

# Nadine labaki and lebanese cinema essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Lebanon has always been a land of beauty, of struggle and of people fighting for their land. The Lebanese cinema plays a dominant role nowadays and is taking Lebanon to a whole new level internally and externally. The Lebanese cinema was for a long time the only other cinema in the Arab World, after the Egyptian cinema that could be counted as a national cinema. It has been in existence since the 1920's and has an archive of over 500 films.

Through a close critical reading of the films, Lina Khatib argues in her book about the history of Lebanese cinema, that while some may regard cinema as a projection of national identity, whether real or imagined, Lebanese films are perhaps exceptional in that they reject the notion of there being any such thing as national identity to start with. " Though it still has a long way to go, Lebanese cinema is heading towards maturity," says Khatib. " It is starting to gain momentum and this is something to be proud of. Lebanese cinema is starting to have a real presence on the international film scene.

And credit is due to the filmmakers themselves. They are planting the seeds of what will become a cinema industry in the future. " Much of modern Lebanese cinema is composed of films depicting war and religious turmoil. The contributions of filmmaker and actress Nadine Labaki as a flashing example nowadays, have thus proven to be a unique addition to the Lebanese cinematic canon. In this paper I will examine the first roots of the history of Lebanese cinema till the arrival of the new modern era, highlighting the achievements of the famous filmmakers of each era dwelling specifically on Nadine Labaki's work.

History of Lebanese Cinema The first silent Lebanese movie saw the light between 1929 and 1930. It was directed by Jordano Pidutti, a 24-year-old Italian cinematographer who had moved to Beirut. The movie, Moughamarat Elias Mabrouk (The Adventures of Elias Mabrouk\*) — filmed in one of the Sursock palaces, a Raouche coffee shop and some alleys of Beirut — was such a success when screened at the Empire movie theater that a sequel produced by Rachid Ali Chaabane, Moughamarat Abu Abed (The Adventures of Abu Abed), was later made. However, the glory was short lived.

Pidutti, whose work had so far revolved around the theme of immigration, was forced to stop filmmaking due to a lack of financing. He ended up filming weddings and current events with the help of a photographer, Georges Costi. This was the first birth of the Lebanese cinema, being also the taste of the successes and failures, turmoil and long silences to come in. In 1933, Lummar Film, founded by Herta Gargour, produced the first talking Lebanese movie, subtitled in French and directed by Julio de Luca and Karam Boustany, Bayn Hayakel Baalbek (In the Ruins of Baalbek).

After the independence Lebanon gained from France, all the filmmakers started implementing local themes, especially rural life and folklore. During the post-independence period, Lebanon had faced an economic increase that made its capital, Beirut, the financial center of the Eastern Mediterranean. Lebanon's economic success, along with the presence of 38 banks and its open multicultural and liberal society, made the country an alternative production choice to Egypt, which was at the time the main location for shooting any production in the Arab World.

Additionally, Lebanon had the region's best technical facilities for film production. For the first half of the twentieth century, Lebanese cinema was very closely associated with Egyptian cinema, exporting numerous Lebanese actors and actresses. Once again condemned, Lebanese cinema was eclipsed during the sixties by its giant Egyptian counterpart. However, things would change as Egypt was drained of its movie directors and its intellectuals during President Abdel Nasser's regime, which prohibited all forms of freedom on its soil and nationalized the film industry in 1963.

Egyptian filmmaking in Lebanon reached its peak during that period, taking full advantage of the beauty of Lebanese landscapes and covering all the film industry in Lebanon. It was highly successful and studios started popping up all over the country. Beirut became the new capital of film distribution, with 7 big American companies and 41 independent offices, and experienced what is widely regarded as the Golden Age of Lebanese Cinema. Lebanon was also a filming location for international productions.

