view of industry operation" and "agency within industry operations" put this study in resonance with Havens, Lotz, and Timic's (2009, 246) call for the development of critical media industry studies.

This book aims to contribute more specifically to the field of distribution studies, both through its ambitious methodological approach and its international scope. In "Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies," Alisa Perren identifies four different "theoretical and methodological frameworks" used by scholars studying film distribution (Perren 2013, 166). A top-down political-economic approach scrutinizes the major media conglomerates and explores issues of corporate power. Cultural studies scholars, on the other hand, have developed a bottom-up approach "considering the cultural dimensions of distribution decisions" (166). Global media studies scholars have studied content flows over "local, regional, and global distribution networks" (166). Finally, media historians have studied nonprofit institution and organization participation in distribution processes. In this volume, I put all these different approaches to task. The perspective alternates from a top-down analysis of US distributor's strategies (chapter 1) to a bottom-up approach focusing on intercultural collaboration with local film players, as well as reception by varied audiences across the region (chapter 2). It often interrogates the role of states (chapter 3) and occasionally nonprofit associations (chapter 6) in shaping the paths of film

circulation. The flows at the heart of the book are sometimes presented within national case studies (part 3) but, in the end, they always draw a larger portrait, uncovering changing regional dynamics (chapter 4), and unfolding global distribution networks that encompass not only North America, North Africa, and the Middle East, but also Europe and India. The book thus demonstrates how these theoretical approaches hitherto considered as separate can in fact dialogue and merge, providing a rich and all-encompassing framework.

The book contributes to distribution studies not only by this all-encompassing theoretical framework but also by its international scope, shifting away from a traditional North America-centered perspective to favor transnational phenomena. While Miller, Govil, McMurria, and Maxwell's political economy approach in *Global Hollywood* (2001) was a useful background to conceptualizing relations that have often been asymmetrical, I found more dynamic accounts in the small but strong literature dealing with the history of the international distribution of American films. Volumes dedicated to Canada (Jarvie 1992), Europe (Guback 1969; Ulf-Møller 2001; Trumpbour 2002), Latin America (De Usabel 1982), and the Motion Picture Export Association (Segrave 1997), although focusing on Hollywood distributors, also brought to light their everyday relations, negotiations, and confrontations with non-US state and film players. The dynamic exchanges between US and non-US players, the interactions between local, regional, and international are also at the heart of two books that take a more global approach. In her 1985 study *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934*, Kristin Thompson identifies World War I as the turning point inaugurating the domination of Hollywood distribution networks worldwide. In *Hollywood à la conquête du monde* (Mingant 2010), I identified the economic and cultural strategies developed by Hollywood majors between the mid-1960s and early 2000s, and traced the origins of current global practices. Both books, however, made only passing allusions to North Africa and the Middle East, leaving it largely out of the US film distribution map. Selecting North Africa and the Middle East as the geographical scope for a study on the international distribution of Hollywood film could seem counterintuitive. News headlines these days focus on China and, to a lesser extent, India, while the North African and Middle Eastern market has always been at best peripheral (Mingant 2015b, 73). In 1965, the region represented 2.5% of foreign earnings.¹ In the late 2010s, it represented about 1.5% of global earnings. This area has consequently elicited low to no interest from US producers, distributors, and marketers,

and remains largely unknown in Hollywood (Mingant 2010, 155–56). From a distribution studies perspective, however, exploring the circulation of US films in the Middle East and North Africa proves a fruitful field and will provide at least three avenues of reflections.

First, the book documents the insertion of cinema in power struggles that mobilize political, economic, and cultural arguments. Hollywood films have found themselves used both by the French and British during the colonial era, by nationalist movements during the struggle for and accession to independence, and by Gulf countries striving to develop post-oil economies in the early twenty-first century. Secondly, the book serves as a case study of interaction between the large variety of players that influence the circulation of films, including film professionals and lobbyists, state authorities and politicians, and consumers, from the different countries in North Africa and the Middle East, but also from the US, Europe, and Asia. Finally, it draws a portrait of the film landscape, or “filmscape,” in which spectators from North Africa and the Middle East live their lives. Exchanges with Europe, especially France and Great Britain, and the US, should not obscure the rich exchanges with India—the Middle East has historically stood as a crossroads between East and West—as well as the century-old film history of the region—and especially in Egypt. By being attentive to the presence of Bollywood films, but also to the regional circulation of Egyptian films and, more recently, Syrian television series, the book aims at enlightening the multitude of influences, contacts, and exchanges that intersect in North Africa and the Middle East and provide a reflection on the filmscape US films are part of and contribute to. Examining such interactions is particularly vital at a time in which the film world involves connected agents that participate in formal and informal circulation all around the globe. Hollywood films have circulated in North Africa and the Middle East since the early twentieth century; they have been at the heart of heated political battles and have been handled by skilled US and local distributors who extended their reach over the whole region, and they have long inhabited the hearts of spectators who also enjoy Egyptian and Indian films. That early twenty-first century spectators in the Middle East should have flocked to *Titanic* and *The Fast and the Furious*, despite the context of contested US foreign policy, ultimately comes not as a surprise but as a testimony to a hundred years of common history between Hollywood and the North Africa and Middle East region.

The first part of the book traces the history of the circulation of US films from the early twentieth century to the early 1950s. Chapter

1 investigates the role played by French distributors in first introducing US films to North Africa and the Middle East, and the way they were superseded by Hollywood distributors in the 1920s; it also provides a history of the early exhibition sector in the region from the 1910s to the 1940s. Covering the first half of the twentieth century, chapter 2 offers unique insight into the ways language, social classes, and gender shaped spectatorship; it argues that two film cultures coexisted at the time: the *Gone with the Wind* culture and the cowboy culture. The exploration of this period is completed by chapter 3, which posits films as political objects used by the European colonizers, especially the French, to further their own ideological agendas.

Part 2 documents the slow collapse of the US companies' distribution system in North Africa and the Middle East faced with two successive challenges: the political sea change in the newly independent countries and the spread of VCR technology. Chapter 4 covers a period from the 1950s to the 1970s, a time when Hollywood films became a pawn in the move to decolonize the newly independent countries' economy and culture; it analyzes the way the Hollywood major's distribution structure, carefully built in the colonial era, started to unravel. Chapter 5 posits the 1980s as a turning point, as the introduction of new technologies and the subsequent development of piracy contributed to the decline of the film market in North Africa and the Middle East, and the final withdrawal of Hollywood companies from direct distribution, thus inaugurating the indirect distribution model still in effect today.

Part 3 maps the strong presence of US films in North Africa and the Middle East in the digital era. It provides a series of descriptive snapshots of the market in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. By focusing on countries closed to Hollywood films, such as Syria, Iran, or Iraq, chapter 6 discusses the differences between commercial distribution and unofficial circulation; it also foregrounds the efforts of individual entrepreneurs trying to revive the exhibition market in difficult political contexts. Chapter 7 is dedicated to North Africa and explores the complex relation between a derelict film sector and a flourishing informal market, offering reflections on the ensuing film culture. Chapter 8 follows the recent evolution of three historically flourishing markets—Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon—as they reach a state of maturity. Finally, chapter 9 offers a unique view into the future by examining the birth of the Gulf market in the early twenty-first century, as it positions to become a key market for Hollywood and change the cinematic center of gravity of the region.