**Arab Cinema and the
Sensibilities of the Socialist Transformation**

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by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film Studies

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
16 September 2009

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-58460-6
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-58460-6

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Abstract

By means of a close textual analysis of a group of films, this thesis explores how Arabic cinemas departed from the normative practices of the Egyptian studio system. The films are: *Cairo Station* (Youssef Chahine, Egypt, 1958), and *Fatma* (Ahmed Badrakhan, Egypt, 1947), *The Duped* (Tawfiq Salih, Syria, 1972), *The Nights of the Jackal* (Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid, Syria, 1988), and *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (Nabil Ayouch, Morocco, 2000). These films reveal an engagement with the social and political reforms set in motion by pan-Arabism and the politics of the Socialist Transformation of the early and mid-1950s. In addition, these films deal with themes of unity and discord, and as such foreshadow and/or reflect on the loss of the 1967 War and the resulting defeat of the discourse and ethics of Arabism. Critical realism and self-conscious use of allegory are the stylistic and strategic approaches that unite these films. As argued in this thesis, the aesthetic and ethical positions found in this diverse group of films constitute a legacy of sensibilities that continues to define and distinguish works of Arab cinematic realism committed to the exploration of the politics brought about by a socialist transformation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank arguably the finest film studies faculty in academia that a fledgling film scholar could learn from: André Loiselle, George McKnight, JoAnne Stober, José Sánchez, Marc Raymond, Barbara Gabrielle, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Mark Langer, Chris Faulkner, Paul Theberge, and Charles O'Brien. The faculty's administration of course deserves a honourable mention, and a sincere thank you to Barbara Shannon, and Wiz Long in the School for Studies in Art and Culture at Carleton University.

The sincerest acknowledgement and eternal gratitude is reserved for Zuzana Pick whose mentoring, incredible endurance and dedication helped me develop from a film student to a hopeful film scholar. I honour her support most along with my family and loving partner Juliana López-Fajardo. God bless you all.

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Introduction: **Realism, Socialism and Pan-Arabism**

In an interview published in 1992 by the *Paris Review*, a then 81-year old and Nobel Prize Winner Naguib Mahfouz spoke about his career choices and his relationship with Egyptian film director Salah Abu Seif. To a question about the hardships he confronted during his lifetime, the writer responded:

Most certainly [the most difficult] was the decision to dedicate myself to writing, thereby accepting the lowest standard of living for myself and my family. It was especially difficult since the prospect of money was dangled before me . . . Around 1947 I was given the chance to work as a scriptwriter with the best in the field. I began working with Salah Abu Seif, but I gave it up. I refused to continue. I didn't work with him again until after the war when everything became expensive. Before that, I wouldn't think of it. And my family accepted these sacrifices.¹

In spite of Mahfouz' misgivings, he collaborated with Abu Seif eight times adapting to the screen one short story, five screenplays and two novels he had written. Given the differences between the writer and filmmaker, it was an unlikely partnership. Mahfouz lived to write: he was highly disciplined, deeply committed to his craft and to the exploration of Egyptian and Arab identity. In spite of having experienced relative poverty, imprisonment and survived a stabbing, he carried on without compromising his ethical integrity. In contrast, Abu Seif's position was more ambivalent. He was a successful employee of

¹El Shabrawy, Charlotte, "The Art of Fiction No. 129," 21.

Studio *Misr*, the main Egyptian production company founded by businessman and financier Talaat Harb who established Bank *Misr* in the 1920s and the studio in 1935. Abu Seif's work was informed by bourgeois values, despite often being challenged and banned by politicians and clergymen that regarded him as a powerful figure and possessing clout equal to their own. As a prominent figure in the Egyptian studio system, he made controversial films time and again without the hindrances other realist directors faced, and even survived the targeting of "critics loyal to Colonel Nasser's dictatorial government," which many of his peers did not.²

Although he frequently expressed his distaste for the "realist filmmaker" moniker, any study on realism in Arabic cinema must start with Abu Seif. Widely recognized as the father of Arab realism, he was amongst the first Arab directors to articulate a political position in his films. He began his career in documentary and moved to feature fiction filmmaking by working with Niazi Mustafa and Kamal Salim. Salim had already started experimenting with realist aesthetics. With Salim's untimely passing, Abu Seif carried on with this project to become a leading figure of Egypt's nascent and burgeoning cinematic realism. Yet, his greatest achievement was to introduce Mahfouz to the world of cinema, and introduce film audiences to the writer's world. Thus, any exploration of Arab realism must also start with Mahfouz. Edward Said's eloquent description validates this claim when he writes, "The realistic novels on which [Mahfouz'] fame rests, far from being only a dutiful sociological mirror of modern Egypt, are

² Darwish, Adel, "Obituary: Salah Abu-Seif."

also audacious attempts to reveal the highly concrete way power is actually deployed.”³ That audacity is at the heart of the legacy explored in this thesis.

The cinematic vision of Abu Seif is aligned to the literary work of Mahfouz. In spite of their differences, they belong to a generation driven by the need to incorporate social and political issues into their work by detailing them and, in the process, articulating a sensibility committed to change. Arab film critic Ibrahim Al Aris' comments about the director's style provide a description of this approach:

making use of actors and actresses... in unconventional ways; depicting the living conditions of the lower classes in society; showing how relations evolve according to the psychological aspect of the personalities; dealing with crime as a part of social reality, examining its causes instead of its results; and, in addition, utilizing technical elements like light, montage and makeup as factors in portraying the psychological dimensions of events and characters. There is another feature important in the subsequent films of Abu Seif: starting from an apparent criminal act, they analyze it and attempt to draw from it a picture of society, an often pessimistic one that shows man himself in his confusion, his relationships, and his journey.⁴

Realism in Arabic cinema can be understood in two distinctive ways. As described above, it is primarily a style utilized for its precision and ability to allow filmmakers to delve into (as close as fiction film possibly can) the world of the poor. Realism is mobilized to represent the realities of the disenfranchised, namely the lower and lower-middle class sectors of Arab societies. In spite of being the majority, these groups lack education, financial means and social status to participate fully in a public discourse strictly controlled by the state and

³ Said, Edward W, “Naguib Mahfouz and the Cruelty of Memory.”

⁴ Al Aris, Ibrahim, “The Legacy of Salah Abu Seif: Master of Realism in Egyptian Cinema.”

the upper classes that own the means of communication. Indeed Arab cinema is obsessed with class, namely with the conflicts arising from class division. The main concern of social expose films, for instance, has been to draw attention to the marginalized, documenting how their lives and experiences are shaped by the immediate context. Al Aris describes Abu Seif's intentions best, stating:

clearly, what concerned Abu Seif more than other directors... was the individual in his struggle with social conditions. The individual caught in the dilemma of livelihood, whether a saint or criminal, sinner or a victim, is in the end a product of social conditions.⁵

The second understanding of realism in Arab cinema coincides with the first yet expands its goals. Instead of simply documenting, it denounces exploitation, raises awareness and advocates change. In the Middle Eastern context where states have historically monitored media production, this critical realism is by far more challenging and potentially controversial. Mahfouz recognized the need for an activist practice when he stated:

I believe that society has the right to defend itself, just as the individual has the right to attack that with which he disagrees. If [an artist] comes to the conclusion that his society's laws or beliefs are no longer valid or even harmful, it is his duty to speak up. But he must be ready to pay the price for his outspokenness.⁶

Admittedly this sort of activist cinema was beyond the ideological disposition of Abu Seif. Yet, it anticipated the more daring and aggressive films by Egyptian directors Youssef Chahine and Tawfiq Salih. While endorsing the socialist principles contained in the cinema section of the Egyptian National

⁵ Al Aris, Ibrahim, "The Legacy of Salah Abu Seif: Master of Realism in Egyptian Cinema."

⁶ El Shabrawy, Charlotte, "The Art of Fiction No. 129," 21.

Charter, these directors pushed the boundaries of social realism to represent the plight of common people. Their work articulated the socialist sentiments of class solidarity, but also exposed the social exploitation and abuse of power in the wake of the traumatic defeats to Israel in both 1948 and 1967. They became agents of a critical realism that manifested itself in various forms through the Arab world; it can be found in the work of the Syrian director Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid in the 1980s and the Maghreb directors in the 1990s, including French-Moroccan Nabil Ayouch, whose films are discussed in this thesis.

The differences between the two modalities of Arab cinematic realism become more apparent in the late 1950s and 1960s when cultural production was directly affected by the more adverse manifestations of Arab nationalism, namely the authoritarian policies and corruption of Middle Eastern governments, and the disastrous effects of the 1956 Suez Crisis and 1967 Arab-Israeli war.⁷ Mahfouz describes how he experienced the period after the Free Officers' coup d'état in 1952. He states:

I was happy with that revolution. But unfortunately it did not bring about democracy... In Nasser's time one feared the walls. Everyone was afraid. We would sit in the cafés, too afraid to talk. We would stay at home, too afraid to talk. I was afraid to talk to my children about anything that happened before the revolution—I was worried they would go to school and say something that would be misinterpreted.⁸

⁷ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 239.

⁸ El Shabrawy, Charlotte, "The Art of Fiction No. 129," 21.

To many the Nasser regime represented nothing more than an extension of the dictatorial and privilege-oriented politics of the monarchy; the only difference being its left-leaning nationalism.⁹

This anxiety about being able to speak openly and freely produced either insidious forms of self-censorship or a revitalized use of codified representations. In theatre, literature and cinema allegory became a preferred option to counter institutionalized forms of censorship. While not everyone adopted metaphor and symbolism as a conscious strategy, writers like Mahfouz recognized the potential of allegory. When speaking about reviews of Midaq Alley, he said:

When I first heard that Hamida symbolized Egypt, I was taken by surprise, even a little shocked. I suspected that the critics had simply decided to turn everything and everyone into symbols. But then I began to see resemblances between aspects of Hamida's behavior and aspects of the political situation. And by the time I had finished reading the article, I realized that the critic was right—that while I was writing about Hamida I was also subconsciously writing about Egypt. I think such symbolic parallels probably always come from the subconscious. Although I may not intend a story to convey a certain meaning that a reader sees in it, that meaning may nevertheless be a legitimate part of the story. A writer writes both consciously and subconsciously.¹⁰

These comments substantiate Ella Shohat's and Robert Stam's remarks about the presence of allegory in Third World cinemas. They write:

The allegorical tendency available to all art becomes exaggerated in the case of repressive regimes,

⁹ Gordon, Joel, Makers of the Muslim World: Nasser, Hero of the Arab Nation, 3- 4. While Nasserism is still a contentious and heavily debated issue in Middle Eastern studies, it is generally understood as an ideology based on the idea of uniting Arabs and enabling them to collectively participate in international affairs. Its political strategy was defined as a constant struggle to achieve domestic stability in the face of the foreign threats to Arab unity and identity.

¹⁰ El Shabrawy, Charlotte, "The Art of Fiction No. 129," 21.

perhaps, especially where intellectual filmmakers, profoundly shaped by nationalist discourse, feel obliged to speak for and about the nation as a whole.¹¹

Implicit and oblique meanings have been naturalized in Arab cultural practices to the point where even today entire television series and/or films about the history of Islam refer to the Prophet Muhammad, for example, without contravening the prohibition against figurative portrayals.¹² By blending literal representation with symbols and metaphor, Arab filmmakers added either a critical dimension to cinematic realism or subverted prevailing myths and discourses on class, identity and culture.

Promises of a Brighter Day

In the wake of World War II, specifically between 1948 and 1967, the establishment of the state of Israel and the demographic shift resulting from the massive influx of Jewish people was perceived by Arab leaders as being an extension of the history of colonialism in the Middle East.¹³ A period of intense conflict ensued. Fanned by anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiments, it culminated with an overt defiance to Western politics: the formulation of a pan-Arabic project based on the ideals of socialism and cultural reaffirmation.

¹¹ Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multicultural and the Media*, 272.

¹² Bakker, Freek L., "The Image of Muhammad in *The Message*, the First and Only Feature Film About the Prophet of Islam." The author speaks to the tensions surrounding the depiction of Prophet Muhammad in Syrian-American filmmaker Moustapha Akkad's *The Message* (1976) stating "It was a very special film because as a result of the restrictions imposed by some prominent Muslim legal scholars, the Prophet was not depicted, nor his wives nor his cousin Ali." Also see Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 48 – 49.

¹³ Gerner, Deborah J. and Jillian Schwedler eds., *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, 2nd Edition, 57.

With the world still at war, albeit a Cold War, Egypt entered what would be known as the era of the Socialist Transformation. In a world divided into ideological spheres of influence, Egypt's leadership found it more advantageous to challenge the Western coalition of former colonial powers by aligning itself to the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Egypt did not assume Communism fully; as an Islamic nation it was not ready to embrace atheistic and anti-religious values. Instead of advocating a complete transformation, Egypt adopted socialism selectively. On the other hand, the Nasser revolution was not a true revolution; it was neither shaped by the people's will nor their participation. Instead, it polarized the intellectuals and marginalized the lower-middle class and the poor. Except for the nationalization process, it formulated a discourse centered on socialist transformation. Gamal Abd Al-Nasser promised a brighter future for Egypt, and with it the formation of a unified, brand new Arabia.

Although film was still viewed in some sectors as a Western product, officials recognized the propaganda value of Arabic language cinema and mobilized it in support of the Socialist Transformation project. The leading producer of Arabic films was Egypt; it possessed an industry that was privately owned, profit driven, modelled on Hollywood, aimed at entertaining. Yet, one of the advocates for a radical change in Arabic cinema was a prominent figure of the Egyptian studio system.¹⁴ Salah Abu Seif stated that:

as socialist cinema sides with the struggle of all
progressive powers against the enemies of the
people, in particular colonialists, capitalist exploiters,
feudal landowners, reactionaries, bureaucrats,

¹⁴ Osman, Khaled, "Egypt's National Film Archive."

arrivistes, and deviators... it should denounce them incessantly and work for their destruction.¹⁵

With leaders in the Middle East embracing Nasser's rhetoric, pan-Arabism became the official discourse and a catalyst for the political, cultural and social aspirations of the Arab states of the region. The leverage and symbolic power of a pan-Arabic nation truly appealed to the people sharing the same language, religion and culture, albeit the numerous dialects, ethnicities and histories of Arab communities. With the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing Palestinian crisis, this new version of Arab nationalism became a rallying cry against a common enemy and the threat posed by Zionist expansion. Yet, as Andrew Hammond points out, "Arab nationalism as a political ideology—both as a unification project and a vocabulary for independence from the West—has been a failure."¹⁶ State-based ideas of nationhood, undemocratic forms of governance, social inequality and repression have endured, proving pan-Arabism to be just a hollow catchword.

