

Wadjda

(2012, Al-Mansour, Saudi Arabia)

Component 2: Global Film: Narrative, Representation and film Style

Focus Area: Representation

Introduction (by Subject Officer Rebecca Ellis)

- Imagine a world where no-one dare speak and laughter is punished. A world where freedom is outlawed, people are property and deviation from the rules carries brutal and violent consequences. This is no fictional, futuristic dystopia; this is women's present day Saudi Arabia.
- Boldly daring to go where no film has gone before, 'Wadjda' is the first feature ever to be filmed in this prohibited and deeply patriarchal domain. It is a film that tackles the stagnant, impenetrable taboos of female oppression in Saudi Arabia. It is even more extraordinary to learn that this mission impossible was carried out by a female director. Bravely venturing into strictly forbidden territory, Haifaa Al-Mansour directed the film remotely via a walkie-talkie to avoid being seen publicly giving orders to men.
- Al-Mansour's bravery is mirrored in the plucky young heroine at the heart of this human rights plight. Ten year old Wadjda (Waad Mohammed) is a wheeling, dealing young entrepreneur, weaving her way through a conservative and regimented high school designed to shape its female output into the second class citizens of the future. Never resigned to her fate, Wadjda sets about acquiring the burgeoning object of her desire; a bike. With feigned enthusiasm, but committed dedication, she enters a competition to memorise the Koran in the hope of seizing the cash prize needed to buy this treasured item, worshipped daily as it taunts her from the shop window.
- The bike acts as an explicit metaphor for liberation and the quest for its acquisition soon

becomes a frustrating analogy for the struggle for women's rights in a state where their movement and mobility is strictly prohibited. The film never struggles under the strain of its weighty subject matter, delivering an enjoyable and feel-good tale, combining elements of heart-warming comedy and addictive drama that does not detract from its inherent and brave messages.

- Mohammed's performance of Wadjda is commendable as the rebellious, cheeky tomboy with an angel faced façade and a cockeyed moral compass, presenting a refreshingly optimistic view of youth in revolt. Wadjda employs some cleverly contrived underhand manipulation tactics in her bid for glory, much to the viewer's delight, generating some stand out comedy moments. The subject of female oppression in Saudi Arabia is still considered an untouchable taboo of the highest order, making this something of a milestone in film-making. Not just in terms of its dissection of the status and discrimination of women but the courageousness of writer/director Al-Mansour who operates in the face of incessant adversity and hate-mail as a matter of course. Al-Mansour describes the film's central premise as one of 'hope, embracing change and moving ahead', messages subtly but powerfully apparent by the film's movingly poignant conclusion.
- An important film to study given the issues of gender, power and context prevalent in today's society and a diverse film in terms of themes, representation and women both in film and behind the camera.

PART 1: Key Sequence and timings and/or links

• Sequence 1

'Opening Sequence' 0.00 – 2.42

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q4axZhm5eA>

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- As a film in the realist tradition of location shooting, naturalistic lighting and performances, the opening sequence quickly establishes these characteristics. We start with shots of feet moving to the rhythm and adorned in light-weight dance style slippers – very feminine and practical. After this, the singing teacher stops the girls and asks them to stand in their places, the girls begin to sing again. This time we see faces and although she is behind a row of other girls, Wadjda is centrally positioned in the frame and in sharper focus than the others, suggesting her status as the protagonist. This is reinforced by the exchange of looks Wadjda has with some passing older girls and the way she is then singled out by the teacher to come to the front and sing alone. As she moves to the front we concentrate on her feet as they move towards us. We can see that Wadjda is wearing Converse trainers with purple laces. These suggest a degree of rebelliousness in Wadjda's character immediately. After she fails to sing solo Wadjda is removed from the other girls and we see a long shot of them singing altogether. Without her, they form a uniformly self-contained group in the most symmetrical shot we have seen so far, reinforcing her separateness from this group. When we then cut to Wadjda standing outside in the hot sun, as a form of sanction, we again focus on her Converse trainers first.

Mise-en-Scène

- As has been mentioned above, Wadjda's Converse trainers are a key symbolic component of the mise-en-scène in this opening sequence. The girls are dressed uniformly and conservatively in full-length grey gowns. The subtle differences between them, and therefore the ways in which they seem to be able to express a degree of individuality, are in their footwear, socks and hairstyle. At one point the cassette player is foregrounded. Its role in providing a cultural 'soundtrack' can be compared to the similar cassette player Wadjda uses to access a different soundtrack in the next sequence.

Editing

- The editing in this sequence, and in the film generally, is subtle and un-showy. It does not draw attention to itself either through rapid-cutting or long takes. The opening sequence,

however, establishes a pattern beginning sequences with small details rather than establishing shots of spaces. In this case, it is a close up of feet that starts the sequence. In the following sequence in the courtyard it is again feet (Wadjda's), and in the following (post-title) sequence it is the makeshift aerial on the wall that allows Wadjda to listen to Western radio stations. This emphasis on using the combination of cinematography and editing to draw attention to small details subtly emphasises the importance of these details.

