Monsieur Ibrahim (*Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*, 2003)

Karen A. Ritzenhoff

dir. François Dupeyron; prod. Lauren Pétin, Michèle Pétin; screenplay François Dupeyron; photography Rémy Chevrin. 35mm, color, 94 mins. ARP Sélection and France 3 Cinéma, distrib. ARP Sélection.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran is an adult fairytale, a paternal melodrama that melancholically depicts not only intergenerational alliances but also the transcendence of religious differences, and thus makes it a showcase for the illusion of global peace and understanding among migrant communities. One of the film's shortcomings is its reliance on a romanticized image of the exotic, »oriental,« fatherly male, represented by the iconic film star Omar Sharif as Monsieur Ibrahim in his final role. Another flaw in the charming plot is the idealized depiction of French sex workers as caring women who give more warmth to men than their absent mothers or potential partners could. One of the prostitutes, Fatou (played by Mata Gabin), is Black, which ostensibly makes her especially desirable for the young protagonist who wants to have his first sexual experience but cannot afford her services. The fact that Fatou is deemed most exotic clearly evokes a French colonial discourse of »Otherness« in visual culture, most prominently displayed, for instance, in the turn of the century photographs of Algerian women in *The Colonial Harem* (Sentilles; Alloula). Fatou is thus also a reminder of France's colonial past and the legacy of the »Grand Nation.« It is not only Monsieur Ibrahim who is the exotic Other but also some of the women in the »Rue Bleue« in Paris, where the story unfolds and which is constructed as a multicultural microcosm.

The plot is based on a novel by Belgian playwright Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt. Its melodramatic elements are interwoven with notions of transnational identity, religion, and diaspora. Schmitt's novel starts with the sentence, »When I was eleven years old, I broke my piggy bank and went to see the whores« (5). The attraction to paid sex workers is at

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the forefront of the movie adaptation as well. Prostitutes are depicted as belonging to an alternative form of kinship among marginalized groups in a bourgeois society. They are idealized as being understanding and compassionate with men, young and old—when properly paid. Moïse »Momo« Schmitt (played by Pierre Boulanger) is orphaned at a young age. His mother has supposedly died—however, she later returns but is rejected by Momo—and his biological father commits suicide after having suffered from depression.

Momo lives in a Parisian low income, predominantly Jewish neighborhood in the early 1960s, across the street from the oft-frequented grocery store run by the enigmatic Monsieur Ibrahim. The store-owner takes great pleasure in his shop in the »Rue Bleue«—it is an institution. Momo is drawn to him, despite being from a different cultural and religious background. Momo is Jewish, and Monsieur Ibrahim is Muslim. One fact that is seldomly addressed in the criticism of the film is that Ibrahim comes from Turkey, is part of a cultural minority there, and ultimately returns to a remote rural area of the country to die. Ibrahim is thus an outsider in his home country as well, not just in the Parisian neighborhood where he sought to live. He is Sufi, and one can also witness his affinity with the dervishes who perform their whirling dance as part of the Mevlevi Order. Monsieur Ibrahim takes Momo to his country of origin on his final journey back to Anatolia. Their mode of transportation is spectacular: a red sports car convertible that makes these unlikely travel companions look like movie stars in a road movie, or so they think. Despite the intimate undertones of the relationship between these two men, there is no sexual innuendo, but rather genuine mentorship that Ibrahim offers to his young friend. Ultimately, Ibrahim bequeaths the store to Momo, and Momo converts to his mentor's Muslim faith—not only by taking on the business and embracing admiration for the teachings of the Qur'an but also by assuming the role as the neighborhood »Arab.« The film deals with diasporic communities and the way subsequent generations reject or adopt father figures.