However, there unfortunate by product of all these successful Egyptian and Western productions in Lebanon, was that they didn't allow Lebanese cinema -which was still searching for its identity- to develop. Only the movies of the Rahbani brothers, which were adapted for the silver screen by the Egyptians Youssef Chahine for *Biya Al Khawatem* (The Ring Seller) and Henri Barakat for *Safar Barlak* and *Bint El Hares* (The Watchman's Daughter), featuring the legendary Fairuz, served to restore the reputation of Lebanese cinema.

The Rahbani films were mainly centered around nostalgic themes of life in Mount Lebanon villages. This period marks the end of an era, the end of the

golden age of Lebanese cinema, when the country was valued for its beauty, its climate and its freedom, and when the name Lebanon was synonymous with openness. Film production slowed down as the movies produced in Lebanon were considered to be of poor quality and were no longer purchased by the Arab countries. Egyptian producers and actors gradually disappeared from the Lebanese scene after Egyptian cinema regained its stability.

Producers who had settled in Lebanon during the sixties abandoned their activities there and took up the distribution of Egyptian and western movies. As for the Lebanese, they had obviously failed to take advantage of the rise in film production during the sixties. Eventually, there was an urge to create a new kind of cinema that would be committed and intellectual, almost worthy of the French New Wave. And so the era of commercial movies came to an end and was replaced by a revolutionary new aesthetic that favored a gritty depiction of the daily, social and political realities.

Despite the war, there was the “ emergence of a new wave of Lebanese filmmakers - fostering, unusually, equal numbers of women and men”. Some of the filmmakers who emerged during this period were “ Maroun Baghdadi, Jocelyn Saab, Borhane Alaouie, Heiny Srour, Randa Shahal Sabbag” and Jean Chamoun. Films of this period were characterized by a lack of closure, reflective of the seemingly endless war at the time. Many filmmakers from this era, such as Jocelyn Saab, Jean Chamoun, Randa Chahal and Maroun Baghdadi, settled in France due to the prolonged conflict in Lebanon.

After the war, Beirut reemerged as one of the centers of mass media production in the Arab world. [43] While media production was concentrated around television, there were attempts to revive the film industry in Lebanon, especially by fresh graduates of Lebanese film schools. Financing of film production in Lebanon in this period was mainly dependent on foreign support, both European and from the Lebanese Diasporas. 2007 was an important year for Lebanese filmmaking when two female directors, Nadine Labaki and Danielle Arbid presented their films at the Cannes Film Festival.

Labaki presented *Caramel* while Arbid presented *A Lost Man*. *A Lost Man* is possibly the most sexually graphic film ever made by an Arab director. *Caramel* enjoyed an international release, including in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Argentina. Increase in film production was evident in 2011. Nadine Labaki's *Where Do We Go Now?* won the Prix Francois Chalais at Cannes. The film also won the people's choice award at the Toronto International Film Festival as well as the audience award at the Films from the South Festival in Oslo, Norway.

Sony Pictures Classics acquired the American rights to the film. The film was Lebanon's choice to compete in the Academy Award's "Best Foreign-Language Film" category. The film also won the Byarad d'Or at the Festival international du film Francophone de Namur in Belgium and the Doha Tribeca Film Festival's Best Narrative Film award. After these two booming successes Nadine Labaki made through her movies she had enormously booked a leading place in her directing career, being a top name and the talk of the town.

Background of Nadine Labaki Born on February 18th 1974 in Beirut, Nadine Labaki started up by being obtaining a degree in audiovisual studies at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, directing her graduation film, *11 Rue Pasteur*, in 1997, which won the Best Short Film Award at the Biennale of Arab Cinema at the Arab World Institute in Paris. In 1998 she attended a workshop in acting at the Cours Florent in Paris. She went on to direct advertisements and music videos for renowned Middle Eastern singers, for which she won several awards.

As a director she took part in the Cannes Film Festival Residence in order to write *Caramel*, her first feature film in 2005. In 2006 she went on to direct and play one of the lead roles in *Caramel*, which showcases a Beirut that most people are not familiar with. Rather than tackle political issues which have plagued Lebanon, she presents a comedy that deals with five Lebanese women who live in Beirut and gather at a beauty salon and deal with issues related to love, sexuality, tradition, disappointment, and everyday ups and downs.

