Ariana (אריאנה, 1971)

Sigal Yona

dir. George Ovadiah; prod. Michael Shvily; screenplay George Ovadiah, Michael Shvily; photography Ya'ackov Kallach; music Haim Zur. 35mm, black/white, 90 mins. Shoval Film Production, distrib. Shoval Film Production.

Courtesy of the Late Michael Shvily Collection

Ariana is the first Israeli-produced film by Iraqi-born filmmaker George Ovadiah, a box-office success that launched his career as Israel's most prominent and prolific melodramatist. Ovadiah directed over a dozen commercially successful films in pre-revolutionary Iran before immigrating to Israel in 1970. *Ariana* followed his first transnational co-production, the Iranian-Israeli film *The Desired One* (*Ha-Nehsheket*, 1967). Film scholar Hamid Naficy regards him as a pioneer in the »hybridized film type,« which results from the migration of Arab and Jewish Iranian *fīlmfārsī* talent and narrative forms to Israel (172). As Naficy recounts, Ovadiah imported not only Iranian crews and casts, but also a set of formal and narrative practices from his earlier work in Iran. In particular, Ovadiah's Iranian melodrama *What Is My Guilt* (*Gonah-e Man Chist*, 1965) is an influence on *Ariana* (173).

The Iranian *fīlmfārsī* has been described by historian Pedram Partovi as a category of popular contemporary social melodrama about family and class conflict, often punctuated by heightened emotion and use of musical »interludes,« and occasionally relieved by comic moments (4). Indeed, these characteristics are evident in Ovadiah's hybridized work, which also borrows elements from the dominant local Israeli *bourekas* genre. The *bourekas* films were mostly comedies revolving around the ethnic tensions between Ashkenazi (of Eastern and Central European descent) and Mizrahi (of Middle Eastern and North African descent) Jews, which emerged after the mass immigration to Israel in the 1950s. The *bourekas* films characteristically attempted to solve these tensions through a romantic pairing between a Mizrahi man and an Ashkenazi woman (or vice-versa). Cultural critic Ella Shohat points to the symbolic and purposive essence of this pattern, describing *bourekas* films as operating within a »framework of a teleological structure leading to a grand finale in which marriage and family unity come to symbolize the continuity of the Jewish people« (116).

This teleological structure is also reproduced in *Ariana*, which is divided into three acts. The first act begins with a series of shots introducing the affair between Kochava (Rachel Terry), a naïve young woman, and Gabriel (Yitzhak Shilo), a wealthy attorney. When she becomes pregnant by him, he shamefully distances himself from their relationship. Kochava then finds care and support from her friends, the grocer Aboud (Arye Elias) and his wife Zohara (Tova Pardo). Kochava passes away after giving birth to her daughter, whom she has named Ariana. The film's second act echoes the scenario of infatuation, pregnancy, and abandonment, as it tells the parallel story of the adult Ariana (Dassi Hadari), who has been raised by Aboud and Zohara. Ariana falls in love with Gadi (played by pop singer Avi Toledano), the son of her adoptive father's wealthy client, the oddly comical Arthur (Avraham Ronai). When Arthur learns about his son's romance, he successfully enacts a ploy to separate the couple. In these two acts, along with the film's third act, *Ariana*'s structure closely aligns with Peter Brooks' account of the melodramatic mode, an account that traces the mode's origins back to the 19th century French novel. *Ariana* is premised on a dualistic moral framework of virtue and villainy, in which Gabriel and Arthur both exemplify classic melodramatic villains whose actions must be driven out (Brooks 33). Additionally, both the first and second acts end with an apparent temporary »triumph of villainy« (Brooks 29), and only the film's climactic third act entails a »drama of recognition« (Brooks 27). This third act features a court trial in which the film's narrative threads are brought together and resolved. When Aboud learns that Ariana is pregnant, he sues Arthur's family. Gabriel reappears in the role of the family's defense lawyer, as the two generations gather in court. The tribunal scene is a recurrent melodramatic motif identified by Brooks, and, as he suggests, the judges must publicly recognize the committed misdeed, upon which the »enigmatic and misleading signs« should be clarified (31). Gabriel is the first to publicly regret his wrongdoing, and Arthur follows by exposing his own ploy to separate Ariana and Gadi. These twin recognitions pave the way not only for the melodramatic reestablishment of the film's moral order (Brooks 42), but also for a »grand finale« that reaffirms the *bourekas* genre's typical structure.

Much of the character design also relies on the conventions of the *bourekas* genre. The characteristic alignment of class with ethnicity is emphasized by the two conflictual father figures incorporating their respective »other« language into their Hebrew dialogue (Aboud also speaks Arabic, and Arthur Yiddish). Relatedly, the Mizrahi working class characters are portrayed as warm, affectionate, expressive, and grounded. The scenes that involve Aboud and Zohara are shot on location in the coastal city of Jaffa, in an area that was at the time largely inhabited by immigrants. By contrast, the bourgeois Westernized Ashkenazi characters are portrayed as materialistic, self-important, and at times socially awkward or childishly spoiled. To this end, scenes featuring Arthur and his family are set mostly in the overly large spaces of their home. The depiction of their lavish and fanciful domestic lifestyle is not only consistent with *bourekas* conventions, but it also provides comic relief in the vein of *fīlmfārsī*. In one scene, for example, the characters drink tea in aristocracy-themed porcelain cups, referring to it as »French coffee.«

The musical interludes comment on and enhance the film's unfolding tale, while further incorporating *bourekas* conventions into *fīlmfārsī* melodrama. Ovadiah also extends his hybridization by using musical interludes drawn from Greek, Arab, and Jewish popular traditions. The opening song serves as a precursor to the film's tempo-

ral circularity. Sung by Avi Toledano (who is yet to appear as Gadi), the song's narrator expresses his love for Ariana through the emblems of the never-changing natural order. The second act begins as Arthur plans to throw a party for his son and asks Aboud to find an »orchestra« for him (adding a violin hand gesture). In a manner characteristic of the *bourekas* genre, Aboud misinterprets his intention and shows up with an Arab music ensemble. Led by Syrian Jewish musician Moshe Eliahu, the ensemble performs one of his signature compositions, »Haleluya Ve-simchu Na.« This uplifting song blends elements from Jewish liturgical chants with Arab musical tradition and, moreover, incorporates both Biblical and Modern Hebrew to express transpersonal gratitude and collective unity—a sentiment suggestive of the central role of interethnic romance in the *bourekas* genre. Gadi and Ariana then meet and dance together. In a later scene, they go out to a club. The Greek folk song played there, »Dirlada,« performed by Cypriot bouzouki player Trifonas Nikolaidis, contains an additional verse. Sung by Gadi for Ariana, and thus recalling the film's opening song, this additional verse heralds the beginning of the parallel storyline in the film's second act.

As Naficy rightly notes, the ethnic tensions that formed the backbone of the *bourekas* genre were also present in its critical reception (173). Upon the release of *Ariana*, the Eurocentric criticism of the time attributed the ostensibly negative characteristics of its melodrama to the »backward culture« of the Orient. A review published in the prominent daily *Davar*, for example, states: »The substandard cinema had inherited the tradition of the Victorian melodrama and nurtured it in different ways […]. If there are any remains, they can only be found at the area of the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf« (Har-Nof, my translation). Rather than a fossilized relic of a bygone era, Ovadiah's film emerges as a dynamic site of circulation and customization. By and large, *Ariana* is illustrative of the melodrama's transnational and transcultural mobility and adaptability, as it forms a rich, hybridized work, in which various narrative and aesthetic traditions merge and overlap.

References

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