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### Global Flows Of Women's Cinema: Nadine Labaki And Female Authorship

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# global flows of women's cinema

nadine labaki and female authorship

t h i r t e e n

p a t r i c i a   w h i t e

Young women directors are achieving increasing prominence within the current circulation of world cinema, facilitated by international festival networks, transnational funding agencies, the cinephilic blogosphere, and fan- and diasporic online networks. Though the prestigious category *auteur* remains, undoubtedly, preponderantly male, the fact that women have gained higher profiles and more honors within such taste-making international venues as A-list film festivals stamps the figure of the woman director with new value. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, films by women twice took home top prizes at both Berlin and Venice. The Cannes Grand Prix (its second prize) was conferred on Naomi Kawase's *The Mourning Forest* (Mogari No Mori) in 2007, and that festival's Jury Prize (its third most prestigious) was awarded to films by women six times.<sup>1</sup> Veteran director Kathryn Bigelow closed the decade by winning the first Oscar to be received by a woman in the directing category for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), renewing intermittent debates about the celluloid ceiling.<sup>2</sup> During the same period, in that competition's (admittedly compromised)

foreign-language film category, dozens of films by women directors were submitted by their countries for consideration; while proportionately fewer received nominations, two films won the award.<sup>3</sup>

If this publicity indeed indicates feminist gains in the elite sector of world cinema, where female authorship is articulated with aesthetic value, do these gains matter at the level of global mass culture, where questions of women in cinema seemingly remain constrained by “to-be-looked-at-ness” and the consumerist quandaries of the “chick flick”? Through a case study of a young Lebanese actress-director, Nadine Labaki, I show how discourses around female authorship in cinema intersect with media constructions of national identity, celebrity, and genre as well as with an aesthetic signature validated by the festival circuit. I suggest that the contours of women’s cinema—provisionally defined as films by and about women, regardless of a filmmaker’s own attitude toward the term or the industrial, artisanal, or political mode of production—have been broadly remapped by shifts in global production, circulation, and evaluation of films.<sup>4</sup>

As Hollywood franchises dominate global film consumption, and new technologies alter distribution and viewing experiences, “world cinema” is presented by international festivals, policies, and critics as a brand or category that preserves film art and national identity. Women directors—whether working in national popular or art cinema or training in film schools or other media industries—are ambivalently recruited to this corrective project, becoming guarantors of “culture” in multiple senses of the term, though not necessarily masters of their own art. Yet, while new understandings of world cinema are the object of growing attention in film studies, questions of gender and authorship have yet significantly to structure such inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

How does globalization affect the concept, content, and address of women’s cinema, and how are women’s films challenging assumptions about and approaches to world cinema?

Even more pointedly—how are women filmmakers shaping new, transnational formations of feminist film culture within these circuits of production, distribution, and exhibition? Of course, feminist activists, organizations, and scholars have fostered and advocated for women’s media since the 1970s, and this work now reaches far beyond the Anglophone contexts in which it principally originated. Encompassing community-based media, documentary, and experimental work, personal filmmaking, and artists’ film, women’s cinema circulates largely through non-theatrical venues and feminist and academic networks. While not my focus here, this history informs and helps make sense of the twenty-first-century presence of women feature filmmakers in a range of national film industries and transnational media contexts in which categories of cinematic value are adjudicated and distinction conferred.

Women directors are in fact key to the history of political filmmaking in Lebanon. While the country has a rich cinema-going tradition associated with time of French mandate, its national industry has been dominated by Egyptian talent. During the civil war (1975–1990), a true auteur cinema emerged with outspoken women directors such as Randa Chahal Sabbag (1953–2008) and Jocelyne Saab (b. 1948) making political documentaries and, later, feature films while living in exile. Several decades younger than these prominent directors, Labaki (b. 1974) was among the first graduates of Beirut’s Saint Joseph University’s film school in 1988, where her student film won a prize. In the absence of an infrastructure for Lebanese cinema, both the filmmakers who returned after the civil war, and Labaki and her peers who came of age during the post-civil-war period, are dependent on co-production financing, traditionally from France. Labaki’s *Caramel* (Sukkar Banat, 2007) is a French/Lebanese co-production produced in Lebanon with a French producer, Ann-Dominique Toussaint. When *Caramel* debuted in Cannes in the Directors’ Fortnight in 2007, it immediately attracted international attention; Labaki returned to the festival with her second film, *Where Do We Go Now?* (*Et maintenant, on va où?*) in 2011. *Caramel* topped the box office charts in Lebanon, and its success on the festival circuit (including a Gala at Toronto) earned it release in 32 territories and a gross of \$14 million (against a budget of under \$2 million); it was the first Lebanese film to be released theatrically in the United States. The popular success of Labaki’s films coincides with an upturn in feature-filmmaking and film culture in Lebanon and in the Middle East more generally, with newly established film festivals and markets in the United Arab Emirates offering co-financing opportunities and outlets. For my purposes, the high profile of *Caramel* as a film from a peripheral film-producing country by a woman director makes it an exemplary text in any consideration of how so-called third-world women directors are becoming important currency in twenty-first-century global culture.

