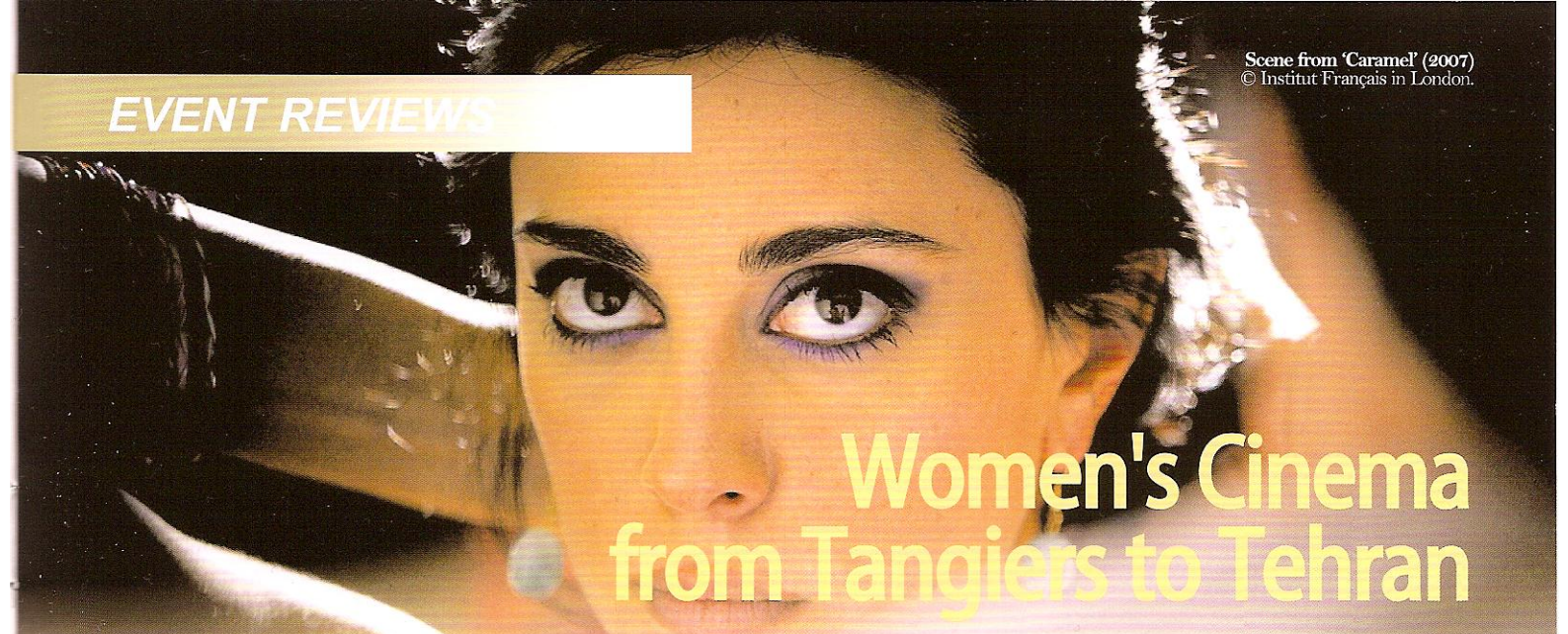


Scene from 'Caramel' (2007)
© Institut Français in London.

Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran

Benjamin Geer and Glada Lahn review this diverse film festival, organised by the Institut Français in London and Parallax Media (22 February - 2 March 2008)

LEBANESE director Nadine Labaki's first feature film, *Caramel* (2007), launched the festival. This romantic comedy centres on a Beirut beauty salon where five women share their problems: Layale's married lover won't leave his wife; Nisrine can't tell her fiancé that she's not a virgin; Rima seduces a female client; actress Jamale desperately tries to conceal her age; a chance of romance for seamstress Tante Rose is sabotaged by her dotty older sister. Labaki deftly plays the lead and gets nuanced performances, full of camaraderie and perfect comic timing, from a cast of mostly non-professional actors. Interior shots are sumptuously vivid, although some scenes recall the slick pop videos that Labaki used to direct. The film avoids political issues, and social ones appear only as pretexts for comical situations (such as Nisrene and co's escapade at the virginity restoration clinic). The characters seem to live in a bubble – a funny and endearing bubble nevertheless.