In contrast, the idea of a united Arab people was tempting and relatively effective, becoming "a remarkably pervasive reality."¹⁷ Throughout the Middle East, the intellectual classes rallied around the notion of a strengthened culture capable of articulating shared histories and realities and withstanding foreign influences. The religious classes advocated that a unified people would ultimately consolidate the power of Islam. The lower-middle classes saw an opportunity for social advancement, securing a better place for themselves within a progressive

¹⁵ Khayati, Khemais, "Salah Abou Seif: Cineaste Egyptien," 183.

¹⁶ Hammond, Andrew, Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media, 14.

¹⁷ Hammond, Andrew, Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media, 15.

and modernized society. The ideals of the Socialist Transformation solidified over the next two decades because they were founded on the promise of a better future and a sovereign position in a world now free from the shackles of colonialism. Out of these ideals, and to quote Hammond again, “a self-aware, cohesive but richly diverse Arab culture emerged.”¹⁸

These ideals of the socialist revolution manifested themselves in cinema, informing the pervasive yet productive notion of “Arabic cinemas” that recognizes, in the words of Sabry Hafez, the “many differences that account for its richness, scope and vitality.”¹⁹ While recognizing that this unified identity is a construct, and as such “is ambivalent and problematic, [it] is largely informed by a structure of feeling, a sense of shared lineage, cultural heritage and common experience.”²⁰

Literature Review

Research for this thesis included a wide range of scholarly works dealing with cinema and culture in the Middle East. Consulted were studies mapping the development of Arab cinemas, specifically those addressing the multiple modalities of national, critical, committed and alternative cinematic practices in the various countries of North Africa and the Middle East. This extant literature determined the scope of this thesis, narrowing its approach to historical rather than theoretical issues. For example, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash’s work in Reflexive Modernization (1994) speaks to the dis-embedding of

¹⁸ Hammond, Andrew, Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media, 2.

¹⁹ Hafez, Sabry, “The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema,” 231.

²⁰ Hafez, Sabry, “The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema,” 231.

traditional social norms with a re-embedding of alternative/revisionist modernities, and is applicable herein, yet risks transferring the emphasis from the films onto the theory. Instead, the chosen approach entailed research into the cultural and political history of the Arab world, particularly works dealing with the topics of socialist transformation and Pan-Arabism as well as the impact of these discourses on regional and national cultural practices. Finally, research on Arabic cinema was supplemented by more specialized studies on the diversity of styles, sensibilities and intentions present in Middle Eastern filmmaking. A brief review of these three areas of study and individual sources follow. It includes comments on the various stages of the research leading to the formulation of the methodology of the thesis.

This study originally began by looking at the concept of Third Cinema proposed by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," first published in 1968. Of all the positions articulated in this landmark manifesto the most germane to this thesis were those related to the revolutionary potential of cinema; namely its ability to transform spectatorship and promote active audience participation. Also significant were Unthinking Eurocentricism (1994) by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, and "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" and "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Thirds Aesthetics" by Teshome H. Gabriel because these works contextualize the politically oriented cinemas of the Third World, mainly in terms of discourses on cultural identity and cinematic

representations of the collision between tradition and modernity. Lastly, Angelo Restivo's The Cinema of Economic Miracles (2002) on Italian cinema and Donald Richie's A Hundred Years of Japanese Cinema (2002) provided a road map for the thesis. These books alerted me to the potential of close analysis, channelling the research to critically engage with the culturally specific features of Arabic realism.

Scholarship on the impact of historical and political developments on Arab culture advanced the research significantly. Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report (1997) by Beinín and Stork, Understanding the Contemporary Middle East (2004) by Gerner and Schwedler and A History of the Arab Peoples (2002) by Albert Hourani provided concise histories of the Middle East, with detailed emphasis on the Socialist Transformations of the 1950s and 1960s. The prominence of Naguib Mahfouz in cultural commentaries about the representation of everyday life in a modernizing Arab world led me to explore further his role in the development of Arab literary realism. These accounts drew my attention to the relatively small yet valuable literature on Ghassan Kanafani like Muhammad Siddiq's Man Is a Cause (1999), offering insightful analysis into literary practice as a vehicle to critically address the political and social structures of the Arab world.

Research on Arabic cinema confirmed the creative links between literary and cinematic practices, namely the impact of Arab literary realism and Egyptian film realism. By far the most valuable is the work by Egyptian film scholar Viola Shafik: Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity (1988) and Popular Egyptian

Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation (2007). She examines realism as the preferred style of socially committed filmmakers, identifies different approaches and singles out modalities aimed at countering the commercial products of the Egyptian studio system. Also useful is the work of Walter Armbrust's "New Cinema, Commercial Cinema, and the Modernist Tradition in Egypt," Guy Hennebelle's "Arab Cinema," and Joel Gordon's "Film, Fame, and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from *Mustafa Kamil* to *Nasser 56*" because it considers the relationship between film and politics in Egyptian mainstream cinema during the decolonisation period. Comprehensive studies dealing with more recent developments also proved beneficial. Popular Culture in the Arab World (2007) by Andrew Hammond and Arab Television Today (2007) by Naomi Sakr examine the current state of cultural and media production, identifying its historical links to the Socialist Transformation and the legacy of Pan-Arabism.

Rasha Salti's "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema" and Lawrence Wright's "Disillusioned" and "Letters from Damascus: Captured on Film" pick up where Shafik leaves off. Their studies offer a thoughtful and detailed context for understanding the part played by Syrian cinema in preserving the legacy of cinematic realism, namely of the engagement with and expression of the sensibilities of pan-Arabism and the Socialist Transformation. Last but not least, Sabry Hafez' "The Quest/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema" draws attention to the cultural and political forces that shaped mainstream practices and the advent of modernist film. His work attests to the multidimensionality of Arab cinemas, a feature often overlooked in favour of

narrow categorizations of the various and diverse practices that emerged since the 1950s.

To conclude this review of cinema related sources, a brief comment on what I found to be their major shortcoming is necessary. While research on Arab cinemas is comparable in terms of its methodological and conceptual framework to the existing scholarship in the respective fields of Film and Middle Eastern studies, it lacks an in-depth engagement with individual works. It is this tendency of labelling practices according to pre-determined categories that motivated me to opt for an analysis of the distinctive modalities and stylistic features of a selected group of films.

As a brief note, the description of the exclusion of certain films that may fit the criteria of analysis was primarily based upon three things. First and foremost, the access to older or less popular Arabic films is limited and would have required means unavailable to this project. Secondly, certain films such as *A Door to the Sky* (Farida Ben Lyzaid, Morocco, 1989), *A Summer in La Goulette* (Ferid Bougedir, Tunisia, 1996), or *Man of Ashes* (Nouri Bouzid, Tunisia, 1986) all meet the criteria of alternative cinema yet would require gendered readings that were simply beyond the scope of this particular project. And finally, countless Youssef Chahine, and other alternative Egyptian filmmakers' films were considered and ultimately replaced due to the fact that the project may have become too Chahine/Egypt centric thus overshadowing the breadth of the sensibility.

With this idea in mind, the chapters that follow are structured around the analysis of selected films admittedly chosen as examples of practices aimed at departing from the mainstream, normative trends of Arab cinema. Organized in chronological order, these case studies are aimed at placing the films within the landmark years of the Socialist Transformation and drawing attention to their place within Arab cinematic histories. After a brief contextualization, each chapter includes a plot summary detailing the settings, characters and narrative structure of the film. The following sections highlight the distinctive elements of the film; its stylistic features, affiliations to Arab cinematic realism and use of allegory to critically engage with social and political issues.

Chapter One is centered on *Cairo Station*, directed by Youssef Chahine in 1958, a bleak and disturbing film dealing with human alienation, sexual repression and social violence. The film abandons the fantasy world of Egyptian studio films, represents the railroad station as a microcosm of Arab society and adopts an ethical position that favours community and solidarity. To explain how this work breaks from yet retains some elements of mainstream Egyptian cinema, the chapter includes comments on *Fatma* (Ahmed Badrakhan, 1947), a Hollywood modelled film featuring famed performer Umm Kulthum. While being representative of two different periods, these films exemplify the shift that occurred in the 1950s under the influence of pan-Arabic ideology and the policies of the Socialist Transformation.

Chapter Two deals with *The Dupes*, an innovative film based on the novel *Men in the Sun* published in 1962 by Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani and

made in Syria by Egyptian director Tawfiq Salih in 1972, and it includes a brief account about the relationship between cinema and the Syrian state. The film is examined from the perspective of its political activism and place in the history of the Socialist Transformation in Arab cinema. Consideration is given to how *The Dupes* extends the tenets of Arab social realism by assimilating the aesthetics of modernist realism, how it incorporates allegory to address its audience and to engage critically with the plight of the Palestinian people.

Chapter Three centers on *The Nights of the Jackal* directed by Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid in 1988. This multilayered film is an example of the tensions and complexities present in Syrian filmmaking practices. It belongs to the lineage of provocative films that can be traced back to the Egyptian realism of the 1950s and the Syrian alternative cinema of the 1970s. Set in rural Syria, it is a tale of patriarchal authoritarianism that uses allegory to reflect on the role of leadership during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the failure of Arab unity narratives. Beneath what appears to be a simple story, the film reveals a scathing commentary on leadership, and coerced/blind advocacy.

The concluding chapter deals with *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* directed by Nabil Ayouch in 2000 and with the questions of whether and how the cinematic sensibilities shaped by the Socialist Transformation can manifest themselves 40 years later. This landmark work strives to transcend social realism. It combines the hard-hitting realism of street-kids' films with the fantasy of children's fables, revealing at once the brutalizing experiences of marginality and, by means of animation, the liberating potential of the imagination.

Chapter One: **Youssef Chahine's *Cairo Station***

On 27 July 2008 Youssef Chahine passed away. Having directed 44 films during a career that spanned 57 years, he was by far the most prolific of all the filmmakers of the Egyptian and Middle Eastern cinemas. His work ethic and aesthetic savvy distinguished him from most of the region's directors. In a tribute to his life and career, Hani Mustafa pointed out that Chahine "always believed in the power of the people once they began to question an unjust social order and in the power of film to raise such questions in people's minds."²¹ He achieved international acclaim and his contribution to the world of cinema aligned him to such directors as Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jules Dassin, and Ousmane Sembene who also died within a year of Chahine's passing.

Among Chahine's extensive output is *Cairo Station* (1958). Still considered one of the most important films in the Arabic language, *Cairo Station* is essential to Chahine's body of work because it foreshadows his position as an originator and *auteur* of personal Arabic cinema. This artistically audacious and thought-provoking film signals a substantial stylistic and narrative departure from the prevalent structures of Egyptian commercial filmmaking. It is an early example of a cinema shaped by the pan-Arabic cultural sensibility and the

²¹ Mustafa, Hani, "Adieu Chahine."

reformist impulse that prevailed in Egypt during the era of the Socialist Transformation.

This transformation began in 1952 with the Free Officers Revolution that dethroned the corrupt King Farouk I and installed General Muhammad Naguib as the first president of Egypt.²² Nonetheless, the most prominent figure of the coup d'état was Colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser, who became the second president of the republic in 1956. Immediately, he set in motion a nationalization project with the takeover of the Suez Canal that same year, which was a bold call for pan-Arab unity and sovereignty and a challenge to the colonial and tripartite powers of Britain, France and the United States, and their ally Israel.

These anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiments for reform also manifested themselves in the cultural sphere. Filmmakers sought to revolutionize a cinema perceived to be primarily aimed at showcasing beautiful locations and the privileged classes that occupied them. The main advocate and representative of this type of cinema was the Egyptian film critic and director Ahmad Badrakhan. As Sabry Hafez points out, Badrakhan called “for a light cinema of glamour, romance and entertainment,” because as the director stated in his book *Cinema* published in 1936, “...the bulk of the cinemagoers, does not want to see its sordid life reflected on the screen...”²³

Nonetheless, this trend was already being challenged in literature, specifically in realist novels focusing on the plight of the lower classes, the social

²² Mohi El Din, Khaled, *Memories of a Revolution: Egypt 1952*, 43. In the chapter “From the First Cell to the First Leaflet,” the author outlines the political unrest as a motivational factor for the overthrow of the monarchy and points to the Palestinian occupation as the trigger for the rebellion.

²³ Hafez, Sabry, “The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema,” 236.

divisions and the decaying conditions of Arab society. As noted in the previous chapter, novelist and short story writer Naguib Mahfouz wrote socially inclined works that were adapted by Egyptian directors uninterested in conforming to the model proposed by Badrakhan. During the previous decade novels by Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas and Fyodor Dostoevsky were adapted to the screen in Egyptian language versions tailored to Arab audiences.²⁴ As Sabry Hafez indicates:

Kamal Salim's *Determination* (*Al-Azimah*, 1939), inaugurated a new genre of critical realism in Arabic cinema, attacking injustice and corruption [and] Salah Abu Seif, the assistant director of *Determination*, followed in Salim's footsteps and produced many powerful films in this genre.²⁵

Eventually Abu Seif directed *Your Day Will Come* (*Laka Youm Ya Zalem* (1952), an adaptation of Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, and widely regarded as amongst the first adapted works of cinematic Arab realism.²⁶

Abu Seif was amongst the first to create a hybrid Arab cinema by infusing realist ethics into the commercial works produced within the Egyptian studio system. Directors such as Chahine and Tawfiq Salih followed his example. They explored the realities of the underclass and embraced the realist ethics and formal protocols characteristic of other post-war cinemas to address the social crisis and political upheaval in the Middle East. The latter were brought about by the decolonisation process since the 1920s and the military conflicts that ensued from the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. As was the case in Italy,

²⁴ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Culture*, 122.