I focus on *Caramel* in order to map multiple determinants of cross-cultural consumption, competing constructions of feminism and “post-feminism,” and shifting politics of prestige, patronage, and taste that inform the reception of female film authorship in a globalized, multi-platform media world. A national and regional celebrity through her work in music videos and commercial campaigns, with a charismatic presence on the international film circuit and as lead actress in her own films, Labaki harnesses the proto-feminism of the global “chick flick” and the energy of Arabic pop fandoms in her compelling performance of authorship.

### **nadine labaki and the chick flick**

*Caramel* centers on a group of women who frequent and work at a beauty salon and support each other through romantic difficulties, the constraints

of family and traditional femininity, and conflicts between career and desire. The space, the scenario, the character type—all are recognizable to North American audiences from the generic world of the woman's picture. The film activates familiar dynamics of spectatorial identification through the trope of female friendship and a distinctive, though not exclusive, address to a female audience. In time-honored traditions of film melodrama, political and social conflicts are displaced onto personal and consumerist concerns and resolved (or not) emotionally rather than systemically.

However, this is not a Hollywood women's picture. *Caramel* is set in Beirut and uses its female ensemble-cast formula to bridge social divisions—notably, in the Lebanese context, sectarian ones between Christians and Muslims (evoked here with intentional superficiality—a character name, a cross). On the one hand, the film's enthusiastic international reception credits its "universality"; it is emphatically privatized and consigned to a world of emotional connection. On the other hand, the film's success on the world stage is appropriated to discourses of the nation, "softening" Lebanon's international image of civil war and strife. The film's reception is framed in both populist and auteurist terms. Thus, while making concessions to international viewers in the commodity form of the art-house-friendly "foreign film," *Caramel* frames questions about gendered authorship, genre, and trans/national address that have significant implications for contemporary feminist media studies.

National films for export frequently deploy images of female emancipation as part of an international bid for the nation to be seen as progressive; the figure of the woman director herself often can be seen in this light.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, for example, in the case of post-revolutionary Iran, where the profession of cinema is governed, like all public life, by modesty laws, the percentage of women directors is much greater than in most Western nations. A less ideologically mediated example is the international acclaim accorded Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli (who became cultural minister after the January revolution). Ella Shohat cites Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace* (Samt el Qusur, 1994) as a primary example of what she calls "post third worldist" cinema—films that depart from a masculinist "third worldist" emphasis on nation-building and revolutionary violence to foreground gender and sexuality, the private sphere, and feminism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Tlatli's film, which deals with a servant girl's experience of the transition to independence, is still very much an allegorical intervention in master narratives of Tunisian patrimony. In contrast, the success of *Caramel*, and Labaki's media celebrity, can in part be attributed to the more recent film's affinity with "post-feminist" texts that associate female emancipation with consumerist values and sexual and professional self-definition in a neoliberal frame—to its status as a Beirut *Sex and the City*, consistent with Lebanon's cosmopolitan reputation as the "Switzerland of the Middle East," and its relaxed

standards of female dress code. Extradiegetically, Labaki's glamour is consistent with those of the contemporary Lebanese female megastars whose images her music videos have helped cultivate; it is this glamorous image that is received by national, diasporan, and regional audiences. Diegetically, her character is intelligible to transnational audiences in generic terms.

"Chick flick" is, of course, the epithet used to characterize—and dismiss—contemporary women's pictures (romantic comedies and serious dramas that receive limited critical but much fan love). In contrast to the proto-feminism of the classical Hollywood women's picture, the chick flick is a genre of production, and a ritual of consumption, often associated with the post-feminist presumption that the collective goals of feminism have been achieved, leaving the emancipated woman to address her narrowly individualized needs through heterosexual coupling and the commodity form. That this is an often racialized, class-based, and Western narrative is pointed out by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker in the introduction to their collection *Interrogating Postfeminism*: "postfeminism is white and middle-class by default," in its focus on leisure and consumption.<sup>8</sup> Their volume characterizes post-feminist culture as transnational-media representations of women that relegate feminism to the past. Because women's autonomy, solidarity, and empowerment are taken as givens and goods, feminism itself—as organized political struggle on behalf of women as a class—is considered passé. When the geopolitical dimensions of this neoliberal narrative are acknowledged at all, it is with the perhaps paradoxical result of displacing active feminism onto the global south. Human rights campaigns and various "click-philanthropy" projects targeted at "women and girls" work for "democracy"—and, one assumes, an attendant level of consumer comfort. There is, of course, profound arrogance in this assumption of a cultural lag time, given that "post-feminist" culture exports the ideologies of individualism that precisely paralyze collective struggle. And in the process, feminisms from other parts of the world are not recognized as such. Like Hollywood "chick flicks," films such as *Caramel* articulate problems of female subjectivity and agency with dimensions of contemporary consumer society. However, the film's embeddedness in a national cinema and a larger world helps bring out a critique of post-feminist culture's complicity with profoundly imbalanced global flows of capital and power.

