Scriptwriting Workshop for 2012’s Cinema Grantees
May 28 - 30, 2013 – Beirut
Dar Al Musawwir and AltCity
Back in December 2012, a jury committee which comprised the two award-winning directors, Ziad Doueiri (Lebanon) and Raja Amari (Tunisia), as well as renowned writer, poet and journalist Wael Abed Al Fattah (Egypt), evaluated 69 projects received during AFAC’s open call for the annual General Grants for Cinema. A total of 12 film projects were selected to receive the grants. The jury concluded their meeting with the following points: there’s a clear presence of strong ideas among the grantees; there is a lack of writing skills in some cases which is hindering the scripts’ development; there is a need for screenwriting training workshops in the Arab world.

AFAC has taken on the jury’s recommendation of establishing a scriptwriting workshop for the Cinema grantees. AFAC had already conducted six workshops as part of its special programs - the Arab Documentary Film Program (ADFP) and the Crossroads program – and so it is not a far stretch to offer professional support to recipients of the general grant too. The first workshop for feature fiction films benefitting projects awarded in the annual General Grant for Cinema was thus held between May 28th and May 30th, 2013, a Scriptwriting Consultation Workshop for the 2012 Cinema projects.

AFAC’s workshops target filmmakers (and producers) who had received grants for their projects with the aim of providing them with professional support in specific gap areas. They involve a number of seasoned film professionals that act as advisors, particularly for less experienced filmmakers, which make up most of the grantee pool. Through consulting closely with the jurors committee, communicating regularly with the grantees, staying abreast of the major developments pertaining to their projects as well as listening to and learning from their needs and challenges, AFAC is able to design a properly tailored training program.

The scriptwriting consultation workshop for the 2012 Cinema projects took place in Beirut, where an advisory program was implemented with the help of a team of advisors, coming from different cinematic and geographical backgrounds. In order to allocate an appropriate amount of
time for the working sessions of the feature-length fiction scripts and the necessary focus on the individual projects, AFAC kept the number of participating projects at three.

The three feature fiction projects are all in their final development phase. These three projects are: Bassam Jarabawi’s "Solitaire King" (Palestine), Ahmad Fawzi Saleh’s "Poisonous Roses" (Egypt), and Rabih El-Amine’s "The Trees Also Die" (Lebanon). All three filmmakers – aged 28, 30, and 38 respectively - are working on fine-tuning their scripts, finding their weakness and tweaking their most recent drafts together with the help of the advisors.

The choice of the advisors was inspired both by the similarity of the three projects as well as their unique individual qualities. All three projects are somehow looking at failed heroism and the struggle to change one’s destiny. Lebanese filmmaker Ghassan Salhab –a regular AFAC advisor- offered his distinctive insight into the creative process of writing for film as well as directing. Brazilian filmmaker Karim Ainouz, of Algerian origins, is a well-known filmmaker - "Madame Satã" (2002), "Suely’s Heaven" (2006), "I Travel because I Have to, I Come Back Because I Love You" (2009) - represented an interesting international perspective and humanistic intuition. French producer Marie-Pierre Macia brought her many years of experience in programming and producing works by Arab filmmakers - Palestine’s Kamal Jaafari with "Port of Memory" - and one of the most prestigious living cineaste Hungary’s Béla Tarr for "The Turin Horse" (2011).

With this intimate team of 6 people, the workshop kicked off with a welcome dinner where the filmmakers and advisors got to know each other informally before the formal meetings begin.
One month before the workshop, projects’ files (synopses, treatments, existing visual material, and samples of filmmakers’ previous works) were sent to the advisors to allow for in-depth analysis during the meetings. One-on-one meetings constituted the bulk of the program as it proved to be the most beneficial component of the previous workshops held by AFAC. Over a three day period, each of the participating filmmakers would have a two-hour session twice with each of the three advisors. There would also be group meetings and case studies. Participants were informed ahead of time to prepare a brief presentation of their projects for the workshop opening session and were requested to read each other’s scripts as well, and prepare questions to their colleagues. Feedback sessions among advisors and with participants were conducted at the end of each day to allow for an immediate assessment of the day’s work and any needed adjustment to the schedule of the following day. Screening of a case study film as well as a film from one of the advisors took place and a final group feedback session concluded the workshop on the last day. An intensive and rare opportunity to bring younger filmmakers of the Arab region to benefit from the experience and insights of seasoned and well-recognized filmmakers from around the world, the scriptwriting workshop would make an important creative impact on the grantee’s perspectives and self-reflection before taking on the production of their film.

Program
On the first day, the advisors had their first meeting to share their notes on the three projects. The discussion spanned an array of topics related to the scripts: storyline, characters, character development, style of writing, etc... The advisors then defined the direction that each would like to take in the first one-on-one meetings. Participants presented their projects and shared some visual material (trailer or rushes), giving the advisors an insight into their visual and artistic approach to their topics. It was also a time for questions and comments among each other regarding the different styles and attitudes observed towards making the films. The aim of this exercise was not only to acquaint the participants with each others’ projects, but also to give them the chance to explore ways of how to best represent their works in words. The advisors were keen on eliminating any element of “pitching”, and were rather looking for an answer from each of them to a sole question: Why do you NEED to make this film?

One-on-one meetings followed and occupied the entire afternoon. It was like therapy for filmmakers, as each struggled to express the places where their scripts were facing difficulty. The first day concluded with a screening of a film by Karim Ainouz, "Suely’s Heaven". It was his second feature film and it proved to be an inspiring choice because it is a character-driven film, as are the three projects at hand. Karim’s words after the film screening, as he told us about events and ‘moods’ that were going on behind the scenes and on the set, without any fear of exposing the film's vulnerability, really hit a chord with the young filmmakers. He generously shared with us all the risks and the decisions that changed along the way, laying bare the evolving process of filmmaking.