²⁵ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 238.

France, and the U.S.S.R., transformations on the political level in the Arab world were powerful factors in calls for cinematic reform. As Abu Seif noted:

now that the revolution has expressed in the National Charter a global vision of history and of the future in a solid revolution context, it is imperative to see how weak our films are on the analytical and political level. It is now the task of the state to create, on the basis of the charter, a mature cinematographic world where man's struggle against fatal social conditions and his striving to change his destiny are expressed.²⁷

Official responses to these calls for reform were predictably ambiguous.

On the one hand, as Arab film scholar Qussai Samak writes:

in 1959, the [Egyptian] government established the Higher Institute of Cinema designed to educate a new breed of filmmakers and technicians to replace the traditional profit-oriented establishment that controlled the business since World War II."²⁸

On the other hand, as Viola Shafik notes:

In 1955 the revolutionary government issued a new censorship law, annulling some of the restrictions of the 1947 law. However, it declared also the new law's objectives: 'to protect public morals, to preserve security, public order and the superior interests of the state.'²⁹

With censorship boards holding on to the opinion that the image of the nation was not the property of the artists and intellectuals but of the state, and its ruling class, the cinematic model established by Badrakhan remained dominant. With these types of films being promoted nationally and exported throughout Arabia, the Egyptian studio system maintained its hegemonic position and Cairo retained its status as the filmmaking capital of the Arabic speaking world.

²⁷ Quoted in Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 29.

²⁸ Samak, Qussai, "The Politics of Egyptian Cinema," 12.

²⁹ Shafik, Viola, "Egyptian Cinema," 34.

Notwithstanding other forms of filmmaking developed in the 1950s and 60s as alternatives to the classical commercial model, namely the realism pioneered by Salim and Seif. Viola Shafik describes these practices as “commercial realism” because they consist in mixing a “spectacular event plus observation of daily life” and uses *Cairo Station* as an example.³⁰ Indeed, Chahine’s film exhibits similar features. Set and shot in Cairo’s main railroad station, it is a hard-hitting drama and a record of modern urban existence. With its audacious treatment of sexuality, madness and violence, the film tested censors (it was banned briefly) and audiences, and failed at the box office forcing Chahine to revert to more commercial films.³¹

Although the film’s importance was not immediately recognized, *Cairo Station* will be examined as an early example of hybrid cinema. It abandons the fantasy world of Egyptian studio films, namely the reliance on musical numbers, closed sets and movie stars. It utilizes actual locations and casts actors against type to create full-fledged characters. It represents the railroad station as a microcosm of urban Arab society in the 1950s and adopts an ethical position that favours community and solidarity. Its realist and allegorical approach aligns the film to the sensibilities of the Socialist Transformation.

To explain how *Cairo Station* departs from yet and retains some of the elements of commercial cinema, a brief consideration will be given to *Fatma* (Ahmed Badrakhan, 1947), a conventional melodrama featuring the renowned diva Umm Kulthum. Comments on this classical product of the Egyptian studio

³⁰ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 135.

³¹ Gordon, Joel, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser’s Egypt*, 41.

are aimed at addressing the shifts that occurred in this period, and accounting for how critical realism transformed cinematic practices in the Middle East.

Departing from the Station

Cairo Station opens with a voice-over in which the newsstand owner Madbuli (Hasan El Baroudi) introduces himself and the crippled newspaper peddler Kenawi (Youssef Chahine), the film's main protagonist. Madbuli's proclamation: "poor Kenawi, how could anyone have foreseen his end," establishes that the story is told retrospectively. The narration is heard over a series of shots inside the station showing the main entrance with its immense clock, the trains on the platforms, the crowds of passengers and workers. The dynamic editing, multiple camera positions and framing draw attention to the organic relationship between the location and the various characters.

A series of short scenes introduce the various groups of characters, their backgrounds and aspirations. In one scene, Hanuma (Hind Rostom), who has managed to elude the authorities, joins other women who live and work illicitly on the station grounds selling cold drinks to appreciative passengers. The spirited young women tease each other and joke about the sexually obsessed Kenawi and Hanuma's engagement to Abu Srī (Farid Chawqi), a porter who wants to organize his fellow workers. In another scene, two men fight over a luggage-handling fee. When one is hurt, Abu Srī confronts Abu Gaber who runs a bag-handling racket. With each group standing on opposite platforms, the scene

reveals an inter-class conflict between those who hold pro-union views and those who use gangster-like tactics to exploit others.

The explosive and violent nature of gender relations is revealed mainly in scenes that involve Hanuma. In an early one, Hanuma returns to the empty coach where she lives after being pushed by her female friends under a water hose. After peeling off her dress, she stands in her soaking underwear without realizing that somebody is looking at her voluptuous body. Scared by Kenawi's sudden appearance, she chases him out of her living quarters. In another scene, Abu Sñ beats her in public and then inside a shed for disobeying him for still going on trains to illegally sell drinks. His abuse stops when she uses her sexuality to distract him by playing a game of hide-and-seek. Kenawi stands outside, listening to what is going on. An abrupt cut to the wheels of a train, and the crosscutting between shots of Kenawi clutching a coke bottle and the machine speeding down the track alludes to the couple's sexual intercourse and to Kenawi's infatuation with Hanuma resulting in his resolve to kill her.

Frustrated and enraged, Kenawi obtains Hanuma's bucket and tries to lure her into an empty storage building. He stabs Helawatum, the friend who is asked to find the bucket, and stuffs her body into a crate. By now, Madbuli and Abu Sñ realize that Kenawi's obsession may have gone too far. As they look for him, Helawatum manages to crawl out. Realizing that he has failed, Kenawi chases Hanuma across the darkened train yard threatening to kill her unless she agrees to leave with him. Meanwhile everybody searches for Kenawi. The crowd surrounds the deranged man. As Madbuli distracts him, Abu Sñ disarms him and

ambulance workers put him into a straightjacket. The closing shot shows Abu Sri carrying Hanuma away. In the foreground stands a young girl who has been abandoned by her lover.

Discarding Tradition

As the summary suggests, *Cairo Station* is a rather bleak and disturbing film primarily concerned with human alienation, sexual repression and social violence. In spite of the cathartic ending, it offers no positive resolution. No wonder audiences accustomed to the optimistic endings of Egyptian studio films stayed away. Another element they may have found wanting is the lack of song and dance sequences commonly used even in classical melodramas like *Fatma* by noted director Ahmed Badrakhan. The film featured Umm Kulthum in the role of an unmarried lower-middle class nurse who falls in love with an aristocrat, and struggles to maintain the integrity and honour of a Muslim matriarch. It was a star vehicle that relied on the singer's reputation for its popularity and box office success.

Since the late 1930s song and dance numbers were a staple of Arabic films and contributed to the making of a star system. Interpreted by celebrated stage performers, these musical sequences point to the traditional link between cinema and theatre. More importantly, and given that theatrical entertainment was beyond the financial means of film audiences, cinema was the only venue for working and lower-middle class viewers to have access to their idols. Films

profited from the entertainment value and glamour of popular singers, thus reinforcing the escapist aims of commercial cinema.

Fatma, for instance, capitalizes on the casting of Umm Kulthum. The film's success was the result of the star's popularity rather than its innovative style or capacity to use the cinema realistically to comment on social issues. The narrative and formal design of the film favours the diva's personality and her performance style, rather than the social issues it seeks to address. As a result, it glamorises her character and shifts viewer investment away from her character's plight. This feature is consistent with other films being produced in Egypt at the time in which songs were no longer used to convey the character's emotional turmoil.

This new approach in 1947, as film scholar Salah Ezz Eddine writes, "helped make the exaggerated melodramatic character that had belonged to Arab cinema at the time disappear. It forced Arab cinema to renew itself and give up its pretended seriousness."³² This style can also be found in *Fatma*. The performance of Umm Kulthum in the opening credits sequence establishes the centrality of music, specifically of music popularized by Arab orchestras using traditional instruments. While songs replicate the sentimentality of the plot, the musical scenes disrupt the pace and slow down the story. By conforming to the demands of musical entertainment, the moments of performance give the film an episodic quality. The romantic register of the songs disconnects them from the narrative, specifically from the themes of class privilege and social prejudice that are dramatized in the film.

³² Quoted in Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 115.

As noted earlier, one element that distinguishes *Cairo Station* from the commercial Egyptian cinema is the absence of songs and dance sequences. Instead, it uses a modernist score by composer Fouad El Zahiri to sustain the action and convey the characters' emotions. Only once is diegetic music used; in a scene that shows a group of young adults arriving to the station, some playing Western instruments. While the passengers wait for the train's departure, Hanuma enters the car to sell her drinks. She joins the merriment, dancing in the midst of the crowd. She makes eye contact with Kenawi who is standing outside on the platform. A series of reaction shots link the characters emotionally, signaling their reconciliation. Here the jazz-style tune and spontaneous dancing are fully integrated into the narrative, revealing a conscious effort to break away from the traditional Arab melodies and theatrical performances commonly used in Egyptian musicals.

Reformulating Cinematic Realism

Chahine earned his position as a pioneering figure in Egyptian cinema by challenging the status quo and the models instituted by the leading commercial directors of the time. While Badrakhan, the director of *Fatma*, sought to transplant the Hollywood model of filmmaking, Chahine sought to transform Arab filmmaking practices. From this perspective, *Cairo Station* can be considered an early example of cinematic Arabic realism. While the film breaks with mainstream cinema, it retains some of the elements associated to Egyptian studio system productions. Hence, examples from *Fatma* will be used in this section to explain

the distinctive strategies of Chahine's film. The focus will be on the following components: the use of actual Cairo locations instead of controlled studio settings; the move away from star-system casting and characterization and the ethical shift signalled by each film. The aim is to closely navigate through the decade separating these films, and account for how stylistic transformations were shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which the films were produced.

There is a symbolic dimension to the shift to location-based productions. While going outside the studio did not mean breaking off with commercial filmmaking, it represented an opportunity for directors to liberate themselves from the technical and formal constraints of studio shooting. The opening sequence of *Fatma* consists of a series of crane shots through the streets leading to Fatma's home in Omara Alley. Except for a brief shot of birds flying overhead, nothing in the scene indicates whether the lively neighbourhood is an actual location or a studio set. As a result, the *mise-en-scène* has a distinct theatrical feel. The only attempt at authenticity can be found in the honeymoon sequences, namely the boat trip scenes shot in the Alexandria harbour. The scenic ocean panorama is consistent with the imagery of modernity that Badrakhan favoured in his film because he believed that when lower-middle class people went to the cinema they wanted to experience glamour not the squalor of everyday life.³³

In contrast *Cairo Station* is fully shot on location. It skilfully uses all the areas of the *Bab-el-Hadid* train station, including the train yards and storage facilities.³⁴ The *mise-en-scène* endows the film with authenticity, and reveals a

³³ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 236.

³⁴ *Bab-el-Hadid* is the actual name of the Cairo central train station, and is also the Arabic title of the film.

social and human reality hitherto absent from Arabic cinema. By depicting the everyday life of the lower classes, it represents the station as a microcosm of urban experience. Although *Fatma* and *Cairo Station* deal with working and lower-middle classes, the focus is different. If in the first film the characters are content with their social position, and rely on a romantic hero to alleviate their plight, in the second the protagonists are aching to break out of poverty and ready to fight for their rights.

Staging, camera and editing in *Cairo Station* highlight the relationship between characters and their environment, at times turning the station itself into a protagonist. For example, in the scene that shows Hanuma and the other young women washing their clothes with the same water hose used to cool off the steam engines, a parallel is established between the equipment and the inhabitants of the station. In contrast, in the scene where Hanuma saves a child from being run over by a train, the shots of rails being switched and wheels coming to a screeching halt draw attention to the threat posed by the machinery. If these shots visualize the modernist idea that technology is a measure of a nation's development, they also suggest that progress also depends on integrating and protecting those that are most vulnerable. Otherwise, the rich get richer and the poor remain excluded.

In regards to actor-character relationships, *Fatma* is a star vehicle that relies on analogies between the actor's off- and on-screen persona. Whether intentional or not, the name of the main protagonist evokes explicitly Umm Kulthum's real name Fatma Ebrahim Elbeltagi. In addition, the public image

cultivated by the actor lends authenticity to her role as a modest yet noble woman.³⁵ For example, when Fathi tries to seduce Fatma into having sex before marriage, she acts in accordance to the myth of moral integrity that the actor cultivated in real life. Moreover, the scene realigns the actor/character to the traditional standards of Muslim female dignity. Consistent with film's ubiquitous moralizing rhetoric, this strategy is aimed at enabling film audiences to identify at once with Fatma and the moral ideals represented by Umm Kulthum. In this sense, the character is nothing but a projection of the actor's mythology.

In *Cairo Station* Kenawi, Hanuma, and Abu Sri are full-fledged characters. Played by professional actors, the performances are designed to privilege their identities as characters. The casting of Hind Rostom as Hanuma, for instance, relies on the actor's charisma and beauty. Yet, there is something quite troubling about the character's free-spirited personality and overt eroticism. No matter what she does, Hanuma's fate is pre-determined and her identity is bound to the desiring male gaze. Moreover, her relationship with Abu Sri exposes her vulnerability and draws attention to the violent undercurrents of sexuality.

Chahine playing the part of Kenawi signals an important departure from the practices of the studio system. Not only did the director cast himself in the leading role, he infused the character with anti-heroic characteristics.³⁶ From the onset Madbuli's voiceover narration describes Kenawi as sexually frustrated, setting up the inner conflict that consumes the character and inevitably drives

³⁵ For more information on the actor and her career, her legend and celebrity status in Middle Eastern cultures, see *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt*. Dir. Michal Goldman. Narr. Omar Sharif. 1996. DVD. Arab Film Distribution, 1996.