*Caramel* embraces both the consumerist "chick flick" present and the affective energies of traditional women's genres while steering clear of overt framing in terms of Arab feminisms. Labaki's film uses a female ensemble-cast formula to articulate changing questions about national identity with the urgency of women's self-realization and the energy of their solidarity in a fractured culture. *Caramel* decisively brackets war and politics to focus on women's everyday lives, and it was largely lauded precisely for its apolitical qualities: critics punned the title, resulting in

overuse of the epithet “sweet.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, the subtext for international audiences is oversaturated media images of the civil war that wracked Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, as well as conflict in the Middle East more generally, especially after the 2006 Israeli-led war with Hezbollah that shattered a fragile but decade-long period of peace and prosperity in the country, in the year before the film’s release.

Certainly, a woman’s film by a woman director, shaping international reception of Lebanese cinema, marks significant distance from stereotypical associations of the country with war. As Labaki states in the press kit: “I belong to a generation that wants to talk about something different, love stories for instance, something that is closer to the feelings that we know and the experiences that we have than to war.”<sup>10</sup> The director’s “we” refers to the generation that came of age since the civil war ended, but “feelings” and “love stories” also implicitly gender “we” as female, in opposition to the masculine-coded subject of war. Despite her desire to change the national subject, Labaki’s acclaimed second feature, *Where Do We Go Now?*, responds directly to the legacy of war, produced as it was after the 2006 Israeli air strikes and, as the director points out in most interviews, after she gave birth to a son. The film built on *Caramel*’s success and became an even bigger domestic and international hit. Employing many of the same production personnel (producer, costume designer, co-writer, composer), and reprising *Caramel*’s themes of female solidarity, *Where Do We Go Now?* depicts sectarian violence overtly. It is the women of a remote village who unite to heal the community rift (which is seen as national and regional). In this context, the generic elements of the women’s film—ensemble cast, central star, romance, costume, even songs—distinguish the film from more direct political critiques. In a commercial directed by her sister for Johnnie Walker’s “Keep Walking Lebanon” campaign, Labaki explains: “I felt a responsibility as a mother, a citizen, a director, to convey this message [of coexistence] before it is too late.”<sup>11</sup> In Lebanon and the Middle East, the film was cast as a significant public sphere intervention, very much associated with the creative voice (as well as the glamorous lifestyle of its director, as the Scotch campaign’s mise-en-scène attests).

Framed by North American reception, the woman director can be seen as carrying out a particular “civilizing” mission. How do “women’s films” as a genre align with “women’s films” as a question of authorship in these exchanges? An answer can suggest how the politics of genre inform the cultural work of global women’s production. Labaki’s films are (re-)shaping Lebanon’s national cinema and media culture by tapping into the generic formulae and affective power of the women’s film, while at the same time accessing international circuits in which these formulae are universalized. While this intelligibility can mean that cultural specificities are downplayed (the country and village remain unnamed in *Where Do We Go Now?*), it can also facilitate what Chandra Mohanty calls transnational

feminist “connectivities.”<sup>12</sup> I argue that Labaki’s films’ feminist impact is tied to the visibility of their “female” subject matter—including the affective bonds between women that their generic form draws upon—as well as to the visibility of their female director. In the reading that follows, I wish to keep in play the tensions between the genre’s homosocial sphere of solidarity and critique, populism and affective engagement, and the forms of individualism associated with auteurism, as well as between transnational post/feminism and national/regional celebrity culture.

### caramel

*Caramel* stars Labaki as Layale, charismatic owner of a beauty parlor who is having an affair with a married man. She’s surrounded and supported by an assortment of female employees, clients, and neighbors, played by an ensemble cast of nonprofessional actors. The salon is a chick-flick topos *par excellence* and a microcosm of its concerns—at once a homosocial (but, importantly, not domestic) space, it is a site of female “bodywork” and a neighborhood hub. It provides for an intersection of types (here Christian and Muslim, traditional and “modern,” successful and struggling, young and old), a focus on female desire, and the sharing of secrets (extending to “cultural” secrets such as the caramel depilatories that give the film its title). As these secrets are shared with the viewer, we are implicitly located as (female) patrons of the beauty parlor.