The film premiered at the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007 and was a commercial success in the summer of that same year. It sold worldwide and collected important prizes at many festivals around the world, garnering Labaki much acclaim both as a director and actress, and putting her on *Variety's* 10 Directors to Watch List at the Sundance Film Festival. In 2008 the French Ministry of Culture and Communication gave her the insignia of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters. In 2010 she directed and starred in her second feature film, *Where Do We Go Now?*, which tackles with humor a delicate subject about a village in which church and mosque

stand side by side, and in which women try to keep their blowhard men from starting a religious war.

The film also premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in the “Un Certain Regard” category in 2011. It was an international success and won the Cadillac People’s Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival. It also collected many other awards in festivals around the world, like Cannes Film Festival, San Sebastian International Film Festival, Stockholm Film Festival.

The film was also nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Critics Choice Awards in Los Angeles. As an actress, she starred in *Stray Bullet* directed by Georges Hachem in 2010. She also appears in the French production *Rock The Casbah* directed by Laila Marrakchi alongside actors Hiam Abbas and Lubna Azabal. Afterwards she starred in other feature films like *Bosta* and *The Father And The Foreigner*. Nadine Labaki’s films Nadine Labaki is one of the directors that could be labeled as an auteur, due to her iconic personality and style that flashes and comes visible with every new feature she directs.

She has visible techniques and certain character that she reveals through her movies. We can trace this along her two feature films *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?* *Caramel* is a 2007 Lebanese film — the first feature film by Lebanese director/actress Nadine Labaki. The film premiered on May 20 at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, in the Directors’ Fortnight section. The story focuses on the lives of five Lebanese women dealing with issues such as forbidden love, binding traditions, repressed sexuality, the struggle to accept the natural process of age, and duty vs. desire.



Labaki's film is unique for not showcasing a war-ravaged Beirut but rather a warm and inviting locale where people deal with universal issues. In this movie you can see the strong feminist character of Nadine that focused mainly on the problems and struggles of Lebanese women, being part and one of them. She was being an individual who used this movie as a voice for her as a woman and other women as well, speaking their language and communicates with them through her movie. Under the roof of a hairdresser shop, Labaki succeeded in briefing up the lives of 5 different women with their 5 different stories.

What is interesting about her as well is that Nadine Labaki focuses on all ages of women, not only teenagers or middle aged women, but also older women who seemed to have interesting plots for a film director and audience as well. She therefore attracted all ages of women by stressing in this movie on the notion of freedom of women and their ability to make their own choices. This example can be proved through her last scene in Caramel where the girl cuts her hair and makes a decision of her own which ends the movie with the message that women should be free and able to do whatever they wish to do.

Another point that proves that Nadine is also an auteur besides her focus on women and choosing to cast a crew of actors, who are not professionals, is her stress on religion in her movies. She shows how there is always the religious character that cares for her religion and carries a cross or pictures of Mary around. This was shown through the character Layal in Caramel where she had a cross in her car and carried a picture of Jesus and Mary in her

pocket. The title *Caramel* refers to an epilating method that consists of heating sugar, water and lemon juice.

Labaki also symbolically implies the “idea of sweet and salt, sweet and sour” and showcases that everyday relations can sometimes be sticky but ultimately the sisterhood shared between the central female characters prevails. The shooting of *Caramel* ended just nine days before the Israel-Lebanon war erupted in July 2006 and was released in Cannes exactly one year after the shooting began. An old clothes shop in the Gemmayzeh area of Beirut District was transformed into a salon where the filming of the movie took place. Caroline Labaki, Nadine’s sister, was the costume designer.

The music was composed by Khaled Mouzanar. Shortly after the movie release, Labaki married him. *Caramel* was distributed in over 40 countries, easily becoming the most internationally acclaimed and exposed Lebanese film to date. The film received critical acclaim. As of July 3, 2009, the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes reported that 92% of critics gave the film positive reviews, based on 67 reviews with the general consensus being “*Caramel* is both an astute cultural study, and a charming comedic drama from a talented newcomer.