³⁶ Kenawi is different from the characters Chahine interpreted in his later films; namely in *The Alexandria Trilogy* where his main concern was to portray the struggle with his own sexuality.

him to criminal behaviour. Moreover, Chahine links his character's obsession with images of pin-up girls to his own profession as a filmmaker. Kenawi sells newspapers that peddle in gossip, and he collects racy magazine pictures to decorate the hovel where he sleeps. He is constantly projecting his own fantasies onto the photos by drawing on them, re-arranging them and even mutilating them. In spite of Chahine's upper class origins and educated background, he deglamorizes himself to play the crippled and mentally deranged Kenawi.

In regards to their ethical positions, both films can be considered socially conscious. The central theme in *Fatma* is class difference, and the plot reveals how segregation and prejudice lead to conflict. The film reinforces the divide between upper and lower classes, portraying the complacency of their respective members. No attempt is made to challenge the social structures; instead the wealthy deceive and exploit the poor. When Fathi wants the marriage certificate back, he uses Fatma's own moral code as a justification. After hearing that his older brother, The Pasha does not recognize the validity of their union, and to defend her honour, she hands over the document without suspecting that her actions will effectively invalidate her marriage. When the matter goes to court, Fatma is further victimized by being sentenced to work at a labour camp. It is not until Fathi recognizes the error of his own ways that a resolution is possible.

In contrast, *Cairo Station*'s conflict centers on the resolve of the disenfranchised to better their lives. While Kenawi is bent on achieving happiness through love but fails, Abu Sri' achieves his goal by forming a union. His struggle for the welfare of the porters and vendors is intertwined with his

attempt to win Hanuma's heart. Yet, the romance is only secondary because Abu Sri's is a political victory against the corrupt practices of Abu Gaber and his associates. The moral position of *Cairo Station* derives from the representation of class solidarity, namely of how a community asserts its rights and works together to improve their own lives, and those of the society at large.

Codified Critique and Allegorical Reading

In this section the differences between the allegorical approach in *Cairo Station* and the representation of class differences in *Fatma* will be considered. In the two decades separating the films, a shift in sensibility occurs that enables allegory to be strategically mobilized to counter censorship and critically engage with a political process. While critical realism aligned itself to the politics of the Socialist Transformation, it did not offer an unqualified endorsement of the discourse initiated by the Free Officers Movement and Nasser, its main agent. The Egyptian officials, who felt the task of cinema was serving the state, never welcomed criticism. As a result, censorship boards were established with the mandate of ensuring that cinema conformed to its role by reinforcing the state's conservative agenda. *Fatma* acknowledges class differences and social prejudice only to reinforce the status quo because the lower-middle class characters do not question the values and power of the upper classes. In contrast, *Cairo Station* takes a stand against the power structures of the society from which it emerged. This critique is codified, making it an early example of an Arab cinematic realist film that encourages an allegorical reading. In addition, it is

an early instance of using allegory to shield a film from censorship, namely from suspicious officials authorized to order changes before exhibition approval is granted, or worse, prevent its release altogether.

As noted earlier, the film uses its location to represent the station as a microcosm of urban experience. People of various classes, ages and genders move through the station, and those who work and live on the grounds constitute a community of sorts with its own social hierarchy. At the top of the structure are the police officers, the owner of the canteen Mansour, and Abu Gaber; on the bottom are the porters and illegal vendors. The extensive grounds encompass an immense hall dominated by a clock where passengers, workers and loiterers circulate, a beautiful exterior garden with a fountain where Kenawi meets Hanuma and tells her how he imagines their future together as well as the passenger and freight platforms. Yet it is at the outer edges of the station where the illegal workers and the most impoverished characters live in broken down train cars and makeshift shacks. Interestingly, the vendors used signs and words—such as ‘fagafigo,’ a code word for ‘the cops are coming’—to alert each other of impending dangers.

Allegorical representations manifest themselves primarily through character relationships. In the following examples, consideration will be given to the manner in which gender dictates power relations in the station. In contrast to Fatma whose lack of agency is equated to her asexuality, Hanuma’s sexuality determines her identity and actions. Her first appearance in the film establishes her as an embodiment of desire. When she boards the train to sell cold drinks,

the passengers—and presumably the film audience—react to her suggestive body language. A similar process takes place in the scene where she removes her soaked clothes, except that her desirability is explicitly mediated by Kenawi's gaze. Yet, she is also aware that sexuality grants her some measure of power. For instance, during the conversation scene in the park outside the station Hanuma motivates Kenawi to work hard by encouraging his fantasies of a prosperous and happy future, even if it is without her. Hanuma's relationship with Abu Srı exemplifies how her sexualized agency is represented. In the sultriest sequence of the entire film she uses sex to undermine Abu Srı's identity, namely his authority and leadership, by infantilizing him. While these scenes reinforce female objectification, it can also be argued that the film's representation of Hanuma as a free-spirited, rebellious and belligerent woman counteracts traditional portrayals of female passivity.

Abu Srı's struggle for workers' rights positions him as a catalyst of social and political change. He embodies a power shift that favours the inclusion of the disenfranchised by challenging the control and corruption of the rich. He is a compassionate and forceful leader; he fights for fair working practices and initiates labour reforms by arranging a visit from a government official. More importantly, Abu Srı challenges the authority of his adversary Abu Gaber who forces workers to bribe him in exchange for jobs. If Abu Gaber personifies aristocratic privilege and the value system of the monarchy, Abu Srı's politics aligns him ideologically to the Free Officers Movement because his goal is

similar: to topple the old regime and facilitate a participatory form of governance based on unity and equal rights for all workers within the station.

As the film's main protagonist, Kenawi is the primary agent of audience identification. In fact, his first appearance in the film elicits uncertainty because the camera only offers a partial view of his body. It is only at the end of Madbuli's introduction that his face is revealed. Because he is unstable and unpredictable, Kenawi is the embodiment of chaos. Even if he barely speaks, he is aware of everything and everybody. He sneaks around the grounds of the station, observing passengers and workers. His threatening gaze is revealed in extreme close-ups, and his potential for violence is illustrated by his fixation with newspaper headlines about the decapitated body of a woman found in a trunk. He acts out this fantasy when he mutilates a photo of a woman, and stabs Helawatum and hides her inside a crate. By managing to stop Kenawi's murderous rampage, Abu Srī rids the station of the chaos he represents and truly confirms his position as the hero.

This chapter is structured around the argument that *Cairo Station* signals a departure from the practices introduced by Hollywood modeled films like *Fatma*. Although the films analyzed are representative of two different periods, their differences exemplify the shift that occurred in the 1950s under the influence of pan-Arabic ideology and the policies of the Socialist Transformation. As noted, the representation of urban life and class struggle in *Cairo Station* counters the tendency to glamorize class difference in *Fatma*. Instead of privileging romance and morality, Chahine's film portrays the resolve of the

disenfranchised to challenge class privilege and corruption. It offers a compelling yet troubling view about sexuality, madness and violence that contests the ethical position of mainstream social realism and anticipates a political and critically engaged Arabic cinema.

Chapter Two: **The Dupes and the Transition**

The struggle for political stability throughout the Arab-speaking world reached its peak in the 1960s. With it came independence from colonial rule, secular governance, nationalization, ideological disposition towards socialist reform, and investments in pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism. Concurrently, a new sensibility emerged throughout the Middle East that manifested itself in all artistic disciplines. As noted in Chapter One, it was the collaboration between writers and filmmakers that contributed to the earliest manifestations of critical realism in Arabic cinema.³⁷ *The Dupes* (Tawfiq Salih, 1972) is an example of this partnership. This compelling and accessible film adapts an activist work of literature and innovates Arab cinematic realism. It aligns itself to pan-Arab socially inclined practices that seek to move beyond the notion of cinema as entertainment. Its representation of the plight of Palestinians encourages a critical engagement on the part of audiences, fulfilling its activist intent.

Before engaging with what is unanimously considered as one of the most significant film co-productions of this period, it is necessary to acknowledge its place within a larger trend of politically engaged work set off by the novel from which it was adapted.³⁸ The film is based on the novel Men Under the Sun written by Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian journalist, novelist, and teacher.

³⁷ Gerner, Deborah J. and Jillian Schwedler, Understanding the Contemporary Middle East, 400.

³⁸ Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 155.

Moreover, Kanafani was a leading figure and extremely influential in developing the cultural critical discourse of the Socialist Transformation. His introspective, judicious and militant activist inclinations sought to challenge both the Zionist rule in Palestine, and the Arab governments he accused of mishandling the matter.³⁹

As Roger Allen writes:

the circumstances involved in his death are clear enough: a time-bomb was placed in his car. What is less clear is who was involved in the atrocity: while most hands pointed to the Israeli secret service, it has to be admitted that relations between the splintered Palestinian and other Arab groups were far from cordial at the time.⁴⁰

Kanafani was killed the same year as *The Dupes* was released.

Drawing on the life and experiences of Kanafani as a refugee, the novel reveals the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948 and the mass exodus of Palestinians from their homeland. It adopts a critical view on the Palestinian crisis that Kanafani shared with other artists by offering a portrait of a traumatized Arab identity that was bereft of a home. Forced displacement and exile represented the loss of an essence, a lineage and a tradition; it was akin to losing an identity and one's place in the world.

As a work of literature, Men Under the Sun exhibits the naturalist qualities of realism. It documents a disgraceful side of Arab history by confronting the duplicity of governments aligning themselves with the Palestinian cause while segregating Palestinians into refugee camps. Furthermore, the novel is an indictment of the exploitation of Arabs by Arabs. It resonates with readers

³⁹ Siddiq, Muhammad, Man is a Cause: Political Consciousness and the fiction of Ghassan Kanafani, xi – xii.

⁴⁰ Allen, Roger, "Introduction," in Ghassan Kanafani's All That's Left to You, x.

because it simultaneously engages with the mundane aspects of everyday life, whilst exploring the myths of success and prosperity perpetuated by megalomaniacal Arabs.

In spite of its scathing critique, the underlying message of Men Under the Sun is one of unity and solidarity and, as such, contains echoes of the fervent socialist values embraced and espoused by populist leaders like Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser.⁴¹ The novel aligns itself to the sentiments and the rhetoric of a discourse that had been gaining strength because it consciously moved away from the colonial and the non-secular traditions perceived as having hindered Arab progress. This ideological shift was aimed at solidifying a place for the Arab peoples within the political structures of their own countries, and in the realm of international relations.⁴²

Novels like Men Under the Sun exemplified an investment on the part of the intelligentsia in the ideological alternatives generated by post-colonialism in Arab societies. Writers like Kanafani incorporated politically charged themes into their work, and their own experiences into the lives of the characters and the struggles they recounted. In addition to writing and teaching, Kanafani is often remembered as a "politically active journalist" who reacted to the events that impacted him.⁴³ The source of his literature was his life, and the transformations taking place around him shaped the representations of everyday life found in his work.

⁴¹ Allen, Roger, "Introduction," in Ghassan Kanafani's All That's Left to You, x.

⁴² Hourani, Albert, A History of the Arab Peoples, 402.

⁴³ Kanafani, Ghassan, Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories, 9.

In addition to Kanafani's and Tawfiq Salih's commitment to realism, what links Men Under the Sun and its screen version *The Dupes* is the experience of exile shared by the writer, the director and the characters.⁴⁴ Salih worked for many years within the Egyptian studio system, and was known as a realist filmmaker. In his early career, he adapted the work of realist writers: his first feature *Fool's Alley* (Tawfiq Salih, 1955) was based on Naguib Mahfouz's Midag Alley (1947), the first work of literary realism portraying an urban location as a microcosm of Egyptian society. Later when he wrote his own scripts, he espoused the tenets of socialist realism to represent the lives and experiences of ordinary people.⁴⁵

Although comparisons are often made between the realism practiced by Salih and fellow Egyptian directors Salah Abu-Seif and Youssef Chahine, it is Salih who is credited as being committed to socialist ideals and non-commercial filmmaking practices.⁴⁶ Salih's politics inevitably affected his career as the studio bureaucracy hindered his work and the censors subjected his films to arbitrary rulings.⁴⁷ Eventually, he suffered from what amounts to an occupational exile and was forced to seek production funds and facilities elsewhere. Before working as a cinema teacher in Iraq, where he settled in 1973 and directed his final film *Long Days* in 1980,⁴⁸ Salih migrated to Syria and made *The Dupes*, his best known and critically acclaimed work.⁴⁹ Financing came from the National Film

⁴⁴ Siddiq, Muhammad, Man is a Cause: Political Consciousness and the fiction of Ghassan Kanafani, xii.

⁴⁵ Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 134-135.

⁴⁶ Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 128.

⁴⁷ Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 137.

⁴⁸ Shafik, Viola, "Egyptian Cinema," 107.

⁴⁹ Salti, Rasha, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," 29.

Organization; a state-funded agency praised for producing socially inclined films and viewed as the most serious competitor of Egyptian cinema in the Middle East.⁵⁰ In view of what Viola Shafik qualifies as “the inconsistencies and contradictions of cultural politics” in the post-Nasser era, Syria was really the only option for a filmmaker with style and substance like Salih.⁵¹ He was able to explore themes and issues that were often ignored in Arab cinemas, such as class struggle, social inequality, underdevelopment, ignorance and political corruption.

Therefore, it is important to examine *The Dupes* from the perspective of its political activism and its place in the history of the Socialist Transformation in Arab cinema. After a brief plot summary, an account about the development of the Syrian film industry is provided. Also considered is how *The Dupes* extends the tenets of realism, how it incorporates allegory to address its audience, and how it breaks with mainstream realism to become a defining film in the transition to an activist Arab cinema.

A Journey to Hell

The Dupes is organized around four fragments, each using a flashback to tell the story of each one of the four protagonists. The plot revolves around the journey of three Palestinian refugees to Bassorah, a border town between Iraq and Kuwait. Also depicted are the circumstances behind the refugees' decisions to be smuggled into Kuwait and the motivations that led the fourth character, a

⁵⁰ Salti, Rasha, “Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema,” 24.

⁵¹ Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 137.

fellow Palestinian, to take them illegally across the border into the country where he is legitimately employed. All the matches on action introducing the four characters and the final stage of the trip take place inside the office of a fake import and export company where the men are sent and the smuggler meets his “dupes.”