Other storylines are interwoven with Layale’s, involving sex before marriage, aging, divorce, lesbian desire, and family obligations. None is thoroughly resolved, and the romances mostly don’t work out, though the film does end conventionally with a wedding—that of one of the stylists, Nisrine, to her fiancé, with the other women fulfilling the chick-flick character function of bridesmaids. While the wedding affirms a traditional female destiny, the celebration and even the structure of married life sustain the homosocial bond so central to the film’s spaces, plot, and address. Moreover, the occasion affirms Arabic cultural integrity—while this is a Muslim wedding, it is an occasion for inter-communal song and dance.

On the international cinephile circuit, *Caramel* has been located primarily as an auteurist film and as a harbinger of Lebanon’s film renaissance, but neither of these characterizations can disavow the film’s overtly “female” subject matter and sensibility. I suggest that this gendering both facilitates the film’s circulation and undermines masculinist discourses of nation. At the end of the film, a black title card in French and Arabic displays the dedication: *a mon Beyrouth*. Like a number of other works of Lebanese cinema, this film pays tribute to the city’s survival of the ravages of 15 years of civil war and acknowledges Beirut’s central place in the Lebanese (and a wider Middle-Eastern) imaginary as a cosmopolitan city.<sup>13</sup> The end credits then





Figure 13.1

A multivalent sign graces the central Beirut hair salon location of Nadine Labaki's global chick flick *Caramel* (2007).

open over a shot of the streets outside the salon, a frequent location of the film, with two older female characters, the salon's laundresses, picking up pieces of paper, as if gathering shreds of communal memory in a shared living space. Thus, the salon stands at the intersection of two discourses: the chick flick (and, more generally, the semi-public sphere of female cultural influence), and the symbolic power of the capital (Beirut as cosmopolitan city). This intersection is inscribed with an authorial—female—signature: to *my* Beirut.

The salon's sign, *Si Belle*, has been damaged, whether by shelling or regular wear and tear, we don't know. However, with the "B" tipped, the sign, while still legible as "so pretty," becomes a conditional phrase: "Si elle ..." (If she ...).

Indeed, the city is not so pretty as it once was, but the initial affirmation of beauty is still present in the conditional assertion of potential. "If she"—that *she* read, perhaps, as the female subject—were in a position of agency, would the city remain a symbol of war? The film's focus on women and everyday life tests this proposition. *Caramel* hangs a question on the salon as "chick flick" topos. It uses its gendered generic affiliation to explore questions of national/cultural specificity and transnational legibility. The dedication "a mon Beyrouth" is at once a modest, feminized claim to particularity *and* an ambitious attempt to redefine the cinema according to a female perspective.

Discourses of beauty and potential also define Labaki's authorial persona. The reflexive association of Labaki's name with the film is not only consistent with the auteurist circuits in which it was launched—it debuted at the Cannes film festival, and La Cinéfondation financed the script through the Cannes Residency—but also to her visibility as its star and as

an actress more generally. At the time of *Caramel's* release, Labaki had already made a name for herself in Lebanon, directing music videos for Arab women singers, notably superstar Nancy Ajram.<sup>14</sup> Her personal details are well known—her sister Caroline designed the costumes for *Caramel*, and after the film wrapped up, Nadine Labaki married the film's celebrity music director Khaled Mouzanar. Labaki's profile—even star status—is achieved in a national and regional context with a relatively high number of women directors, but her music video background and Coca-Cola Lite ad contract locate her squarely in a younger generation tied to more commercial entertainers, and she has accordingly achieved a much higher international profile.

Labaki's insistence on opening the film in Lebanon before France, the use of non-professional actors, and location shooting, all enhanced her authenticity as a national spokeswoman. As a "cultural" rather than a conventionally political film, *Caramel* also spoke to a diasporic population that, despite having been affected by war, by no means defines itself exclusively in those terms. Labaki commented in an interview with *Filmmaker* that "You have a very big sense of guilt because you're a filmmaker and you don't know ... how your art can do something for your country. ... but then I understood that maybe it was my mission to make this film that shows something else ... a new image."<sup>15</sup> A "new image" invokes the makeover trope, the neoliberal post-feminist plot *par excellence*, and it links what *Filmmaker* calls the film's "Hollywood aesthetic" with Labaki's commercial and music video work. And, while some press accounts downplayed just how girly the film is in the interests of serious art cinema coverage, other sources explicitly associated it with the chick flick genre. *New York* magazine's "Culture Vulture" column comments on *Caramel's* beauty parlor setting: "The premise may evoke images of Queen Latifah tossing off one-liners with a blow-dryer in hand, but *Caramel* throws a few curveballs into the chick-flick mix: One woman falls for a female client, another has an affair with a married man, and a third finds love in the last stages of her life."<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, these so-called curveballs have nothing to do with the national context in which the film is made, with civil war, with sectarianism. Yet, these subplots do mediate these key axes of national identification. The homosocial spaces of the film (the salon, the sleazy hotel room where the women party together) are both post-feminist consumer spaces and extensions of gendered socializing in the Middle East.