Momo experiences a lot of discord with his biological father, who appears to be a tormented, bibliophile intellectual. The son sells the weighty volumes of books to pay for sexual favors with the sex workers in the »Rue Bleue.« The idea that literary books as hardware pay for sex, a form of software, is just one of the film's story elements that is both entertaining and paradoxical. Momo also breaks his piggy bank to pay for the services of Sylvie (Anne Suarez), a white prostitute. In some ways, Momo becomes Monsieur Ibrahim. Their deep friendship is »built on« their attitudes toward women and prostitution. This could be interpreted as male social bonding via the exchange of women's bodies and experiences with these bodies in the flesh. The relationship between Momo and Monsieur Ibrahim is not sexual but relies on their »shared« sexual experiences with female sex workers. This affirms their maleness both subjectively and interpersonally. The aspect of the movie that turns it into a fairytale of friendship and tenacity is the idea that Jewish and Muslim cultures are so closely related that it is possible to effortlessly switch between them.

Monsieur Ibrahim revises what has been identified as one of the prevalent genres in melodrama: the maternal melodrama (Gledhill; Gledhill and Williams). While these films depict mothers and daughters—in difficult and at times murderous complicity, especially in film noir (e.g. *Mildred Pierce*, 1945)—*Monsieur Ibrahim*'s melodramatic plot involves men. The power of patriarchy is challenged because Momo does not assume his father's legacy but conscientiously shifts his allegiance, stepping into Monsieur Ibrahim's footsteps. The way his mentor deals with women, especially stars and sex

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workers, is visualized with a subplot that features Brigitte Bardot (Isabelle Adjani) upon her visit to the particular quartier in Paris during a film shoot. In *Monsieur Ibrahim*, she flirts with the store-owner during a break from filming in the »Rue Bleue.« He over-charges her for a bottle of water, which she playfully accepts. Ibrahim knows the value of services, especially when it comes to transactions between men and women. Momo also embraces the idea of commodity value when he pays for sex and assumes a controlling male role, mimicking »the Arab« and the cultural stereotypes that go along with this racist label, despite his young age.

One of the key themes in *Monsieur Ibrahim* is the notion that diasporic communities allow individuals to seek out their own family connections, creating what British film scholar Daniela Berghahn has described as »far-flung families in film.« Berghahn explains that Ibrahim is an elderly Turkish Muslim man (mistakenly nicknamed ›the Arab‹ by his neighbors) who runs a grocery store in the Jewish quarter. The Jewish boy Moses from across the road is a regular customer (and shoplifter) there, and, after his father's suicide, Monsieur Ibrahim adopts him (77). The author labels the film adaptation as a road movie »about leaving the familiar behind and venturing forth into the unknown« (78). This metaphor of movement and shared experience is key to the understanding of the father-son relationship that develops between Ibrahim and Momo. It is also located at different cultural crossroads between Europe and the Middle East. Ibrahim takes the teenager onto a pilgrimage and a »home-coming« to a foreign, yet familiar, country. Berghahn concludes that »whereas many road movies convey their protagonists' marginality and ultimate unassimilability through an open-ended narrative structure—these outsiders just carry on driving« (80).

Like other diasporic films, François Dupeyron's *Monsieur Ibrahim* relies on strategies of representation connected to melodramatic story elements of isolation, loss, and identity crisis. Such films often display rites of passage from childhood to adulthood and the transformations that ensue: »the protagonists physically cross borders on their journeys to self-discovery as well as venturing beyond personal boundaries« (Ritzenhoff 204). They frequently depict families and destinies in flux, overshadowed by dark cultural tensions and conflicts. *Monsieur Ibrahim* plays with the notion of chosen cultural communities (see also Naficy 1999; Naficy 2001). The melodrama of diasporic films often shows that the tensions between homeland and chosen exile are based on memory—initially repressed, and then re-emerging in complicated cultural microcosms. While *Monsieur Ibrahim* ends with the death of »the Arab,« the melodramatic ending allows relief, as Momo is able to choose where he belongs, leaving his own traumatic past as a Jewish orphan behind.

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