The film opens with an extreme long shot of a heat stricken man stumbling towards the camera. He sees the patch of trees marking the shore of the Shatt el-Arab, a body of water where the Euphrates and the Tigris meet. As he reaches his destination, he collapses. A flashback starts after a shot of Abu Kaiss (Mohamed Kheir-Halouani) laying in the shade of a tree. He remembers *Ustaz* Saleem teaching his son a lesson about the Shatt el-Arab and the endangered fate of the Palestinian nation.⁵² The following shots confirm the teacher’s grim prophecy about the Arab-Israeli war and shows his death on the battlefield. A documentary style is used throughout the flashback to represent the displacement of the Palestinian peoples, Abu Kaiss’ lack of prospects as a peasant farmer in Iraq and the urgency to move to Kuwait.

Assaad is the next character to arrive at the office. The word “road” uttered by the front man triggers a flashback detailing his participation with other refugees in a plot against the Jordanian government and the long journey he undertook to flee the country. After agreeing to marry, Assaad obtains money from his bride’s father to escape. In spite of his family’s plea, he sets off for Kuwait with the hope of being able to benefit from the country’s economic boom. In contrast, Merwane receives his family’s blessing because he represents the

⁵² *Ustaz* Saleem is a progressive thinking teacher that replaces the Imam as a village schoolteacher.

only hope for a Palestinian refugee family left destitute because the father and eldest son have left to marry new wives. Merwane's flashback starts when his travelling companions inquire about whom he will live with in Kuwait.

The final flashback revolves around Abul Khaizaran (Abderrahman Alrahy) who was first shown in Abu Kaiss's flashback ripping a rifle out of *Ustaz* Saleem's hands. When he re-appears in Bassorah, Abul Khaizaran is no longer a member of the Palestinian resistance but a smuggler. During the journey from Bassorah to the border, he is portrayed as a man who drives his countrymen as far away as possible from Palestine and has capitulated to imperialism. The flashback reveals his insatiable desire for money as a means of compensating for being castrated on the battlefield.

Once at the border post, the men's fate is sealed. The border guards' unrelenting questions about Kawkab, the exotic dancer they want to meet, prevent Abul Khaizaran from returning to his truck, and air conditioners drown out the banging noise made by the refugees who are hiding inside the overheated and airless water tank. Since Abul Khaizaran is unable to return to the vehicle in time, the men suffocate. As their corpses are left in a garbage dump in Kuwait, the close up shot of Abu Kaiss' clenched and rigid hand evokes an image from his flashback; that of *Ustaz* Saleem's fist sticking out from the ground in the battlefield. *The Dupes* ends with the same caption it began: "And my father once said a man without a homeland will have no grave in the earth and he forbade me to leave."

Syrian Cinema and the State

From the break-up in 1961 of the United Arab Republic (UAR)—a pan-Arab alliance between Syria and Egypt set up in 1958—to the present Syria has been a one-party state. After a decade of political uncertainty, Hafiz Al-Assad came to power in 1970, ruled until his death in 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar in 2001. During this period, the country was involved in several wars: skirmishes and border disputes with Israel, it occupied neighbouring Lebanon, and fought off many uprisings by Sunni Islamic fundamentalists. The Syrian government aligned itself politically and economically with Egypt, Libya, Iran, Palestine, Jordan, and the Soviet Union. These alliances were dictated not by ideological affinities but by the *Baathist* party's aspiration to expand and solidify its rule regionally.⁵³

Historically Syrian cinema has been shaped by political developments. During the colonial period when France ruled Syria and after the nation's independence, Syrian cinema was dominated by US, European, and Egyptian imports.⁵⁴ Between 1928 and 1958 Syrian productions were few. With the formation of the UAR came the founding of The High Council of Art and Literature in 1959, which included a film committee.⁵⁵ As in Egypt where cinema had already been integrated into the Socialist Transformation agenda, the Syrian state recognized the political value of media production. In spite of the dissolution of the UAR in 1961 and the military coup (the March Revolution of 1963) that

⁵³ For more information, see Gerner, Deborah J. and Jillian Schwedler, Understanding the Contemporary, 107. *Baathism*—the word means colonial resistance—was an ideological offshoot of pan-Arabism. Before becoming a party, it was as a political movement.

⁵⁴ Kennedy Day, Kiki, "Cinema in Lebanon, Syrian, Iraq, and Kuwait," 390.

⁵⁵ Jabbour, Diana, "Syrian Cinema: Culture and Ideology," 41.

brought the *Baath* party to power, the new regime maintained this position and established the National Film Organization (NFO) in 1963. Grand ambitions were invested in the NFO as the *Baathist* regime promised to provide production facilities, access to educational facilities, and a production complex. In 1969 the NFO instituted a “distribution monopoly,” ensuring full state control over Syrian cinema.⁵⁶

Due to its affiliation to socialism, Syrian cinema was identified from the outset as the anti-establishment cinema of the Arab world. This reputation was solidified when Yugoslavian director Bosko Vulinich was hired to make *The Lorry Driver* (1967) the first NFO long feature,⁵⁷ and Syrian filmmakers were sent to Moscow to train at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Given that Syria, more than Egypt, sought to utilize cinema as tool of anti-imperialist politics and pan-Arabic solidarity, Syrian films garnered public and critical attention throughout the Arab world. The nationalist and socially inclined principles of what soon became known as alternative cinema, as Shafik points out, “transformed the Syrian film organization during the 1970s into a collecting pool for a number of progressive non-Syrian directors.”⁵⁸ Among them, as noted, was the prominent Egyptian filmmaker Tawfiq Salih.

On the one hand, the NFO was committed to the ethics and aspirations of social realism inspired by the Socialist Transformation and the pan-Arabic movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Not bound to the commercial imperatives of mainstream filmmaking, this cinema was meant to be introspective, critical and

⁵⁶ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 21.

⁵⁷ Salti, Rasha, “Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema,” 27.

⁵⁸ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 154.

actively engaged in the exploration, restoration, and advancement of the Arab identity. Hence, films were aimed at counteracting the perceived complacency amongst Arab peoples, confronting the damage inflicted internally by a lack of unity and acknowledging the state's responsibility for the decaying situation of Arab politics, society and culture.

On the other hand, the *Baathist* state viewed the cinema as a vehicle to promote the agenda of the party and control public discourse. As Andrew Hammond points out, "The *Baathist* officers who took control of Syria in the 1960s borrowed from the Egyptian model of heavy state control in all aspects of society, including the media."⁵⁹ From the party's perspective, filmmakers were considered state employees whose duty was to create and propagate images consistent with *Baathist* politics. To the extent that cinema was viewed as a tool to popularize and legitimize the regime, it was hostile to the critical project of alternative cinema. By the early 1970s, in the wake of the disastrous Six-Day War of 1967 against Israel, progressive notions about revolution and pan-Arab solidarity were replaced by authoritarianism. In these circumstances, the state-cinema relationship in Syria became a struggle between a government bent on retaining control over media production and a cinematic movement committed to the Socialist Transformation that had inspired it decades earlier.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Hammond, Andrew, Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics, and the Media, 24.

⁶⁰ This argument is commonly made in relation to the various "New Cinema" movements and the "cinéma d'auteur" that emerged in the post-1967 period. Also see Shafik, Viola, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, 186-187. Yet it is necessary to acknowledge the relationship between these manifestation and the critical realism tendencies in Egyptian films of the early 1950s and Syrian Films of the late 1950s.

Beyond Social Realism

The Dupes is an innovative work and must be considered in relation to the distinctive characteristics of mainstream Arab cinematic realism. Like *Cairo Station*, *The Dupes* took Arab cinema out of the studio. However, its major achievement is that it took realism, and by extension Arab cinema, out of the studio system. Moreover, it extended the social critique characteristic of Arab realism by assimilating the aesthetics of modernist realism adopted and popularized by representative filmmakers of the various “new waves” that emerged throughout the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This section highlights three of the distinguishing features in *The Dupes* that secured the film’s reputation as a model of an alternative Arab cinema sensibility. After examining the use of flashbacks and newsreel footage, a consideration is given to the evolution of the neo-realist protocols of Arab cinematic realist practices, namely location shooting and acting. Finally, it is argued that *The Dupes* reworks the melodramatic codes of realism aimed at humanizing the characters to expose the plight of refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 Palestinian-Israeli war.

The opening shots of an exhausted traveller visualize the physical and mental hardships of crossing the desert. As Abu Kaiss collapses, the camera captures the vastness of the land and foreshadows the perils of the journey that he has undertaken. The flashback blends fiction and documentary, a rarely used device in contemporary Arab films, to establish what brought the character to the shores of Shatt el-Arab. Dramatic scenes are interweaved with an expository

voiceover narration, newsreel footage and still images to represent the character's reflection on the Zionist occupation as well as on the political treason and duplicity of the Arab leaders' responses to the Palestinian question.⁶¹ By embracing the effect of reality embedded in the documentary materials, *The Dupes* is both a record and a re-enactment of the 1948 war, and the post-war events.

Moreover, the blend of documentary and fiction is indicative of the film's hybridity, a characteristic feature of Arab cinematic realism and the film's modernism. Whereas *Cairo Station's* brings critical realism into mainstream filmmaking, *The Dupes* abandons commercial imperatives altogether. Its experimental qualities and activist posture on Palestinian experience signal an affiliation with the cinematic avant-garde of the period aimed at transcending the formal and ethical limitations of neo-realism.

Although the use of location shooting, non-professional actors and vernacular or regional dialects were common in Arab realism, *The Dupes* expands these devices. Instead of busy urban landscapes, the preferred setting of Arab cinemas, the film marks a rare incursion into rural roads and highways to visually reinforce the themes of abandonment and flight. By foregrounding social dislocation and migration, *The Dupes* contests the pervasive yet hollow rhetoric of unity and solidarity of Arab nationalism. Salih's film discards conventional forms of performance in Arab cinematic realism, namely the off- and on-screen link between actor and character. Actors assume separate identities and interpret the characters' stories without recourse to familiar character-types or acting

⁶¹ The Palestinian question generally takes many forms but can be reduced to "what do we do with them?"

styles associated to specific genres. Performances are understated and subtle: actors appear detached, as though lacking emotion yet their body language and gestures enable the viewer to gain insight on how they are affected by the events. Also characters look slightly off screen and/or their bodies are centered when they appear to directly address the camera and the audience, a common technique of documentary.

Lastly, *The Dupes* takes a distinct approach to the Palestinian question by detailing the struggle of the Palestinians and shifting its attention to the plight of the refugees. By adapting Kanafani's novel Salih draws attention to the disenfranchised, those without a home, work or other means of support, who are willing to risk their lives to escape their predicament. As such the film differs from other screen adaptations, particularly of novels by Naguib Mahfouz dealing with lower or working class characters who are relatively integrated into a community and able to cope with the hardships of everyday life. *The Dupes* proposes a different engagement with the audience. It encourages viewers to identify with the refugees as being the most desperate, vulnerable and powerless members of society because they have lost the ability to choose their own fate. Instances that allow for this identification are: when Saad informs Abu Kaiss that smuggling is the only option for a man without legal documents; when Assaad is forced to run for his life because he is identified in the newspapers as being involved in a pro-Palestinian terrorist plot; and when Merwane's brother stops sending money from Kuwait and his father remarries leaving him as the only one able to put food on the family table.

The realist strategies used in *The Dupes* are consistent with the activist inclinations and the demands for change generated by pan-Arabism two decades before the film's release. It draws on flashbacks and mass-mediated imagery to convey the inner thoughts of characters. By combining documentary and fiction, it aligns Arab cinema to the modernist innovations of contemporary film practices. While locations expand the material and social geography of Arab filmmaking, the performance style alters conventional modes of actor-character identification and humanizes characters. Finally, it promotes viewer investment with the grim and traumatic realities of exile.

Subversion through Allegory

Allegory is perhaps the most utilized of all artistic techniques in Arab cultural practices.⁶² It is more prevalent in works that stray away from the norms aimed at regulating discourse and representations in the public sphere and implemented by censors. As Ismael Xavier explains, political modernist films in the 1960s and 1970s, used allegory extensively to explore "the crisis of the category of nation as a social and political framework..."⁶³ In contexts of acute repression, allegory also became a preferred strategy to counter dominant discourses and elude censorship. Film scholar Miriam Rosen writes about Salih struggles and strategic successes in producing controversial films in Syria stating: "One project (on the Palestinians) was abandoned by his producers when they discerned its political implications, but in 1971 —after Black

⁶² Shafik, Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation*, 90.

⁶³ Xavier, Ismael, "Historical Allegory," 358.

September—he succeeded in making *Al-Makhdu'un (The Dupes)*.”⁶⁴ In what follows, an allegorical reading of *The Dupes* is proposed. It takes into account the following: the analogies between the film’s representations and the cultural, social and political formations that inform them, and the elements that facilitate potentially subversive reading of its treatment of the Palestinian issue.

Meanings that emerge from the characters’ portrayal draw attention to contrasting and antagonistic forms of Palestinian and Arab identity. Abu Kaiss, Assaad and Merwane embody the resolve of Palestinian exiles and are agents of pan-Arabic sentiments of solidarity and progress. Their humble origins and desperate circumstances push them to risk their lives in order to find economic security and domestic stability for themselves and their families. Their counterparts are Saad, the import/export manager, Abul Khaizaran and the border agents. They represent the Arabs who have set up roots and realized their personal ambitions. They act as catalysts of the drama. This function is highlighted in the episode depicting Abu Kaiss’ encounter with Saad in the refugee camp. Abu Kaiss is advised by Saad, a fellow Palestinian who has returned from Kuwait a wealthy man, to smuggle himself into Kuwait. Lured by Saad’s apparent success, Abu Kaiss chooses to leave and risk his life to secure a better future for his family. This decision leads him to the office of the shady import/export manager who profits from the hardships of his fellow Arab. Like

⁶⁴ Rosen, Miriam, “The Uprooted Cinema: Arab Filmmakers Abroad,” 35. Black September refers to the onset of a war in 1970 waged by King Hussein of Jordan on Palestinian militants trying to sabotage his monarchy’s rule over the country. Thousands of people, mostly Palestinians and their sympathizers, were killed. The conflict ended in July 1971 chasing the Palestinian Liberation Organization and thousands of Palestinian fighters to neighbouring Lebanon. The Assaad character is presumed to be involved in the Black September crisis as he is involved in terrorist plots in Jordan before running for his life.