The chick-flick trope of the superficially different group of friends is here used to transcend Christian/Muslim divisions. Themes of consumerism and beauty culture are articulated with those of tradition and modernity. For example, plastic surgery provides the occasion for a "universal" post-feminist storyline: Jamale, a divorced mother of teenagers, competes against younger women for work as an actress in commercials. However, the young Muslim stylist Nisrine turns to plastic surgery as a procedure to

“restore” her virginity before marriage. While so-called virginity recovery is widely practiced in the West, the film uses it to signal a culturally specific conflict—and an accommodation—between modernity and tradition. The scene in which the three friends take Nisrine to the surgeon is comically leavened by Nisrine’s adoption of the unmistakably Christian name Magdalene when she signs in for the procedure. The humor seems to mark the film’s awareness of its own limited engagement with the parsing of these distinctions.

If discrimination against post-menopausal women and cultural discouragement of sexual activity before marriage feel like heavy-handed “issues facing modern Lebanese women today,” the sense of an Oprah-style round-up is mitigated by the film’s non-professional cast, and the genuine sense of female community centered on the salon. In the course of the film, several characters at one remove from the core group—a male suitor, the laundress, the boyfriend’s wife—come into the salon for services; as each one is beckoned closer to the inner circle so too are we.

In the epilogue to her book *Lebanese Cinema*, Lina Khatib tests Lebanese cinema against standard criteria for defining a national cinema and finds it falls short on every count. Concluding her study, she writes, “one can go [so] far as saying that the Civil War has become the defining feature of Lebanese cinema.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, *Caramel*’s press notes brag that is the *only* Lebanese film that doesn’t mention the civil war.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the habitual equation of masculine war/feminine home is challenged by the interdependence of public politics and private feeling. If the ensemble female-cast drama has a structural relation to war in Hollywood home front films, no such separation of spheres existed in the reality of the Lebanese civil war. In an English-language interview, Labaki describes being forced to stay indoors as a child during the war, where she grew up on *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, Egyptian films and French ones.<sup>19</sup>

However, the ambition to make a Lebanese film free of connotations of war was crushed by the fact that, just a week after *Caramel* wrapped up in summer 2006, war broke out again, this time between Israel and Hezbollah. The July War lasted 34 days, with a large number of civilian deaths in southern Lebanon resulting from Israeli air strikes in southern Beirut. Retrospectively, war can be seen as a structuring absence of *Caramel*. The younger characters don’t mention it; while Lily, the aged, slightly demented sister of the salon’s laundress Rose, is troubled by an unassimilatable event in her past. However, releasing the film into this unstable context made the national legacy of war impossible to disavow. Although “it wasn’t my intention when I wrote it,” Labaki admits, “because of the events, I would say yes [*Caramel* is a political film] ... In Lebanon ... politics slip into the most intimate areas of our lives. ... I thought I could get away from it but the reality of the war caught up with me.”<sup>20</sup> However naïve, Labaki’s remark makes the feminist claim that the personal is political, and suggests



Figure 13.2

Lebanese actor-director Nadine Labaki as Amale in her feminist anti-war musical-comedy blockbuster, *Where Do We Go Now?* (*Maintenant on va ou?*, 2011).

that “apolitical” or “post-feminist” concern with telling love stories might meaningfully mediate this context. *Where Do We Go Now?* takes this approach further; the film’s combination of topicality and fable-like storytelling put Labaki into the role of a national mediator, and the film broke domestic box-office records.

If *Caramel* treats Muslim/Christian differences as primarily sartorial—a matter of Layale’s cross—*Where Do We Go Now?* addresses the crucial national question of sectarian violence and explicitly posits women’s community as the way to address this. Labaki wrote her second film in 2008 during the aftermath of the Israeli invasion and after she had her first child (a son)—a context and catalyst she invokes frequently in interviews. A comic fable reviving aspects of the post-war Lebanese musical—again with songs by Labaki’s husband—the film shows the women of an unnamed village banding together across religious lines to keep the men from sectarian violence. The surprise winner of the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival and Lebanon’s pick for the Oscar competition, the film addresses political tensions—both feminist and communal conflict—much more directly than *Caramel*, while again employing the formula of an female ensemble cast of non-professionals with the director in the lead role.