Director Hala Khalil's second feature film, *Cut and Paste* (2006), is another romantic comedy. It depicts three closely linked social ills that afflict many young Egyptians: unemployment, late marriage and the dream of emigration. Pugnacious, hard-nosed Gamila has just turned 30; easygoing Yusif is about 45. Both are lower-middle-class, educated, single, still living in their parents' flats, and desperate for a steady job. Gamila is determined to emigrate and enlists Yusif in a marriage of convenience in order to score enough points for New Zealand's immigration system. Her mother, representing an older generation out of touch with its children's predicament, insists that the groom meet his traditional obligations: a flat, a lavish wedding, an expensive ring. The couple makes comical attempts to reconcile parental demands with economic realities, then the film abandons social issues in favour of syrupy romantic fantasy. Nevertheless, it's worth seeing for its sardonic view of frustrations faced by ordinary Egyptians.

In the opening shots of her documentary, *Salata Baladi* (2007), Nadia Kamel voices anxiety over a different Egyptian issue: the intolerant religious discourse to which her young son, Nabil, is exposed. She decides it is time he discovered the complexity of his family history. His grandmother, Na'ela Kamel, was born in Egypt to Italian and Egyptian Jewish parents who converted to Christianity. She married an Egyptian Muslim Communist, adopted his religion and had a career as an outspoken journalist. In Italy, Nabil meets relatives who reluctantly left under Nasser's discriminatory policies against 'foreigners' in the 1950s. Na'ela, who is fervently pro-Palestinian, then risks her reputation to visit long-lost cousins in Israel. Nabil, a stateless Palestinian who cannot legally accompany his grandmother, embodies the absurdity of exclusive national identity. Shot like a home movie, the film overflows with warmth, but sharper editing wouldn't have gone amiss.

The Kite (2003), directed by Randa Chahal Sabag, draws its inspiration from the surreal artificiality of borders. Set in a South Lebanese village whose inhabitants are separated from kin by Israeli annexation, it traces the fate of headstrong sixteen-year-old Lamia. Lamia's family marry her to a cousin on the Israeli side, which means being cut off from her mother and brother. Once there, she refuses to conform, dreaming instead of love with a Druze Israeli border guard who watches her through binoculars. Sound is especially effective: the shrill calls of women across the border as they swap shockingly personal details through loudspeakers is comic and moving; the kite fluttering against barbed wire mimics Lamia's fragile rebellion against patriarchy and the cruelty of politics. Shot with a touch of fantasy against a lush landscape, *The Kite* excels artistically despite its fatalistic ending.

The Silences of the Palace (1994), director Moufida Tlatli's first film, is justly regarded as one of the great achievements of Tunisian cinema. In 1965, a young woman named Alia recalls her childhood and adolescence, during which she and her mother, a servant, were confined to a prince's palace. As revolution brews outside, Alia gradually becomes aware of their enslavement and the code of silence they observe. She falls in love with a young revolutionary, who helps her express through music what she cannot say. When Tunisia gains its independence in 1956 and the aristocracy falls, he becomes an obstacle to her liberation. Alia thus represents Tunisia, disappointed by an independence movement that championed women's rights on paper, without transforming attitudes. The film's magnificent cinematography and contemplative pace reflect the director's long experience as a film editor. The acting exudes repressed emotion, and impassioned Umm Kulthum songs are used to great effect.

Caramel will be on general release in the UK in May.

Benjamin Geer and Glada Lahn are MA students in Near and Middle East Studies at SOAS, University of London.