Saad, Abul Khaizaran has left both his homeland and his cause. No longer interested in struggling for the welfare and dignity of fellow Palestinians, he exploits their desperation. With the excuse that he is providing a service, he behaves like a businessman not a “brother.”

Moreover, Abul Khaizaran personifies failure and his actions are driven by egoism, greed and a lust for power. He has embraced the materialist values of capitalism and the authoritarian ways of imperialism. Viola Shafik is correct in her observation that the film “equates virility with honour.”⁶⁵ Abul Khaizaran has been castrated defending his homeland. For the former combatant, the loss of honour carries far more weight than physical mutilation. He weeps when he recounts the story; the tears obstruct his ability to see the road. The blurred point-of-view shots visualize his disillusionment, evoking the loss of direction that has driven him to abandon the Palestinian cause.

Abul Khaizaran is an authority figure. Although he has the truck and skills to lead the Palestinians out of their dire situation, his ability to fulfil his pledge is compromised by his ethics. According to the rhetoric of pan-Arabism, he is a man without honour and a traitor because he has turned his back on his fellow Arabs and to the cause of Arab unity.⁶⁶ Distracted by bureaucrats, the Kuwaiti border agents, he is incapable of acting swiftly. Instead of guiding the desperate men

⁶⁵ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 197.

⁶⁶ In his voiceover narrated soliloquy Abu Kaiss blames treason (*Khayni*) specifically stating, “You’ve the Zionists before you and the traitors behind. You are between the devil and the blue sea. Haven’t you got it yet that all this is useless? They want you to remain a beggar with a drooping head. They want to make sure you will never raise your voice, that you quarrel instead of striving together and claim your rights. It’s a fact, whoever has survived the Zionists bullets... is a victim of the traitors and plotters. Wouldn’t it have been better if you died like *Ustaz* Salim?”

who have placed their fate in his hands to the “promised land”, he leads them to their deaths.

The Dupes is a political allegory. It engages critically with the traumatic consequences of the Palestinian struggle by bringing up the question of why Arabs want to leave their homeland. It sheds light on Arab attitudes on the plight of Palestinians by exposing the tragic cost of irresponsibility, indifference and male hubris. It is an indictment of Arab leadership by portraying flawed authority figures that exploit and betray the trust of the people most in need of their protection. It resonates within the Arab psyche by drawing attention to the historical acrimony between those who, for better or worse, have endured exile and those who feel abandoned. Amidst a desperate situation that demands unity, this dichotomy foregrounds a political schism among Arab peoples.

The final title in *The Dupes*—“And my father once said a man without a homeland will have no grave in the earth and he forbade me to leave”—reinforces the film’s message. While it solidifies the meaning attached to the homeland, it is a forceful reminder that to run away from the struggle can only bring suffering. Faced with the option of either fleeing or fighting, Kanafani and Salih choose fighting. With death as an inevitable outcome of displacement, the novel and the film defy accepted truths because they present that fleeing as just as much of struggle, yet it accomplishes absolutely nothing for the Palestinian cause.

By the time *The Dupes* was released, it represented a break from the national cinema movements emerging in the Middle East. With an Egyptian

director, a Palestinian author and the production support of the Syrian NFO, it is a pan-national film. Steeped in the concerns of pan-Arabism and political aspirations of the Socialist Transformation, it proposes a critical engagement with the Palestinian question. In terms of its production, stylistic innovations and experimental approach, it exemplifies a shift away from mainstream cinema and an expansion of the protocols of Arab social realism. It belongs to a lineage of cinematic practices aimed at representing the internal and external threats to Arab identity. While *The Dupes* is shaped by the place and time in which it was made, its ideological disposition and aesthetic sensibility have enabled it to withstand the test of time making it one of the most enduring works of Arab cinema.

Chapter Three: **The Legacy of the** **Socialist Transformation in Syria**

Released in 1988, *The Nights of the Jackal* (Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid) is set in 1967 and tells the story of a family in the rural outskirts of the Syrian town of Lattakia before and during the war that transformed the Middle East forever.⁶⁷ It is a fine example of the tensions and complexities present in Syrian filmmaking practices, namely the artistic sensibility and political resolve of directors subject to economic scarcity and strict censorship. Moreover, this visually stunning and multilayered work belongs to a lineage of provocative films that can be traced back to the Egyptian critical realism of the 1950s and the Syrian alternative cinema of the 1970s.

After a brief account of the shift of state support from cinema to television production and its impact on Syrian film practices, this chapter includes a synopsis of *The Nights of the Jackal*. The detailed commentary that follows is aimed at highlighting the film as a product of a context in which filmmakers struggle to assert their creative identity and political stances against the numerous restrictions imposed by the state's control over media production. Realism and allegory, as will be argued, are used effectively and critically. These strategies will be considered within a broader tradition of a political and

⁶⁷ This formulation makes explicit reference to the book by Tom Segev entitled 1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East.

potentially subversive sensibility in Arabic filmmaking that emerged in Syria during the 1970s and commonly called alternative cinema.

State Policy: From Cinema to Television

The achievement of *The Nights of the Jackal* is that it was one of two Syrian films produced and released in 1988. Although the impact of its lengthy and successful theatrical run cannot be measured accurately, its exhibition alone is a remarkable fact.⁶⁸ At this point in time, movie going was negatively impacted by the systematic campaign of the *Baathist* regime against communal gatherings.⁶⁹ With “party thugs” harassing spectators, attendance declined as film audiences fearing intimidation opted to stay home. This situation, compounded with the growth of video rentals and television programming, led to a gradual reduction of movie theatres throughout Syria.

In addition, the Syrian state had virtually abandoned the socialist pro-Arabic cinema project it had previously promoted. As in other countries of the Middle East, including Egypt, Syria reverted to formulaic and commercially viable motion pictures and became a major producer and supplier of television series, or *musalsal*, to the Arabic world. This ascendancy of mainstream production forced committed, alternative, art house or independent films into the margins. Therefore, it is useful to examine briefly what led to these changes, and how filmmakers responded.

⁶⁸ Ghanam, Oussama, “Tigers in Their Ninth Day: Syrian Cinema in a Quarter Century,” 72.

⁶⁹ Wright, Lawrence, “Disillusioned,” 62-64. This campaign was legitimized by the martial law, still in effect, that was proclaimed in 1963, the same year of the founding of the National Film Organization and the first state television broadcast. Also see Salti, Rasha, “Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema,” 25.

As Viola Shafik indicates since 1969, the Syrian state has exercised full control over cinema and television.⁷⁰ In accordance with the government's original plan of using media for propagandistic purposes, an elaborate approval process was instituted to regulate the production and circulation of images. As Syrian film scholar Rasha Salti points out:

film scripts have to earn the seal of approval from committees, undergo endless petty trials, revisions and discussion, before making it onto the list of projects endorsed by the NFO... From the beginning of production, film scripts have to pass that test, and at the conclusion of production, films are screened for a gathering of officials, high-ranking cadres in the *Baath* and other dignitaries of the state before the film is granted permission to be screened publicly.⁷¹

Other mechanisms were introduced, like approving films for international markets only and delaying domestic exhibition. To use the words of Arab film scholar Rebecca Hillauer: "even displeasing films are not banned: they are simply not shown."⁷²

In the 1980s, as Salti points out:

Cinema became the repository of thwarted 'national' aspirations, failed promises, and disillusioned subjectivity and citizenship. Its lens became critical, it began to furrow in the cracks and fissures of the social construct, unearthing the disruption between official discourse and lived experience, the national paradigm as it were, and it's unfolding in everyday reality.⁷³

As a result, the state was faced with a dilemma of either suppressing films it considered "dangerous" or promoting media it perceived more favourable to its

⁷⁰ Shafik, Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 21.

⁷¹ Salti, Rasha, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," 38-39.

⁷² Hillauer, Rebecca, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*, 250.

⁷³ Salti, Rasha, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," 33-34.

agenda.⁷⁴ The solution to this predicament came in the form of a gradual disassociation with a cinema perceived as being critical of the dictatorial politics and social coercion of the Baath regime. And last but not least, the principles of self-expression and artistic autonomy driving cinematic practice conflicted with the state's self-appointed role as the sole monitor of media production.

Shifting support to television in the 1980s enabled the Syrian state to maintain control, mainly because it believed that television was a more effective and trustworthy media. The hugely popular *musalsal*, for instance, was viewed as safe because of its avoidance of controversial topics such as sectarianism and minority rights issues.⁷⁵ Whether dealing with historical or current subjects, the *musalsal* has tended to adopt an ideologically conservative position and privilege resolutions that conform to the value-system and discourse of the Baath party.

Given the economic, demographic and social realities of the country, the Syrian state could not possibly afford to maintain a prolific production in both media. While no detailed information is available on what percentage of funding previously allocated to film was transferred to television, policies favouring television produced mixed results. While producers, directors, technicians and actors were attracted by opportunities for steady work and better salaries, independent companies were enticed by partnerships and other incentives.

Krady writes:

Since the 1980s, the Syrian state has offered its production facilities to private directors in return for rights of first broadcast. This drew filmmakers and

⁷⁴ Kraidy, Marwan M., "Syria: Media Reform and its Limitations."

⁷⁵ Dick, Marlin, "The State of the *Musalsal*: Arab Television Drama and Comedy and the Politics of the Satellite Era."

writers whose training in Soviet film realism led to stunning videography, solid dialogue, and engaging treatment of historical themes.⁷⁶

The Syrian state's claim about the value of investing in and maintaining control over television was validated by public response.⁷⁷ As in other Middle Eastern countries audiences embraced the medium, displacing cinema as a mainstream form of entertainment. With the proliferation of cable and satellite broadcasting, the audience share and popularity of the Syrian *musalsal* replaced Egypt's historical dominance as a purveyor of motions pictures in the Arab world. In spite of attempts to revitalize commercial filmmaking, and efforts to capitalize on co-productions, Syrian cinema was relegated to the margins of cultural consciousness.

Yet films continued being produced and exhibited at home and abroad. Some achieved public success, mainly amongst specialized audiences and film festival crowds, and garnered critical recognition and awards even from the Syrian state. The directors managed to retain some degree of creative autonomy not available to their television colleagues, in great measure because they chose personal projects that would free them from the constraints of commercialism. In an interview, Syrian filmmaker Mohammed Malas stated:

The kitchen of cinema here [in Syria] is full of poisonous materials. But we are lucky as filmmakers to work in this kitchen. Because there is no audience, at least we don't have to worry about the censorship imposed by commercialism.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Kraidy, Marwan M., "Syria: Media Reform and its Limitations."

⁷⁷ Abu-Lughod, Lila, "Dramatic Reversals: Political Islam and Egyptian Television," 269-270.

⁷⁸ Wright, Lawrence, "Letter From Damascus: Captured on Film," 67.

Many filmmakers learned to work under the existing conditions, namely the stringent production approval process. Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid, the director of *The Nights of the Jackal*, proposed that strict censorship could lead to more effective cinema, and backed his assertion by saying that the Soviet films under Stalin were superior to those produced in post-Cold War Russia.⁷⁹ In addition, in an interview he stated that although “nobody should be forbidden to say what he wants... a phenomena that dazzles me [is that] when you’re suppressed, you *think* better.”⁸⁰ Whether this claim, to use the words of Lawrence Wright, is “a perverse desire to romanticize the artistic constraints of dictatorship”⁸¹ or is more widely applicable to Arab filmmaking, censorship created conditions that enabled filmmakers to ascertain their right to self-expression, and devise strategies for making films that were at once accessible and meaningful.

A Simple Family Tale

The Nights of the Jackal opens with a shot showing a portrait of the main protagonist Hassan, better known as Abu Kamal (Ass'ad Fedda) dressed in military uniform hanging over a bed. He reveals his authoritarian and abusive personality when he wakes up his wife Mu'tiah (Najah Abdullah) and tells her to use her whistling skills to scare away a pack of hyenas that haunts the rural family home. However, when an exhausted Mu'tiah refuses, he grabs her, forces her out of bed and intimidates her into obeying him.

⁷⁹ Wright, Lawrence, “Disillusioned,” 63.

⁸⁰ Wright, Lawrence, “Disillusioned,” 63.

⁸¹ Wright, Lawrence, “Disillusioned,” 63.

The opening credits roll over a circular panning shot that starts with the landscape of hills above the port city of Lattakia and ends at the Abu Kamal home where the family members are introduced. While Mu'tiah is sitting on the ground doing housework and Abu Kamal is exercising, the eldest daughter Rima is sweeping the floor, the youngest son Bassam (Bassam Koussa) is working on his kite, the second daughter Dalal (Tulai Haroun) is dressing and leaving her room, and the second eldest son Talal (Zuheir Ramadan) is pissing on a large leaf. The long sequence shot concludes when the father orders his family to get ready to leave for the fields.

In this early part of the film, the routine of going down the hill every morning to work is established. Each member of the family grabs a tool, one of the sons holds the donkey on which the father will ride, and the daughter enquires about what to cook for lunch. In the next scene Abu Kamal's brutality towards his family is confirmed. When he hits his own toe with an axe, he blames his family, and curses while hopping around hysterically. The outburst stops when Abu Kamal suddenly calls everyone to help him get back to his feet. Then, he begins to laugh and everybody joins. Rima comes down to the field to announce the arrival of visitors. After a brief conversation with a village sheikh, a formal request of marriage is made. The unhappy daughter is escorted by Abu Kamal and her new in-laws, and led away in a procession.

This wedding scene points to the film's main theme: the self-inflicted alienation of the father that inevitably forces the children to leave home. Shortly after Rima's departure, Abu Kamal humiliates Talal for flirting with Hayat, a

desirable woman who is married to Suleiman, a neighbour. He buries his son in a hole, shaves his head and covers it with a sweet substance. As he waits for Talal to get stung by insects, a soldier approaches announcing that the son is drafted into the army. Dalal elopes when she discovers that Ali, the shoemaker's son who got her pregnant, will never have the courage to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Mu'tiah dies grief stricken after learning about Talal's death during the war. And finally, the eldest son Kamal, who is seen only on his visits, makes good on his threat never to return to the family home because of the abuse and humiliation he endures at the hands of his father.