As I noted, in *Caramel*, Islam is primarily a signifier of multiculturalism. Notably, the community ritual of the wedding is sanctioned by another form of difference, through the wedding song offered by the salon’s hair washer, Rima. Rima’s song is a multivalent performance. Although her

identity is never spoken about, Rima's clothing and stance code her as a lesbian, and the glances exchanged by female coworkers relay our own sense of being in on her secret. On one level, Rima's song sanctions the normative gender roles of the nation. She's been rather forcibly made over to look "femme" for the wedding. On another level, her casting as guardian of culture strengthens the reading of wedding not as ritual of heterosexual closure but rather as one of homosocial solidarity, even desire—after all, her "make over" involved one of the caramel depilatories!

Clearly, lesbianism functions more as thematization of an issue facing modern Lebanese women than it does as a matter of sexual identity or practice. Once again, the gay or lesbian character is used to signify "modernity."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, this "curveball" appeals to the cachet of "the secret," the promise of a female world. Rima is shown as hyperaware of

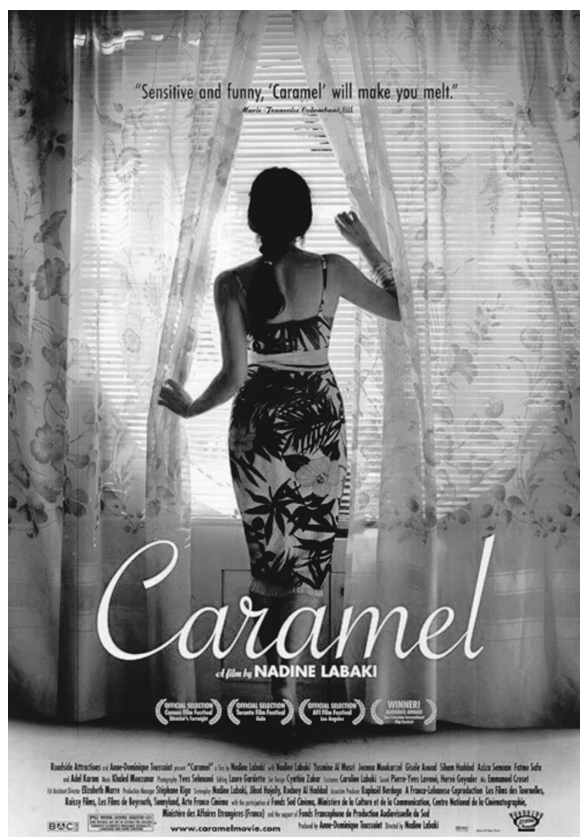


Figure 13.3

Sensuous drapery and the figure of the woman gazing out the window on this poster featuring Nadine Labaki in the lead role of her debut feature *Caramel* (Sukkar banat, 2007) condense orientalist and women's picture tropes.

the girl sitting next to her on the bus and her rather minimal storyline entails her attraction to a beautiful client who enters the salon with trepidation. Labaki discusses the character with *New York* magazine online: “[Homosexuality] is very secret, which is why I decided to write about that. I see a lot of homosexual women and men who just keep it to themselves, and they lead very unhappy lives where they end up hating their bodies and hating themselves. Many people live with it in secret, but there are also many victims and others who have problems dealing with it in public. It’s the contradiction of the country.”<sup>22</sup>

Elevating homosexuality to “the contradiction of the country” confirms the function of queerness as an emblem of modernity. This adds another twist to the modern chick-flick cliché of the lesbian in the female ensemble cast film. Often, such a character’s explicit lesbianism defuses a more generalized homoeroticism; the other women are just (her) friends. However, in an Orientalist iconography of the harem or baths, the lesbian marks the diffusion of erotic possibility within such homosocial spaces. *Caramel*’s very title refers to a culturally specific female ritual, one that not only invites the gaze but also makes the mouth water. The Orientalized poster and marketing imagery beckon the viewer beyond the veil to a mysterious female-only space. In *Caramel*, this nineteenth-century iconography of female homoeroticism is supplemented by a late-twentieth-century one, in which lesbianism is a metonym for feminism itself.

Rima is still sexy; in a deployment illustrative of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of the “epistemology of the closet,” the salon employee’s cryptic identity may even make her *more* appealing, constrained as is her sexual expression within this diegetic reality.<sup>23</sup> Rima’s non-disclosure works in another way: For Labaki, the character is a stand-in for closeted Lebanese lesbians. Her “visibility” as an erotic subject—or object—is a marker for the wider cultural recognition entrusted to more explicit, internationalized, and modern media such as this film strives to bring about. Thus, the film has it both ways. It thematizes lesbian identity while not having to be on the line itself as a “gay” film. It is knowing about the need for discretion while remaining ignorant about the lived reality of lesbian life. There is a palpable eroticism in the hair-washing scene (a well-worn trope of grooming as a stand-in for lesbian sex) as well as a failure of imagination; ultimately, erotic desire is translated back into discourses of empowerment.<sup>24</sup>

