Issues of Representation in Arab Animation Cinema:
Practice, History and Theory

By
Tariq Alrimawi

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

February 07, 2014
© by Tariq Alrimawi (2014)
Abstract:

This practice-based research addresses the challenges that face the animation practitioner in the Arab region. In engaging with this topic it highlights the contrast with international animation producers, and also seeks to analyse how Arab animation cinema is represented and understood in the West. It introduces Arab animation history, and the animation industry as it currently exists in the Middle East. I suggest the reasons why there have been so few animated shorts and feature-length films successfully produced in the Arab world, in spite of their being a rich literary and cultural heritage. This study reveals a number of cultural, religious, political and economic issues related to Arab animation cinema, both in relation to its history and in regard to its place domestically and internationally. This research explores how YouTube and other social media became the main platform for Arab animation artists to distribute their political works during and since the ‘Arab Spring’ in the Middle East. The immediate consequence of this is an explosion in the exposure of Arab animation artists and their work to the world, in comparison to the very limited opportunities and freedoms of the past. Moreover, this study seeks to open up a conversation about the possibility of showing animated films that include Arabic content to Western audiences. This is complex in the sense that the place and presence of Arab animated stories are affected by how the representation is perceived within its production context and conditions of exhibition. My research will result in original knowledge, to be made available to Arab filmmakers, the Arab film industry and international academics addressing and championing animation, by engaging with conceptual questions, creating a critical practice methodology, and applying research-led practice methods.

Keywords:

Arab animation, Arab filmmakers, Muslim filmmakers, Arab cinema, Middle East, representation, visual culture, Arab Spring, political communication.
Acknowledgments:

I would like to gratefully thank my supervisors Prof. Paul Wells and Dr. Robert Harland for the motivation, encouragement and development of my PhD research. This thesis would not have been possible without their support and their vast knowledge in the area of animation and visual culture. My sincere thanks also go to the Postgraduate Research Studies Coordinator Dr. Marion Arnold who offered guidance and advice which were important to me. Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my father and mother for always believing in me, and for their continuous support throughout my life.
Publications:

Contents

Introduction: ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Contextual Review .................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

1.1 Locating the research questions ............... Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.2 Methods and Methodology:....................... Error! Bookmark not defined.


2.1 The challenges that face the Arab Animation Cinema Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2 Arab Animation Spring ................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Illustration: ......................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 3: West vs. Arab.............................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

3.1 The journey of The 99 ......................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2 The Danish Cartoons Crisis ..................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.3 ‘Real Arab’ from the Western point of view .. Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4 The short animated film Missing: Film for peace Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Illustration: ......................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 4: Invisible Protagonists ....................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

4.1 Images in Islam ........................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.2 The Prince of Egypt (1998, animated film)...... Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5 Fantasy characters in Islamic animation:........ Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.6 Finding solutions: ........................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Illustration: ......................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Conclusion:............................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Bibliography: .............................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

Appendix
Introduction:

The popularity of animation cinema rises every day, and sustains both adult and child audiences across a range of platforms from feature films to internet web-episodes. This is an important backdrop and inspiration for my work. As a Jordanian practitioner I graduated with a Master’s degree in Animation from Newport Film School, University of South Wales. By the end of my study, I had made a short animated film called *Missing* (2010) (figure 1, on the DVD). This short animated film has been screened at numerous international and Arab Film Festivals (See appendix 1). It became the vehicle which inspired me to undertake further post-graduate research, in that it helped position me as both an animation filmmaker and a Jordanian filmmaker literally on the world stage. I was able to attend numerous festivals and it became clear that there were many aspects of possible research to undertake about the place of contemporary Arab animation cinema both within the history of animation cinema, and as a model of production in the contemporary era. Interestingly, therefore, this short film became one of the main methods of data collection for my research by enabling me to meet filmmakers, academics and festival curators. This short film has enabled me to investigate Arab animation cinema within a wider cultural and production context. It helped me to address the problems and the challenges that face the animation practitioner in the Arab region in contrast with international animation producers, and also to analyse how Arab animation cinema is represented and understood in the West.

It is worth mentioning that there is an Arab animation history, and it has had some attention, which I will discuss later. Further, much to the surprise of many of my Western colleagues, there is indeed an animation industry in the Middle East. However, when I was attending festivals, such as the *Tokyo Short Film Festival 2011*, the *Chicago Children’s Film Festival* and the *Cambridge International Student Film Festival 2011*, I observed that I was the sole Arabic animation director that had attended and presented their animated short film. The common question that international animation filmmakers posed of me was ‘Why is it that not many Arab animation films are seen at international film festivals and in the world marketplace?’ and further, it was often suggested that this might be related to the current global perspectives about Islam and the Arab religion.