That day during dinner, the filmmakers were feeling less burdened and more inspired. They started to mingle more easily, with passionate debates and urgent questions coming up and discussed within the group, setting the tone for the next day’s extensive one-on-one sessions.
The advisors met again in the morning to evaluate the first day meetings. They shared their ideas on how to best benefit the filmmakers and help them to communicate their projects, each in their own way.

From 10:30 am to the early evening, the filmmakers finished a complete round of one-on-one sessions with all three advisors. Discussions had spanned a wide range of topics related to structure, storytelling, origins of the stories, personal aspects integrated in their scripts, creative and visual approaches, weaknesses and strengths, etc.

Towards the end of the day, two additional meetings were scheduled for Marie Pierre Macia with the producers of “Solitaire King” and “The Trees Also Die”: Sami Shanaa and Carole Abboud respectively.
The third day opened with a case study of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s “Ali: Fear Eats the Soul”. Salhab introduced the German filmmaker who, despite dying at a very young age (37), managed to make some 40 films and TV dramas, becoming one of the most important figures in the New German Cinema. Salhab pointed out his singularity and rigorous cinematic choices to communicate a simple story, integrating with subtlety his social and political criticism. The film was a lesson in how to convey the complexity of the human condition without being complicated.

A final round of one-on-one sessions was completed before advisors and participants left the workshop premises to a coffee shop by the sea where the group meeting was held in a refreshing atmosphere. Participants reflected on the meetings, advisors’ feedback, discussions, as well as their initial expectations versus the actual output of the workshop. Each presented a detailed assessment of the expected challenges and the work to be done in the coming months in light of the discussions they had with the three advisors. For their part, advisors also voiced general observations based on the two-day meetings and raised additional issues, questions and advice in relation to each project.

That afternoon, there were additional one-on-one meetings arranged upon participants’ requests, and a final feedback session was conducted with the advisors to evaluate the workshop itself. Three days was exactly enough time for this kind of workshop, and selecting a few number of projects was a wise choice since it allowed for more intense evaluation and discussions of each project. Also, the smallness of the group allowed for flexibility in responding to each participants needs and to go with the flow of what became most interesting rather than following a pre-set format.
Project Title: Poisonous Roses  
**Director:** Ahmad Fawzi Saleh  
**Producers:** Eman Hemeda, Karim Aitouna  
**Country:** Egypt

Saqr is a handsome man from the slums of the tanneries where he has lived and worked all his life. He dreams of escaping. He is torn between his love for his sister, who lives with him in the tanneries, and his wealthy girlfriend who can take him out of his world. The story is told from the point of view of the three main characters.

Project Title: Solitaire King  
**Director:** Bassam Jarabawi  
**Producer:** Sami Shanaa  
**Country:** Palestine

"Solitaire King" follows Ziad, a 30-year-old Palestinian political prisoner, after his unexpected release from solitary confinement in Israeli custody. After 13 years in jail, Ziad is blindfolded and bound, by bus, for home. Ziad’s perception of reality is overcome by his fantasies, his last resort for survival.

Project Title: The Trees Also Die  
**Director:** Rabih El-Amine  
**Producer:** Carole Abboud  
**Country:** Lebanon

Shaza, a young mother of a 10 year old boy, flees the city with her son and goes searching for a place to bury her husband. They stop for the night in an isolated house where they come across Wadad and Rachad. The night becomes an eternity and the four characters retreat gradually into their memories and their fears. Meanwhile, a war is raging outside.
Marie-Pierre Macia (France)
After majoring in Literature, she worked at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, at the American Film Archives as a researcher, and spent a decade programming the San Francisco International Film Festival. Between 1998 and 2002 she was the head of the Directors’ Fortnight in the Cannes Film Festival. She’s the artistic director of Crossroads, the co-production forum of the Thessaloniki Festival, and a co-founder of the company MPM Films.

Ghassan Salhab (Lebanon)
Born in Dakar, Senegal. In addition to making his own films, Salhab collaborates on various scenarios in Lebanon and in France, and teaches film in Lebanon. He has directed four long films: “Beyrouth Fantôme” (selected by Trois Continents/ Nantes 1998 and various international film festivals), “Terra Incognita” (selected by Sélection Officielle / « Un Certain Regar » - Cannes 2002), “The Last Man” (selected by « Cinéastes du Présent » - Locarno 2006, Montpellier, Torino, Tribeca, “Tous les cinemas du monde” – Cannes 2007…), and “1958” (selected by FID Marseille, Locarno, MEIFF Abu Dhabi…), in addition to numerous short films and videos, including “(Posthume); Narcisse Perdu; My living body, my dead body”; “La Rose de personne”. He has also published his texts and articles in various magazines.

Karim Ainouz (Brazil)
Karim Ainouz is a Brazilian-Algerian filmmaker and visual artist, presently living and working in Berlin. He holds a degree in Architecture from the University of Brasilia and in Cinema Studies from New York University. He then enrolled in the Program of Independent Studies of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Ainouz’s feature debut, “Madame Satã”, premiered in 2002 at the Cannes Film Festival’s Un Certain Regard. His next films, “Suely in the Sky” and “I Travel Because I Have To, I Come Back Because I Love You” (co-directed with Marcelo Gomes) premiered in the Venice Film Festival’s “Orizzonti”, in 2006 and 2009 respectively. His short films include “Paixão Nacional” (1996) and “Seams”. (1993). His installations have been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial (1997) and the São Paulo Biennial (2004).