The only one left is Bassam. Abu Kamal is pleased that his son can now whistle. Instead of chastising him, he complies with his son's request to cook something other than potatoes and sends him to Hayat's house so that she can teach him how to prepare stuffed grape leaves. Like his brother Talal, Bassam is infatuated with the desirable Hayat. In the end, he is inexplicably sent away after finding the bodies of Hayat and the barber who have been murdered by her husband Suileman. Now Abu Kamal is alone, at the mercy of the jackal.

Countering Idealized Representations of Rural Life

The opening segment signals how *The Nights of Jackal* operates and how it can be read: as a tale of patriarchal authoritarianism not a humorous portrayal of rural life in Syria. The themes established in the pre- and credit sequences foreshadow the disrupting effects of coercion on family life. Significant is the arrangement of the scenes. By opting to show the scene of Abu Kamal's abuse

of his wife Mu'tiah first, the film detaches itself from idealized representations of family. In the next sequence, the family sets off to work in the fields. The high angle shots of the characters going down the hill initiates a visual motif which, culminating in the scene of Bassam's gruesome discovery of the murdered lovers, elicits an allegorical reading because it equates downward movement to a descent into hell.

From the outset, the camera situates the characters within their environment and conveys feelings they are not allowed to express, namely the fear, anger, and uncertainty permeating their everyday lives. For instance, Rima's departure is condensed into three brief scenes focusing on the frame of mind of the daughter and the mother, not on formal proceedings. While Rima's gloomy expression registers her disengagement from the wedding celebrations, Mu'tiah's anguished wailing conveys her grief at losing a daughter. At the same time, the detached perspective of the camera undermines melodrama revealing instead the extent to which the characters' unhappiness is determined by gender, class and culture. Similarly when Dalal confesses to Mu'tiah that she is pregnant, the camera records the dismay of the daughter and the consternation of the mother. Yet as the framing shifts from close-ups to a long shot revealing the forest location, melodrama gives way to a poignant yet unsentimental portrait of female intimacy.

In other instances, the camera assumes the characters' positions. For instance, a point-of-view shot reveals the horrific aftermath of Hayat's murder. When Bassam arrives at the scene, he sees Suileman frozen in the kneeling

position gripping his rifle tightly over the corpses of his wife and the barber, and nearby an unguarded infant. The boy's gaze evokes a previous moment of transgression when Abu Kamal discovers Talal's affair with Hayat. The shift from an objective to a subjective point-of-view confirms the participatory role played by the camera throughout the film.

The minimalist style of *The Nights of the Jackal* evokes the historical associations between Syrian and Soviet/East European filmmaking in the late 1950s and mid 1960s, explainable because of the director's training at the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK).⁸² Yet as Rasha Salti remarks, "Abd al-Hamid's cinema is removed from didacticism and dogma, it feels weightless in its freshness."⁸³ His cinema captures the ethos and culture of the southern rural regions of Syria—the region from which the director comes. His concern to dramatize everyday life and reveal the resilience of ordinary people also prompts a comparison with Italian neo-realism, namely in regards to the use of vernacular speech and locations.

The accent and dialect of the Syrian mountain population distinguishes *The Nights of the Jackal* from the commercial works of Arabic cinema, mainly those produced within the Egyptian studio system. Dress, behaviour, and gestures specific to the region are presented without recourse to folklore and artifice. The scene in which a group of neighbours seek Abu Kamal's assistance to repair their radios is a good example. Authenticity is achieved by means of

⁸² Salti, Rasha, *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, 181.

⁸³ Salti, Rasha, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema," 32.

naturalist performances, and characters whose behaviour towards each other ranges from panic to gratitude, embarrassment and hostility.

The landscape around the port city of Lattakia provides an unmistakable atmosphere to represent life in rural Syria. In spite of its spectacular vistas and verdant hills, it is a harsh environment where farmers' work is backbreaking, profits from their labour negligible and modern amenities are scarce. Despite being shot in 1988, there are few elements such as car models or building designs that contradict the film's timeframe. Therefore the rural setting, which is convincingly void of datable technology, works in the film's favour because it suggests analogies with contemporary Syria. The old bulldozer that Kamal drives and the rickety bus on which Abu Kamal travels to town, for instance, can still be seen in rural areas; they exemplify the stagnant way of life and dilapidated conditions found in the country's rural areas.

Notwithstanding, the radio is a valuable and important object. It offers entertainment for the family when they work in the fields. It also supplies information on market prices for the produce they grow; in one scene Abu Kamal destroys a whole season's worth of tomatoes when he hears about falling sale prices. It provides news on the Arab-Israeli conflict, prompting responses that draw attention to the characters' posture on war, nationalist pride and leadership. A revealing example is Abu Kamal's response to an announcement about the possibility of war with Israel. The scene shows him with his family in their large patio, a common trait of rural homes of the region. He climbs onto the roof and begins marching to the sounds of national anthem at the end of the bulletin.

Looking down on his wife and children, he reverts to the ideal image of himself: his portrait as a soldier that hangs over his bed. When he commands the family to start digging a defensive trench, Mu'tiah casts doubts on the validity of the enterprise to which he answers condescendingly by saying "what do you know!"

Later when a local military representative invites him to rejoin the army, he obliges by assuming the stance of a high-ranking officer. His enthusiasm is short-lived when he is assigned to guard a bridge. In another amusing scene, Abu Kamal's self-aggrandizing image as a military trained community leader is tested. As he demonstrates what to do in the event of an Israeli air strike, an airplane flies overhead. Instead of following his instructions the labourers panic and scatter across the field. In this way, the film comments in a humorous manner on the militaristic tradition of leadership in Syria. They also confirm that Abu Kamal's actions are driven by arrogance not by a genuine interest in the community's welfare.

The Enemy Within

Unable to keep his family together and confront the jackals roaming outside his house, Abu Kamal is shown as an ineffectual and arrogant autocrat. This portrayal is consistent with the use of allegory in Arab cinema. Viola Shafik writes:

The father represents the nation's leadership, who have overestimated their strength, fighting the superior enemy (airplanes) with empty rhetoric (radios) and inadequate means (bare fists). By oppressing the other members of society (the family) they have caused a weakness that has in turn

facilitated the defeat. By means of his paternal anti-hero the director shakes patriarchal family structures and the male claim to leadership.⁸⁴

In what follows, the allegorical dimensions of *The Nights of the Jackal* will be examined. Taken into consideration are the analogies between characters and real life figures, between the disintegration of the family and the dissolution of the state. Comments on the open-ended conclusion will address the question of whether Abu Kamal is the jackal or is left to the jackals?

The opening image of Abu Kamal in full soldier's regalia resonates with film audiences familiar with Arab politics, namely the prevalence of regimes headed by serving or retired military officers. The scene depicts Abu Kamal as an irascible man who uses violence to assert his authority. By forcing Mu'tiah to shoo away the jackals, he is revealed as a coward frightened by the howls of animals he cannot see; an invisible enemy—like the Israeli fighter planes—feeding his delusions of power. This act of aggression against his wife foreshadows the physical and emotional abuse that will tear the family apart, even before all the family members are introduced and the timeframe of the film established.

Set in 1967, the film proposes that the cause of the destruction of Abu Kamal's family is not the war, that the real enemy is not the state of Israel. A colleague of director Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid, Syrian filmmaker Ossama Mohammed, validates this idea when he states: "the Other is not Israel. It is inside our homes. It is inside everybody."⁸⁵ Indeed, the representation of

⁸⁴ Shafik, Viola, *Egyptian Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 164.

⁸⁵ Wright, Lawrence, "Letter From Damascus: Captured on Film," 66.

authority exercised by coercion and war waged on an unseen enemy in *The Nights of the Jackal* borders on the subversive because it devalues the socialist view of leadership based on cooperation and the nationalist aims of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The regional Arabic colloquial term referring to the film's title of the jackal—"ibn awa" is translated as a brazen fox—is one animal not an actual pack of animals heard in the distance. As a metaphor, the jackal should not be interpreted as a predatory occupier, as the director may have wanted the censors to believe. Instead, the metaphor suggests that Abu Kamal is the jackal that threatens the Syrian nation. His abusive behaviour drives away the members of his family (the nation), leaving him alone and confined to his house. In the end, the *nights* belong to Abu Kamal. When there is no one left but himself, he stumbles into the darkness to confront the jackal within, the jackal he has become.

The Nights of the Jackal depicts the impact of war on the civilian population, suggesting a complementary metaphor about leadership. The panic produced by the prospect of war is represented in a sequence where the family, without Abu Kamal who is on military duty, is working their land. After noticing a fire in the wheat field, they discover that Suileman is responsible. As Mu'tiah, Bassam, and Dalal extinguish the flames, Suileman explains that he wants to prevent the Israelis from taking the crops. Irritated by his grumbling, they reassure him by saying that even if there is an invasion, the army would never reach their region—incidentally this is the same argument Mu'tiah used to

dissuade Abu Kamal from his order to dig trenches. The scene ends with a shot of Hayat lying face down on the ground dismayed by her husband's stupidity and the sound of their infant crying.

Analogies between the backward rustic Suileman and the pompous war veteran Abu Kamal address differing attitudes about war. Suileman is a wild man: he barely talks, he is dirty, suspicious, and prefers hunting to taking care of his family. He acts instinctively, reacts against those who threaten him by burning crops or killing. If Mu'tiah and the children stand for a nation bound together by Abu Kamal's authority, the crazed Suileman is the embodiment of the chaos wrought about by dysfunctional and paranoid leaders like Abu Kamal. In light of the remarks about an unseen enemy, the allegory in *The Nights of the Jackal* is at its most devastating because it draws on ineffective leaders and frenzied followers to dramatize the traumatic defeat of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, making it perhaps the ultimate indictment of the authoritarian militarism besieging Syria.

Notwithstanding the influence of Soviet realism and Italian neo-realism on its aesthetics, *The Nights of the Jackals* attest to the endurance of alternative cinema in contemporary Syrian cinematic practices. Despite the obstacles imposed by the state's regulation of media production and limited exhibition opportunities, Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid's film is a fine example of how filmmakers managed in the 1980s to safeguard the realist sensibility that emerged a decade earlier. Syrian cinema was not fighting an all out war against government control. Instead, its tactic was to produce introspective, critical work to undermine the official image of Arabic identity, now the domain of television,

by countering the *Baathist* regime's agenda and propagandistic rewriting of history.

The Nights of the Jackal uses allegory to reflect on the role of leadership in the 1967 defeat and the failure of Arab unity narratives. It challenges hubris with reality, tyranny with expression and revolution with implosion. Without doubt, it is an important film. It establishes its purpose by calling or better yet screaming attention to itself. Beneath what appears to be a simple story about life in rural Syria, the film reveals a schism between leaders, followers and the *jackals* that haunt them both.

Conclusion: **Ali Zaoua, The Legacy Lives On**

The cinema of the Socialist Transformation directed its efforts towards the construction of the pan-national cinema and identity. Inspired by pan-Arab ideals and ideologies, this is an alternative cinema. It emphasizes a heterogeneous and multiple positioned Arab subjects that could be Egyptians as well as Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese and Moroccans. With ordinary people as protagonists, this cinema draws attention to their experiences and struggles to find stability, ensure the welfare of their families and communities, and leave marginality behind to become agents of their own destinies in order to participate fully in the building of a better society.

While all the films in this thesis are products of their time, shaped by the cultural, social and political contexts in which they were produced, they signal a shift towards an activist, modernist and reflexive cinema. These films carry on with the themes and aesthetic sensibility of the Socialist Transformation period, reconfiguring the representation of the marginalized and disenfranchised and expanding the protocols of cinematic realism. To label this cinema affiliated to the cultural history of the Socialist Transformation as a movement—a New Arabic Cinema, for instance—would suggest that it is either a period specific or a normative practice. Considering that the film industry in the 1980s operated in much the same way as it did during the heyday of the Egyptian studio system, it

is more productive to approach this cinema as a sensibility, as a tendency still present in contemporary practices. It has continued developing alongside yet distinctly from the mainstream and it traces its lineage back to the ethics and aesthetics of the Socialist Transformation cinema.

The final chapter of this thesis engages with the question of how this sensibility manifests itself 50 years later in *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (Nabil Ayouch, 2000). This groundbreaking work strives to transcend social realism. It combines the hard-hitting realism of street-kids' films with the fantasy of children's fables, revealing at once brutalizing experiences of marginality and, by means of animation, the liberating potential of the imagination. As a Maghreb film it belongs to what Sabry Hafez calls a "double tradition: both Arabic and French."⁸⁶

The Arab film scholar explains that Maghreb directors embraced the ideas about national culture articulated by post-colonial theorist and political activist Frantz Fanon mainly that "it is not folklore, nor an abstract populism."⁸⁷ Instead their cinema represents the relationship between the individual and the nation, linking the characters' experiences to the social-political realities of the nation. At once responsive to the structures bonding people and society and, in the words of Hafez, to "the shifting nature of identity, both national and individual,"⁸⁸ this approach adds force to the idea that Arab cinema, be it produced in Egypt, Syria or Morocco, is above all a cultural and political practice. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to explore the links between *Ali Zaoua* and the alternative Arabic

⁸⁶ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 241.

⁸⁷ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 242.

⁸⁸ Hafez, Sabry, "The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema," 242.

cinema that emerged in the 1950s. Before commenting on the film's reflexive qualities, a brief description of the plot is in order.

The Legendary Prince

Ali Zaoua opens with an animated sequence and a voiceover narration. The female voice establishes that Ali (Abdel-hak Zhayra) has run away from home because he objected to his mother (Amal Ayouch) prostituting herself to survive. In the next scene, the colourful drawings of a magical island are replaced by a matted shot showing Ali responding to the questions posed by a female interviewer. Surrounded by young boys and adult males, he tells his story revealing a self-styled persona where legend and reality converge. He claims being able to pull vehicles with his teeth, and recounts escaping from home because his mother intended to sell his eyes to a foreigner. An extreme close-up of the boy's face signals a shift from Ali's tale to the violent end of his life as a street kid in Casablanca. He dies surrounded by his friends after being struck on the head by a rock thrown by a boy from a gang Ali has left to pursue his dream of becoming a sailor.