- Interestingly the editing in the opening sequence serves to privilege Wadjda as the main protagonist but tends to avoid a shot/reverse shot pattern and the degree of point of view this would provide. The closest to a shot/reverse shot Wadjda is involved in is that with the older girls who walk past. This could suggest her disconnectedness to those around her and aspiration for a different set of peers.

Sound

- The diegetic sound of the children accompanying the voice on the cassette player starts abruptly with the opening shot of the feet. This, in turn, is silenced abruptly by the sharp sound of the teacher's voice as she tells them to stop. The silence as Wadjda is then asked to sing solo in front of the others is uncomfortable for the other girls, one of whom giggles slightly. When the teacher says, 'Don't you want us to hear your voice?' the theme of finding a voice is introduced. Wadjda will of course prove able to use her voice both to conform and to resist.
- The sequence in the courtyard is the first to employ the subtle non-diegetic music which helps to secure our alignment and allegiance with Wadjda.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Saudi Arabia is a very restrictive environment for women, who are legally forbidden to drive, leave the house unveiled, interact with men they aren't related to, and travel in public without a chaperone. These rules stem from a strict interpretation of Sharia law and are enforced by the religious police. However, women gained the right to vote in 2011 and some activists are hopeful this signals the beginning of

a change in Saudi Arabian society.

Historical

- Wadjda was celebrated at film festivals around the world but is not a difficult and inaccessible ‘art film’. It has a simple narrative, which owes a debt to Bicycle Thieves (Italy 1948) – the most influential Italian Neo-Realist film, which tells the story of a man seeking his stolen bicycle. A bicycle-focused narrative is perfect for the central idea of neo-realism – a story taken from everyday reality rather than Hollywood escapism. Realist films can have a powerful impact on audiences not used to seeing themselves on screen. Neo-realism depends on location shooting, potential use of non-professionals as actors, the cultural ‘fit’ between story, actors and location and small budgets.
- Two factors combined to give Wadjda a high profile. It was the first feature film to gain international distribution to be produced from within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) – a country with no conventional cinemas. Secondly, in a highly conservative country in which women are excluded from many public activities, such as driving, Wadjda was written and directed by a woman, Haifaa Al Mansour.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Representation

- A useful starter activity might be to ask students to think of any ways in which boys and girls are treated differently in our society; to consider if there are things that are unfair or which put girls at a disadvantage. They could then be asked to think of any examples of famous girls and women who have challenged unfairness and discrimination.
- Then, after the film, students could be asked what are some of the ways in which the lives of women and girls are controlled in Saudi Arabia. Can they recall any ways in which women and girls in the film try to be independent and gain more freedom in their everyday lives?
- There are interesting points of comparison in terms of representation in the film. Wadjda’s experience as a young person can be contrasted with that of Abdullah. It is from her desire to compete with him that her goal of owning a bicycle springs. The freedoms and power (in the case of that which he exercises over Wadjda’s

mother’s driver) which he enjoys serve to highlight the constraints on Wadjda herself. However, as their relationship evolves so does his attitude to those constraints and we see the potential in youth for change and progress.

- Another point of comparison is between the three main female characters: Wadjda, her mother and her teacher. All three are defined by the ways in which they conform to or resist the expectations placed on them as Saudi females. None of these representations is simple. For Wadjda’s mother, Reema, as well facing problems as a working woman she finds looking attractive is her only weapon in the battle to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. She loses this battle, but finds that she can make a gesture to help Wadjda gain some of the freedom denied to her. Wadjda’s teacher, Ms Hussa is a key enforcer of the ‘rules’ but her admission to Wadjda that she reminds her of herself as a young girl hints at past rebelliousness repressed into a resolution that today’s generation of girls are not going to get any of the freedoms that were denied her. Wadjda, herself, engages in small acts of rebellion like her scruffy Converse trainers but ‘plays the game’ by entering the Qu’ran recital competition in order to attempt the biggest overt act of rebellion in buying a bicycle.

PART 5 – Further resources

- <https://www.filmclub.org/assets/pdf/Identity-and-belonging-Inclusion-Resource-Wadjda.pdf>
- <http://cff.ecfaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/WadjdaNotes.pdf>
- <https://mrcsays.com/2014/03/25/wadjda/>
- <http://42lkm8490tno2166c630n6si.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PCFF-FilmGuide-Wadjda.pdf>
- <http://www.elyfilmsociety.com/resources/the%20notes%20WADJDA.pdf>
- <https://itpworld.wordpress.com/2013/08/21/wadjda-saudi-arabia-germany-2012/>
- <http://en.qantara.de/content/the-saudi-arabian-film-wadjda-a-childrens-story-in-a-grown-up-world>
- <http://susris.com/2013/07/17/change-coexistence-and-movies-haifaa-al-mansour/>
- <https://thedissolve.com/reviews/198-wadjda/>

- <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/review-wadjda-haifa-al-mansour/>
- <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/film-week-wadjda>
- <http://www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=94727>
- http://d6vsczyu1rky0.cloudfront.net/13793_b/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/03/MM51_web.pdf
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