---

1 I recommend making a short animated film before starting a similar PhD, and sending it to international festivals. The filmmaker/researcher will have many more opportunity to collect data for the research study via attending international festivals.
This may be seen to be ironic given the global production of animated material. Significantly, animation today is used in many fields such as TV series, multimedia, game design, web design, TV advertisements and films. However, despite its prominence in the worldwide popular entertainment industry there is a considerable absence of established Arab production in animation and filmmaking for the domestic market. This is clear from the tendency of importing foreign animated productions for the Arab audience. Moreover, and importantly, there is a lack of representation of 'real' Arabic cultures and stories, and a lack of invention in using the language of animation to communicate with other cultures. Wells (2002:1) suggests:

Animation is arguably the most important creative form of the twenty first century. Animation as an art, an approach, an aesthetic and application informs many aspects of visual culture, from feature-length films to prime-time sit-coms; from television and web cartoons to display functions on a range of new communications technologies. In short, animation is everywhere.

Arguably, though, not quite ‘everywhere’. The Middle East views animation differently. The Egyptian filmmaker Shafik (2007: 9) points out that Arab countries have produced thousands of live-action feature films. Among these countries Egypt, also known as the 'Hollywood of Arabia', has made the majority of them. Ironically, given that this seems to indicate that there is a buoyant production culture, Al Sahar studio, one of the biggest animation studios in Egypt, has had financial difficulties since 1998 in attempting to complete their first Egyptian feature length animated film, The Knight and the Princess (Ghazala, 2011). It is worth mentioning too, that
Egypt had a strong history of animation production during the 1930s and 1940s, by the Frankel brothers before they moved to France in early 1950s. They created the oldest extant animated projects in the Arab world and Africa, and produced a series of short films featuring the heroic character, *Mish Mish Effendi* (Ghazala, 2011: 6). One of these is a short propaganda film against the Nazis which was funded by the Egyptian government during World War II, asking the Egyptian people to donate towards the national defence (figure 2)(Ghazala, 2011: 6). However, even with these early achievements, it remains important to investigate the reasons why there have been so few animated shorts and feature-length films successfully produced in the Arab world since, after this apparently successful start.

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2. Mish Mish Effendi: The National Defence (1939). Directed by: Frankel brothers*

There is an irony in that there are such a small number of animation films based on local and national myths when Arab culture has a lot of magnificent stories as sources suitable for adaptation. This seems particularly challenging as the fairytale is widely used in the production of animation films elsewhere, sometimes borrowing from Arab culture, for example, tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. However, attending the international and Arab film festivals, and talking to producers and filmmakers, it is clear that these Arabian stories have not been used by Arab filmmakers in making animation films, and there is no belief that even if they were used, that the films would impact upon the international marketplace. When I presented my animated film at Arab film festivals, I observed very few animated films from Jordan, Egypt, Algeria and Iraq were screened beside my film, and sometimes none at all, while the majority of films from the Middle East in these festivals were live-action and documentary films. It is clear that the animation industry in Arab countries is small in comparison with the Western industry; there is a lack of interest in animation by Arab filmmakers, while ironically, Western animation films have extensively used Arabic sources that may have provided material suitable for both
home markets and export. Given this situation I have decided to explore a number of religious, cultural, political and economic issues associated with Arab animation cinema, both in relation to its history and in regard to its place domestically and internationally.

The published material about animation in the Arab world is very limited and it is hard to find resources related directly to the subject. Moreover, it is hard to access official archives and libraries dedicated to the history of animation films in the Arab world, and it seems that Arab animation history is almost being wilfully lost, as it is not considered valuable or significant. Only two published references related to Arab animation history were found; the first one is *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* by Giannalberto Bendazzi (1994) and the second is the booklet *Animation in the Arab World, A glance on the Arabian animated films since 1936* by Mohamed Ghazala (2011). These materials are valuable, but they do not cover the animation history of 22 Arabic countries. It will not be possible, then, to research and write a history of animation cinema in the Middle East, but rather to do two things. First, to at least draw attention to the fact that there is a tradition of animation production in the Middle East, and that in both its known historic context, and the contemporary era of production, this can be addressed as a viable model of animation cinema that raises key issues and questions of representation that are useful to address. I view my research as an opportunity to contribute original knowledge to Arab filmmakers, the Arab film industry and international academic contexts addressing and championing animation, by engaging with conceptual questions, creating a critical practice methodology, applying research-led practice methods, and developing this thesis.

