

Narcissism in the City: "Caramel" and "Don't Mess with the Zohan"
Doris Bittar, October 14, 2008

On a weekend this summer I viewed "Caramel" on Friday and "Don't Mess With the Zohan" on Saturday. Both films, in simplistic terms, involve beauty salon shops operated by Arabs, one in Beirut and the other in Brooklyn. The salons are segues into narratives that cross socio-political barriers. This review could continue as a campy cataloging of the similarities between the two films, or it could probe the varying degrees of individual and societal narcissism that both exemplify, albeit in divergent ways.

CARAMEL:

"Caramel" is the first major film by Nadine Labaki. It follows several women who work in a beauty salon, their clients and those who live and work in the neighborhood. In the salon we enter the world of *sukar* or caramel, a stretchy candy widely used in the Arab world for hair removal.

"Caramel" initially seems to be a fluffy movie: beautiful and light. However, its quaintness is paired with the codes of Lebanese social constraints and familial expectations. Beirut is variously beautiful but coupled with stark reminders of the war's wastelands. These backdrops are interlaced with human interactions and secretive liaisons. At its core this film profoundly captures Beirut's unique love of itself. "Caramel" navigates between narcissism and a definition of community versus family. The cinematography ranges from abstract fragmentation and sculpted montage to surreal color pastiches with varied lighting. The acting is understated and economically highlights the idiosyncrasies of the characters. Given the soft and muted cinematic color, the minimal acting follows a parable-like script where actions speak louder than scripted dialogue.

"Caramel's success lays in its open framework that holds together the complex sub-narratives. It is a structure that allows taboos such as extra-marital affairs, homosexuality, premarital sex, care of the mentally ill and Muslim-Christian relations be examined briefly, albeit intensely and poetically. Its depths lay in what can be imagined but not realized, and how cultural constraints anchor communities. This is a quiet film and worth seeing more than once.

DON'T MESS WITH THE ZOHAN:

Adam Sandler's latest movie, "Don't Mess With the Zohan," is a funny slapstick comedy done in extremely poor taste. Zohan, played by Sandler, is an over-sexed-hummus-loving super commando who wants to become a hairdresser specializing in 1970's dry-look hairstyles. Zohan has super heroic physical prowess, and is absolutely and unapologetically in love with himself. He is clearly a spoiled child raised by rough and tumble parents. A particularly resonant and hilariously cruel scene is when Zohan tells his parents about his desire to become a hairdresser. Upon hearing his son's wish, his father and mother sport a gay affectation and call him a "Fagalla." As they converse, his

father casually dips his glasses into the hummus and eats it as though it was the most natural thing to do. The ease with which the characters interact and tease each other seems self-indulgently normal.

It is rare that Palestinians are ever mentioned as specifically as they are in this movie. The Palestinian characters are not developed, yet Sandler clearly avoids the tired stereotypes. In fact, he narrows the chasm of misunderstanding by showing how insufferable the Israelis can be. The contrast between the two enemies is based on an overdeveloped narcissism embodied by the Israelis. The Arab characters are negotiated personas situated somewhere between gentle Italian types and mysterious Zorro types. John Turturro fits that description and so by default the other Palestinians end up with the same temperament. Not surprisingly, Turturro plays the evil but lovable terrorist.

The aggressive Israeli stereotypes get the lion's share of attention, and it may be that in "Zohan," Sandler has created the most definitive prototype yet seen for the militaristic Israeli caricature. Coming in from the backdoor, Sandler's "Zohan" oddly breaks taboos and lays the foundation for humor in the anguished political landscape of Israel-Palestine.

The use of beauty salons lends itself to narcissism as clients must look at themselves in the mirror and romance their surroundings. Perhaps we are sucked into these two films because beauty parlors, after all, are about creating a hyper-focused self-indulgence.