Rima’s beautiful client has no backstory. Although the stylists recognize and whisper about her when she returns to have her lustrous hair cut short, she seems to belong outside the narrative in some transmedial space. While Rima’s wedding song could have ended the film, instead we return to the salon setting. As if in a music video, “Mirror Mirror” (Myrete Myrete), composed for the film by Khaled Mouzanar and sung by Racha Rizk, plays on the soundtrack as the woman exits the salon and looks at

her transformed self in a shop window. She smiles and tosses her bobbed hair, embracing a public self that implicitly defies familial, privatized expectations about appropriate femininity. If, occasionally, “Lebanese” is a Western code word for lesbianism (cf. Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way”), something else is at stake in this scene. In soft-focus, slow motion, manicured, and wearing heels, this woman is not coded as lesbian; eroticism is consigned to Rima’s gaze (and perhaps the viewer’s) and siphoned into female solidarity and Lebanese pop. Still, her haircut unmistakably signifies a new identity.

This cryptic figure of the Arab woman in public—to be looked at, perhaps, but by herself—stands in, I suggest, for Labaki as director. Although the role of the mysterious client was evidently too small for a filmmaker who asserts in interviews that acting alongside her non-professional casts yields the better part of her directing success, the role of confident public beauty is one the director plays on the red carpet at Cannes and in the media discourses that surround the marketing of her work in Lebanon and abroad. By linking this mirror scene with Labaki’s celebrity status, I suggest that Rima’s desire for her client, which catalyzes the latter’s transformation, resonates with the affective charge infusing the filmmaker’s public persona. Moreover, I believe that this scene of self-assessment figures Labaki’s own self-reflexivity about her authorial image as a director within national, regional, and world cinema. She invites the gaze, and it is a gaze that figures possibility. *Si ‘elle...*

The beauty-parlor setting of *Caramel* allows all the film’s Arab female subjects (lesbian, Muslim, aging, working class) some access to the glamorous self-determination that Labaki embodies on- and off-screen and, as I’ve indicated, beckons the viewer in as well. Of course, like the classic woman’s picture, *Caramel* is circumscribed in its political critique. Chick-flick tropes facilitate liberal inclusiveness (Muslim–Christian female friendship and alliance, crypto-lesbianism), but go further to challenge the gender politics of film authorship. For a woman director from a marginal film-producing country to make a film that draws on popular generic sensibilities and art house protocols and thereby to achieve critical attention and audience approval from national, Arab, diasporic, and “general” audiences is to sustain a complex enunciative performance. Labaki’s career to date suggests that feminist film is alive and well in the age of the chick flick, including in the chick flick itself.

As Thomas Elsaesser and others have argued, the international film-festival circuit has long functioned as an alternative distribution network in opposition to Hollywood cinema.<sup>25</sup> Labaki is one example of many women directors in negotiation with the constraints of the globally circulating commodity form of the feature film—signed by an auteur, but recognizably affiliated with a genre and a region. The many media discourses that position her—commercial campaigns, red carpet appearances, her

work as a music video director, her claiming of her maternal role—translate this filmmaker’s self-authoring to a world of potential fans.

## notes

1. Berlin’s Golden Bear winners were Jasmila Zbanic’s *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams* (Bosnia/Herzegovina, 2005) and Claudia Llosa’s *Milk of Sorrow* (La teta asustada, Peru, 2006). Indian–American director Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* received Venice’s Golden Lion in 2001, and Sofia Coppola’s *Somewhere* won the top award in 2011. Cannes Jury Prizes were conferred on two films by Samira Makhmalbaf, *Blackboards* (Takhté siah, Iran, 2000) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (Panj é asr, Iran, 2003); two by Andrea Arnold, *Red Road* (United Kingdom, 2006) and *Fish Tank* (United Kingdom, 2009); *Persepolis* (directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, France, 2007); and Maiwenn’s *Poliss* (Polisse, France, 2011). Note that Makmalbaf and Arnold won this prize twice, confirming the festival’s association with the anointing of auteurs. The fact that more women are recognized does not mean the culture of festivals—which has always admitted the singular talents of individual women auteurs such as Agnes Varda or Lina Wertmüller—has substantively changed. In 2010, Cannes included no women’s films in competition at all, and Jane Campion’s 1993 *The Piano* remains the single Palme d’Or winner by a woman director in the festival’s history.
2. “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2011,” Martha Lauzen’s annual study of the American film industry for the Center for the Study of Women in Film and Television at San Diego State University, found that “women accounted for 5% of directors, a decrease of 2 percentage points from 2010 and approximately half the percentage of women directors working in 1998.” A separate 2009 study entitled “Independent Women: Behind-the-Scenes Representation on Festival Films” found that “Women comprised 22% of directors” of feature-length US films at top US festivals for the year. See Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film: Research, n.d., accessed May 21, 2012, <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html>. The Center does not look at global figures.
3. The successful films were Caroline Link’s *Nowhere in Africa* (Nirgendwo in Africa, Germany, 2003) and Susanne Bier’s *In a Better World* (Hæven, Denmark, 2010); interestingly, both films feature white characters in non-Western settings.
4. For recent contributions to this robust field that emphasize the transnational dimensions of women’s cinema, see Alison Butler, *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2002); and Kathleen McHugh, “The World and the Soup: Historicizing Media Feminisms in Transnational Contexts,” *Camera Obscura* 72 (2009): 110–51.
5. Among the many excellent recent works on world cinema, see especially: Natasa Durovicova, and Kathleen Newman, eds., *World Cinemas/Transnational Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009); Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, eds., *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Rosalind Gault and Karl Schoonover, eds., *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. See Viola Shafik’s discussion of the “feminization of Arab cinema” in *Arab Cinema: History and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 201–203.