The current knowledge about, and position of, Arab animation production encouraged me to look for more animated films produced by Arabs and to bring further attention to Arab animation heritage, while also engaging Arab filmmakers to conduct primary research about the aesthetic of their works and the challenges that they face. Alongside this investigation, I also co-operated with Arab artists to make some practical work, in order to engage with aesthetics and production challenges first hand, having for example, to deal with religious official authorities. It was my aim in this practice to establish if I could create a guide to using Islamic resources for Arab animation filmmakers. I realised that this was perhaps one of the most important aspects of the production, since even before I am ‘an animation filmmaker’, I am a Muslim, who is committed to his faith, Islam. It is important then to see how the work is affected by this perspective, in that any film made that might have religious subject matter or connotations has to be produced with sensitivity and care.
Chapter One shows the process of shaping the research questions and choosing the research methods suitable to answer those questions raised as part of the historical enquiry. This includes case studies, practical work, primary interviews, and an address of narratology and metaphor as key aspects of representation. Chapter Two demonstrates what Arab animators and studios have done in the past through to the present, addressing how Arabs use their folktales from historical and religious sources, and seek to export their animated films to the international film market. This chapter also explores how YouTube and social media became the main platform for Arab animation artists to distribute their political works during the ‘Arab Spring’ in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East since 2011. The immediate consequence of this is an explosion in the exposure of Arab animation artists and their work to the world, in comparison to the very limited opportunities and freedoms of the past, determined by regimes exercising control and censorship over traditional media such as television. From the point of view of my research, the ‘coincidence’ of the Arab Spring enabled me to reflect upon a development in Arab animation history ‘in its moment’, which in turn enabled me to have a broader perspective in analysing the conditions of production in the past, and what was permitted and executed under certain political, cultural and economic conditions.

Chapter Three focuses on the relationship between the Arab/Islamic world and the West, and looks at Islamophobia, Orientalism and the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims through Western animated films and cartoons. Also, I seek to open up a conversation about the possibility of showing animated films that include Arabic and Islamic content to Western audiences. This is complex in the sense that the place and presence of Arab animated stories is affected by how the representation is perceived within its production context and conditions of exhibition. It is possible then to make potentially conducive ‘products’ that can be shown in the West and the Middle East, but these will always be subject to the political and economic conditions in which they might be shown.

In Chapter Four, a number of religious feature length animation films that tell stories about the Prophets are discussed. This is the most problematic area of representation, but should not be confused with broader issues of ‘representation’ in other contexts. In my discussion I am thinking about representation more broadly, and offering some specific ways in which animation is particularly useful in offering additional tools to enable different kinds of image construction. This study provides valuable information in this regard by revealing the practical problems of
representing the prophets non-physically when making Islamic films, and then tries to solve these problems through the practice of making a number of short animated videos. Ultimately, the practical results were submitted to the Islamic councils in Jordan and the United Kingdom, in order to help create a guide for Arab filmmakers who might in the future make animation films using original Islamic resources. According to the regulations, Arab filmmakers must submit their films before production to a state committee to obtain permission and a license to make the film (see appendix 2 and 3, in Arabic). In my research, then, I am addressing the challenges that Arab filmmakers are seeking to overcome in making their animated films, and as such I will conclude by looking at the questions raised, and what the outcomes of my study were, and try to suggest why this study is important to Arab animation filmmakers. However, and in some senses ironically, as a Muslim researcher, my own practice and study are conducted in relation to my own ethics and moral values, related to Islam. Therefore, for reasons of religious tradition, I will not be able to show any human figure of the prophets including Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in this thesis. It is hoped however that I will be able to offer a suggestive survey of contemporary Arab animation film-making, situated in its historic, economic and cultural context, and to offer some insights on ‘representation’ in Arab animated cinema accordingly.

List of Illustration:

- Figure 1. Missing 2010. Directed by: Tariq Alrimawi [Film still] Jordan/UK: International Film School Wales, Newport University.
- Figure 2. Frankel brothers. 1939. Mish Mish Effendi: The National Defines.[Online video still]. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkYy2u2kQiQ>[Accessed 10 September 2013].