Metacritic reported the film had an average score of 70 out of 100, based on 17 reviews. As of May 18, 2008, the film has grossed a little over \$1 million in the US although it was a very limited release. Internationally, it has amassed a little over \$14 million, making it a very profitable foreign film. It was released on DVD in the United States on June 17, 2008. The film was Lebanon’s official submission to the 80th Academy Awards for Best Foreign

Language Film. Coming to compare both of Nadine Labaki's movies, one can still prove that she is an auteur and that there are elements that she uses in both movies.

But one of the visible differences between *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now* movie is Nadine's personal change in life, from being an independent woman, to becoming a wife and a mother while filming *Where Do We Go Now*. Nadine changed from being someone who stresses on individual women's problems and lifestyles, to a mature mother who cared about showing the struggle and challenges faced by mothers losing their children because of the war and conflicts in the same neighborhoods. *Where Do We Go Now?* is a 2011 film by Lebanese director Nadine Labaki. The film premiered during the 2011 Cannes Film Festival as part of *Un Certain Regard*.

The film was selected to represent Lebanon for the 84th Academy Awards, but it did not make the final shortlist. The film won the Cadillac People's Choice Award at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival. *Where Do We Go Now?* tells the story of a remote, isolated unnamed Lebanese village inhabited by both Muslims and Christians. The village is surrounded by land mines and only reachable by a small bridge. As civil strife engulfed the country, the women in the village learn of this fact and try, by various means and to varying success, to keep their men in the dark, sabotaging the village radio, and then destroying the village TV.

The village is slowly drawn into greater violence; but the women get along beautifully and conspire together to keep their men from fighting, even

hiring Ukrainian dancers to entertain their men. But as Nassim is killed in a skirmish between Christians and Muslims while on an errand in a nearby town, the women are faced with a real test of wills. In an attempt to control the situation, they drug the men by mixing hashish inside sweet pastries and remove their weapons from the village. This ensured that fighting would not resume in the village during or after Nassim's funeral.

In this movie Nadine Labaki continues to use her auteur elements by making the leading actresses the dominant figure in the movie but this time featuring them as heroes and mothers who are fighting for their children's safety. She uses the dramatic sarcasm to make the movie appear less melodramatic which enriches the plot content and makes the viewer feel more entertained. The concept of freedom of women that was used in *Caramel* is also used in this movie for example in the scene of the forest where she runs to hide from reality and tries to find a solution.

This movie goes on the same path of *Caramel* by making music a very dominant figure in it just as if being a strong part of the script. The new thing about *Where Do We Go Now?* is Nadine's adjustments of the dancing scenes, one at the beginning of the movie and the other one between Nadine Labaki (Amal) and her lover (Rabie) at the cafe. It gave the lines a source of symphony and rhythm that added a whole new concept of script and acting to the movie. The shooting of *Where Do We Go Now?* lasted for 2 months from 18 October until 18 December 2010. Khaled Mouzanar, Labaki's husband, composed the music for the film.

Tania Saleh wrote the lyrics to all the songs in the film. The movie was released in Cannes in May 2011. The film was shot in Taybeh a village near Baalbek because the town contains a Church neighboring a mosque, other towns were used during the shooting like Meshmesh, Douma, and Jeita's Church Al-Saydeh. Labaki's two films have entertained and enlightened both critics and audiences. Being an auteur by all means, Labaki showed brilliance in leading an unprofessional cast and coming with such results at the end from people who might be standing in front of the camera for the first time.

Her ability and multi-functionism to act, direct and write is inspirational. She made a unique character for herself being the voice of women, she stresses on the notion of feminism and dedicated her voice and messages of her movies for that sake. She will always seek to achieve freedom for all women. Her inspired vision of humanity and female identity, transcending the violence of war, has established her as a leading voice on the international film stage, with much more potentials and talent to come.