*Salmon Fishing in the Yemen.* Dir. Lasse Hallström. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Emily Blunt, Amr Waked. UK Film Council/ BBC Films/ CBS Films, 2011.

Lasse Hallström is a highly regarded dramatic filmmaker hailing from Sweden, known for subtle and charming work. His films are not short of conflict, or of complexity, but each story is certainly wrapped in a neat little bow by the time the credits roll. Hallström has been acclaimed for *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1993), *The Cider House Rules* (1999), and *Chocolat* (2000). While all of these films delve into issues of emotion, family, and belonging, the story's environment is often small and self-contained. Hallström excels at this kind of story.

*Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* is based on the 2007 satirical novel by Paul Torday. The novel presents vignettes of an unraveling public relations deebacle through text messages, emails, online chat sessions and other correspondences, treating those involved beyond the political realm - that is, fisheries experts and financial managers - as secondary. Simon Beaufoy's script adapts this for the rom-com moviegoer, pushing the politicians into the background and bringing to the fore salmon fishing expert Dr. Fred Jones (Ewan McGregor) and Harriet Chetwode-Talbot (Emily Blunt), the financial representative for Yemeni Sheikh Muhammed (Amir Waked). Muhammed's dream is to bring salmon to the Yemen for recreational fishing. His loftier purpose is to kindle a positive relationship between the Middle East and the West through a shared pastime. Through the development of the program all seems to be going well, but the Middle East is a dangerous place - at least as far as the story is concerned - and such righteous endeavours can never go unscrutinized, or unpunished. Both Fred and Harriet have partners - Fred is long married, and Harriet is involved with a missing British soldier - so they keep their relationship platonic, at least to begin with. This basic outline skirts a number of deeper issues with which Torday wrestles in the novel, but it is enough to say that the written work is a deep and incisive commentary on modern social, political, and technological mores.

Suffice to say that *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* does not, strictly speaking, fit into Lasse Hallström's oeuvre. Simon Beaufoy's script does its

level best to incorporate the multi-faceted, fast-paced, uber-technological bent of the novel but ultimately, on this front, both Beaufoy and Hallström fail. The public relations-cum-political spin subplot often feels clunky and contrived, distracting both director and, by extension, audience, from what Beaufoy has made the main narrative of the film version, which is the up-and-down relationship between Fred and Harriet. One example is an early exchange between the British Prime Minister and his communications specialist Patricia Maxwell (Kristin Scott Thomas) - the exchange is entirely contained within an instant messaging service on the screen of a computer, designed to emulate Apple's trans-device Messages service. This reviewer will concede that it is a unique way of presenting a part of the narrative, but it does not gel at all well with the visual style of the rest of the film.

The portrayal of the Middle Eastern antagonists adheres to the stereotype of a faceless, muttering evil, but the Sheikh and his land are actually treated with a reserve and respect that is rare in British or American films. Sheikh Muhammed - while obscenely rich - seems to be an honest, loyal and principled man. A quiet, but strong, character - emblematic, or so this reviewer believes, of a certain form of Arabic nature - the Sheikh serves as the perfect foil for Fred, the bumbling British bureaucrat. Fred struggles throughout the film to break free from his perfectly-managed world;: his office cubicle, his packed lunches, his neat home office, his neat marriage. On encountering the Sheikh - who lives almost exclusively on a faith-based system of open curiosity and optimism - Fred is stopped in his tracks. The relationship between Fred and Sheikh Muhammed is a gentle, respectful tussle of cultures, and one of the most interesting in Hallström's film: McGregor and Waked carry it off masterfully. The central love story, too, is treated tenderly. Where less deft directors might be tempted to consummate the relationship - cinematically - in a dimly-lit night of passion, Hallström realistically keeps the interaction between Fred and Harriet simple, quiet, and reserved - both characters are in relationships, or at least dealing with some internal issues, mirroring the tone of the film as a whole. The relationship is presented mostly through proper conversation, and the chemistry between McGregor and Blunt lends Beaufoy's dialogue great credibility. Any physical contact is suitably restrained - an arm around the shoulder, or a touch of the hand. At the film's conclusion, a clasp of their hands represents the final "'coming together"' - the happy ending.

Subtlety and simplicity is what stands out in Hallstrôm's direction and in the central performances of McGregor, Blunt, and Waked. While this single-minded vision is occasionally let down by an over-complicated script and a sometimes equally concatenated approach to cinematography and editing, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* remains a charming and optimistic film that will resonate with audiences from the East, the West, and most places in between.

## Works Cited

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Daniel Binns
University of Western Sydney