His friends Kwita (Mounïm Kbab), Omar (Mustapha Hansali), and Boubker (Hicham Moussoune) are intent on preserving Ali's myth. With Ali these young boys, their ages ranging from five to 10 years old, have left Dib's gang and want to honour the friend they view as a "prince worthy of a burial fit for royalty." But first they must overcome a series of obstacles: collect funds for the burial, learn the traditional Muslim rituals, hide the body in a "cave" (underground cellar) to

prevent it from decomposing, inform Ali's mother about her son's death, as well as staying clear from Dib's gang and evading the police trying to chase them away from their make-shift-home on an abandoned jetty in the harbour.

Eventually, the boys are able to carry out their objective with the help of a captain (Mohamed Majd), the aging owner of a vessel on which Ali had planned to escape. Concerned about the whereabouts of "mousse" (his young sailor friend), the captain hijacks Ali's body, places it on ice and builds a casket. Before the funeral can take place, however, Kwita must fulfill his last tasks: confront Dib (Said Taghmaoui, a French-Moroccan actor and the only professional in the cast) to bring Boubker and Omar back, and escort Ali's mother to the harbour. Over the shots of the ship leaving the jetty and sailing away on the open sea, animated drawings visualize and a voiceover narrates Ali's fantastic story about a young sailor and a princess who travel to a magical island where two suns shine brightly in the sky.

The Legacy

Produced nearly a half of a century after the attempts towards the Socialist Transformation in the Arab world, *Ali Zaoua* contains the themes and aesthetic sensibilities of pan-Arabism, cinematic Arab realism and the allegorical codifications common to the films of the period.⁸⁹ It also evokes comparisons with other films discussed in this thesis. Like *Cairo Station*, it opens with a voice-over narration. As in *The Dupes*, the opening scene shot by a broadcast camera showing Ali being interviewed by a journalist is suggestive of the objectivity

⁸⁹ Abu Seif, Salah, "Salah Abou Seif: About the Director."

claims of documentary. Like in *The Nights of the Jackal*, the character is introduced twice in the film: as Ali the fanciful storyteller and Ali the street kid who is murdered. In spite of the obvious differences, the use of these devices is consistent with the protocols of cinematic realism. Yet, *Ali Zaoua* is by far more reflexive and modernist. Its formalist features alter the viewer's investment in the realities being represented prompting questions about the ethical and political motivations that inform the film's style.

Ali Zaoua is shot on location in Casablanca. Like *Cairo Station*, it represents the city as a microcosm of Moroccan society. The topographic and architectural features of the various settings reveal the customary dichotomies between the dilapidated and modern city, between destitution and prosperity, marginality and progress. The settings are also used to draw attention to the plight of the *chemkara* (street children) and the emancipating potential of solidarity and fantasy. By means of these complimentary yet divergent realities, the film adds a metaphorical dimension to its portrayal of the disenfranchised.

The *mise-en-scène* and formal design intensify the effect of authenticity characteristic of realism, and together with the settings visualize the abandonment, alienation and violence common to cinematic portrayals of urban experience. For instance Ali is murdered in a vacant lot filled with debris; Dib's gang lives in a half-built building that looks like a school; and the street kids play soccer in a field packed with broken down buses; the place Ali and friends call home is an isolated jetty, a slab of concrete with no walls or roof on which the children draw squares pretending to have an individual kitchen, bathroom and

living room. In addition to these rundown, decaying and isolated places, the film offers brief glimpses of modern Casablanca; namely the chaotic streets where the children beg or sell cheap trinkets to indifferent motorists. For instance, Kwita steals a purse from a middle-class girl at the entrance of a school; he talks to a guard at the Naval Headquarters hoping to find a sailor suit for Ali's burial; he visits the popular district where Ali's mother lives.

By means of these locations, *Ali Zaoua* constructs a series of analogies between normality (the home of Ali's mother) and destitution (the jetty), nurturing (a gentle mother who cares deeply about her son and his friends) and mistreatment (the violent deaf mute Dib who tortures, molests and rapes children), misery (the life on the streets) and fantasy (the children's story that nourishes Ali's dream to become a sailor and leave the street and the gangs.) These analogies sustain the film's ethical position—its censure of violence and advocacy of solidarity—and articulate another trope associated to critical realism and the cinema of the Socialist Transformation, namely the recurring theme of leadership.

The ultimate cause of Ali's death is his decision to challenge Dib's authority by leaving his gang. Ali is a leader who encourages his friends to pursue their dreams, and materialize their fantasies. This resolve undermines Dib's control, turning Ali into an honourable and virtuous prince—a moniker symbolizing enlightenment. Conversely, Dib embodies authoritarianism. Like Abu Kamal in *The Nights of the Jackal*, he is a father figure gone awry who exploits the *chemkara* physically and psychologically, and profits from their poverty and

vulnerability. This dichotomy between enlightened and repressive modalities of leadership is frequently deployed in the films affiliated to the discourse and ideologies of the Socialist Transformation. As noted earlier, the despot theme resonates with the history of the power struggles that have stymied the progress of Arab people. However, in *Ali Zaoua* there is hope: the followers of virtuous leaders may be able to escape oppression and realize their dreams of a brighter future—a subject to be addressed below.

To write his screenplay, Nabil Ayouch conducted research and followed the lives of a group of street kids.⁹⁰ His decision to cast some of them adds authenticity to the film. The boys' energy and spontaneity serves the director well; it enables him to convey both their strength and resolve to survive on the street. At the same time, Ayouch avoids glamorizing them; their scarred faces and bodies are brutal reminders of the physical and psychological violence they endure in their everyday lives. The realism of *Ali Zaoua* emerges from its ability to expand the emotional register of the street-kid film; by humanizing the characters it avoids sensationalizing their despair, alienation and exploitation.

Nowhere are the film's ethics more explicit than in its treatment of children's addiction to glue. After showing them sniffing glue, it uses animation to shed light on its hallucinatory effects. For instance, Kwita's hallucination consists of moving shapes that appear on the metal blind of a store. To the extent that these drawings evoke the colourful chalk images illustrating Ali's story at the start of the film and painted on the walls of the "cave" where his body is hidden, they

⁹⁰ *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (2000) d. Nabil Ayouch. Film Movement 2006 DVD. The liner notes were written by the director.

visualize both a flight from reality and a fantasy. After Kwita steals the young woman's purse, the shapes of rolling waves change into the curly hair framing the face of a princess—clearly an imaginary projection of his child-like longing for love.

As suggested earlier, the reflexive quality of *Ali Zaoua* is established in the opening sequence. By blending a children's story with a documentary-like presentation of the *chemkara*, the film expands the expressive capabilities of cinematic realism. Although multiple scenes depict how children experience life on the street, the centrality of myth and legend counters a reading of the film as an ethnographic record. It reveals the plight of underprivileged children but also represents their ability to imagine themselves differently and prompts the film audience to see them differently as well. The recurrent use of subjective point-of-view shots is central to this strategy; it gives the children narrative agency and encourages viewer investment both with the dramatic conditions of their lives and their resolve to rise above them.

Perhaps the most eloquent example of this strategy can be found at the end of the film, namely the diverging meanings elicited by the closing sequences. As Kwita, Boubker and Omar depart to bury Ali on an island, a series of point-of-view shot reveals Dib and his gang standing on the jetty. This poignant scene is followed by an aerial view of the boat sailing into the ocean and a voice-over narration of Ali's tale about a sailor's journey. While the image of the vessel conveys freedom and hope, the shots of the homeless boys suggest the improbability of a resolution, or at best a resolution that is out of their immediate

reach. For the children left behind, violence and alienation persist; their struggle to survive life on the streets continues. Like the magical effect achieved in the final shot of two suns illuminating the city's skyline, fantasy is ephemeral.

Conclusion: The Sensibility of the Socialist Transformation

Comparisons made between *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* and *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, Brazil 2002) are intriguing.⁹¹ While these films exhibit similar features, the formalist and political stance of Ayouch's film evokes *Los Olvidados* (Luis Buñuel, Mexico 1950) and *Mama Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy 1962.) The earlier works break with the observational tenets of neo-realism, engaging critically with the realities of marginality being represented and countering modernist narratives of social development and progress. Like these films, *Ali Zaoua* expands the emotional register of the street-kid film. Instead of sensationalizing their despair, alienation and exploitation, it humanizes the characters.

These qualities are equally found in Arab cinematic realism, and more specifically in the group of films discussed in this thesis: *Cairo Station*, directed by Youssef Chahine in 1958, *The Dupes* directed by Tawfiq Salih in 1972, *The Nights of the Jackal* directed by Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid in 1982, and *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* directed by Nabil Ayouch in 2000. These films exemplify practices aimed at departing from the normative trends of Arab filmmaking represented in the 1940s and 1950s predominantly by Egyptian

⁹¹ The DVD jacket quotes a review from *The New York Post* that reads: "In its own, low-key way, *Ali Zaoua* is just as stirring [as *City of God*]." Also, many of my colleagues' initial reaction upon screening the film was that it reminded them of the far more popular *City of God*.

productions, and are shaped by the momentous events that transformed the Middle East between 1948 and 1967.

A period of intense conflict following the establishment of the state of Israel was fanned by anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiments. Notwithstanding its ideological ambivalence and authoritarian policies, the revolution led by Egypt's Free Officers Movement and Gamal Abd al-Nasser promoted a discourse centered on socialist transformation that promised a brighter future for Egypt, and set in motion a pan-Arabic project based on the ideals of socialism and cultural reaffirmation. Pan-Arabism became a catalyst for the political, cultural and social aspirations of the Arab states of the region. This new version of Arab nationalism appealed to communities sharing the same language, religion and culture, and became a rallying cry against a common enemy and the threat posed by Zionist expansion. To the extent that socialist transformation was based on progress and modernization, its ideals solidified over the next two decades and manifested themselves in cinema by means of a sensibility and a commitment to activist, introspective and reflexive modalities of cinematic realism.

In spite of the differences among the films—mostly due to the periods and contexts of production—they share similar concerns. Influenced by literary practices, namely the work of Naguib Mahfouz, Egyptian realism drew attention to the marginalized sectors of Arab society. By representing how their lives and experiences are shaped by the immediate context and the conflicts arising from class division, this realist filmmaking broke from a cinema focusing on modernization and characters belonging to privileged sectors of society. Other

practices expanded the documentary aim of realism in the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israel War, when cultural production was directly affected by the more adverse manifestations of Arab nationalism.

The daring films by innovative Egyptian directors Youssef Chahine and Tawfiq Salih signalled a gradual shift in social, cultural, and political sentiments. Their films gave ordinary people a voice empowering them as narrative agents, denounced exploitation, raised awareness and advocated change. This modality of realism was by far more challenging and potentially controversial. In the Middle East where states have historically monitored media production, allegory became a preferred option to counter institutionalized forms of censorship. By blending literal representation with symbols and metaphor, Arab filmmakers added either a critical dimension to cinematic realism or subverted prevailing myths and discourses on class, identity and culture.

By exploring the aesthetic, ethical and political features of these five films, this thesis has sought to demonstrate the extent to which these Arab cinematic practices moved away from the reliance on music, stars and melodrama characteristic of the classical Egyptian films like *Fatma* by director Ahmed Badrakhan. Working against the grain of an entertainment-driven industry, *Cairo Station* portrays the station as a microcosm of urban experience. People of various classes, ages and genders move through the station, and those who work and live on the grounds are a community of sorts with its own social hierarchy. By favouring class solidarity, the film represents the resolve of the disenfranchised to assert their rights, secure a better future for themselves and

their community by challenging the divisive tactics of class privilege personified by Abu Gaber and eliminating the chaos embodied by the unstable and unpredictable Kenawi.

The Nights of the Jackal uses realism and allegory effectively and critically. Made in Syria, this film is the product of a context in which filmmakers had to struggle to assert their creative identity against the numerous restrictions imposed by the state's control over media production. Its minimalist style evokes the historical associations between Syrian and Soviet/East European filmmaking yet discards the didacticism of social realism. It captures the ethos and culture of the southern rural regions of Syria, dramatizing the traumatic impact of war on a peasant family led by the volatile and autocratic Abu Kamal. It uses allegory to reflect on the role of leadership in the 1967 defeat and the failure of Arab unity narratives. It challenges hubris with reality, tyranny with expression and revolution with implosion, revealing the schism between leaders, followers and the jackals that haunt them both.

Like the novel on which it is based *The Dupes* is an activist film; it is an indictment of the exploitation of Arabs by Arabs, contesting the pervasive yet hollow rhetoric of unity and solidarity of Arab nationalism. By depicting the journey of four Palestinian refugees from Palestine to Iraq to Kuwait, it engages both with the mundane aspects of everyday life and the myths of success spread by power hungry Arabs. Produced by the National Film Organization at a time when Syrian cinema garnered public and critical attention in the Arab world, this experimental film transcends the formal and ethical limitations of neo-realism. It

expands the material and social geography of Arab filmmaking, draws on flashbacks and mass-mediated imagery to convey the inner thoughts of its characters and promotes identification with the traumatic realities of exile.

A similar tendency towards introspection and reflexivity can be found in *Ali Zaoua*, a Morocco-France co-production about the *chemkara* (street kids) of Casablanca. Shot on location, it depicts the city as a microcosm of Moroccan society. The various settings reveal complimentary yet divergent realities, adding a metaphorical dimension to its portrayal of how children experience life on the street. Yet, the centrality of myth and legend counters a reading of the film as an ethnographic record. By representing the children's ability to imagine themselves differently and encourages audiences to identify with their resolve to rise above the dramatic conditions of their every day life. This contemporary work belongs to the lineage of alternative Arab filmmaking practices that emerged 50 years earlier. Inspired by the ideals of pan-Arabism and promises of the Socialist Transformation period, this cinema expanded the expressive possibilities of realism by reconfiguring the representation of the marginalized and disenfranchised sectors of Arab societies.

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