7. Ella Shohat, "Post-Third-Worldist Culture," *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (London: Routledge, 2003), 51–78.
8. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction" to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
9. See, for example, Colin Colvert called the film "a bittersweet treat," in "'Caramel' Beauty Shop Teases Out Affairs of the Heart," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, April 10, 2008; Claudia Puig, "'Caramel' Takes a Sweet Journey," *USA Today*, January 21, 2008 (Puig describes the film thus: "Caramel is a sweeter and more believable version of *Steel Magnolias*, Middle Eastern style.").
10. *Caramel* Press Notes. Distributor: Roadside Attractions.
11. Labaki was dramatically unveiled in January 2012 as the new spokesperson for Johnnie Walker's social media campaign "Keep Walking Lebanon," which invites users to select one of three projects to benefit the country. Caroline Labaki's promotional video "Walk with Nadine Labaki" is featured on the homepage (<http://www.keepwalkinglebanon.com/main.php>), and the Keep Walking Lebanon and official Nadine Labaki YouTube channels (<http://www.youtube.com/user/KeepWalkingLebanon/featured>; [http://www.youtube.com/user/labakinadine?feature=results\\_main](http://www.youtube.com/user/labakinadine?feature=results_main)) introduce "Nadine Labaki – Keep Walking Lebanon," the video quoted in the text, thus: "Listen to Nadine Labaki's words of inspiration as she adopts the mantle of mother, citizen, and director to deliver a powerful message to the Lebanese." According to the ad agency responsible for the campaign, Leo Burnett Beirut, "The percentage of female interaction with the brand doubled to 49% versus just 24% last year." See <http://www.dubailynx.com/winners/2012/media/entry.cfm?entryid=107&award=99&order=2&direction=1>.
12. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
13. For the place of the city in Lebanese cinema, see among other films, Jocelyne Saab's *Once a Time in Beirut* (Kanya Ya Ma Kan, Beyrouth, Germany, 1994).
14. Lebanese female stars are prominent in the Arabic pop recording industry. Labaki directed Ajram's breakthrough video "Akhasmak Ah" and several additional award-winning clips. Their most recent collaboration "Fi Hagat" is the most viewed Arabic video on the Internet. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vxMNY-mNXA>. Ajram is Coca-Cola's Middle Eastern spokesperson and a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador. Labaki also directed the video for the Lebanese reality show *Star Academy*. For a discussion of the show, see Marwan Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
15. Nick Dawson, "Nadine Labaki: 'Caramel,'" *Filmmaker*, February 1, 2008, accessed May 21, 2012, <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2008/02/nadine-labaki-caramel>.
16. Annsley Chapman, "'Caramel' Director Nadine Labaki on Remaking the Chick Flick," *New York*, January 30, 2008, accessed May 21, 2012, [http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/caramel\\_director\\_nadine\\_labaki.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/caramel_director_nadine_labaki.html).
17. Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2008), 288.
18. *Caramel* Press Notes. Roadside Attractions, 2007.

19. Dawson, "Nadine Labaki: 'Caramel'."
20. *Caramel* Press Notes. Roadside Attractions, 2007.
21. See, for example, Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
22. Chapman, "'Caramel' Director Nadine Labaki on Remaking the Chick Flick."
23. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
24. Iranian–American director Maryam Keshavarz' *Circumstance* (2011) provides an interesting counterpoint. Much more explicit in its depiction of the erotic entanglements between the two 16-year-old schoolgirls at its center, the film appeals directly to LGBT Western and global gay audiences as well as Iranian diasporan audiences.
25. Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Festival Networks: New Topographies of Cinema in Europe." *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 82–106.