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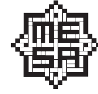

FILM AND CINEMA STUDIES IN REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Review of Three Studies of Egyptian Cinema: *Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Modernity from Reel to Real; The National Imaginarium: A History of Egyptian Filmmaking; Making Film in Egypt: How Labor, Technology, and Mediation Shape the Industry*

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Nezar Alsayyad And Heba Safey Eldeen, eds., *Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Modernity from Reel to Real* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2022). xxxiii + 288pp., £49.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-64903-133-4.

Chihab El Khachab, *Making Film in Egypt: How Labor, Technology, and Mediation Shape the Industry* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2021). xviii + 284pp., £39.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-977-416-965-4.

Magdy Mounir El-Shammaa, *The National Imaginarium: A History of Egyptian Filmmaking.* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2021). xxvii + 318pp., £39.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-977-416-972-4.

In 2021 and 2022 the American University in Cairo Press published three books about Egyptian cinema, each offering a detailed and unique contribution to the field of Egyptian cinema studies and, when read in succession, an immersion into Egypt's film history leading to the present. *The National Imaginarium: A History of Egyptian Filmmaking* by Magdy Mounir El-Shammaa follows a historical trajectory from the interwar period of the twentieth century to the early 2000s. *Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Modernity from Reel to Real* is a curated anthology edited by Nezar AlSayyad and Heba Safey Eldeen and presents a multiplicity of interventions on representations of the city in Egyptian film history. Chihab El Khachab's *Making Film in Egypt* departs from film historiography to conduct an ethnographic account of the making of one film, *Décor* by Ahmad Abdulla, which forms the lens through which El Khachab reflects on the contemporary state of

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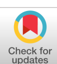

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filmmaking in Egypt. While focusing mainly on the processes involved in the making of *Décor*, the granularity of details he provides form a theoretical contrast to the historical contexts and textual analyses conducted in the other two books.

National Imaginarium combines extensive research of both Arabic and English language sources with newly collected data and engaging textual analysis of a representative group of films for each significant period. Throughout the chapters, El-Shammaa makes a point of acknowledging the contributions of others, including canonical texts by Viola Shafik, Walter Armbrust, and Joel Gordon, as well as Egyptian film criticism such as that of the recently deceased Samir Farid, and political science studies by Galal Amin, Fuad Ajami, Joel Beinin, and Timothy Mitchell, among others. There are many charts with informative data, which are useful in understanding the economic factors and consumer patterns that contributed to the diminishing stature of the Egyptian film industry since the 1970s and, which, combined with the bibliography, leave a trail for future researchers to plot further studies. What makes this book additionally unique is the detailed history of political and economic factors that determined the developments of each time period.

Of the three texts covered in this review, *National Imaginarium* is the most concerned with the "modernizing discourse" (92, 94) associated with nationalism, which catered to and reflected middle-class attitudes about gender, family, and nation, however much they have changed over time. Its prologue and epilogue invoke the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony, which is theorized through discussion of the concept of *ibn al-balad*, introduced in chapter one and developed throughout the rest of the book. It appears with the emergence of an effendi class (or middle class) linked to ideas of realism in films. This effendi class was predicated on the idea of a nativist *ibn al-balad* and it became well established by the time Egyptian cinema launched itself as an identifiable industry in the late 1930s. Although the Egyptian cities of the early twentieth century (Alexandria and Cairo) are often described as cosmopolitan, El-Shammaa argues that this cosmopolitanism had begun to wane long before the interwar period. The identity of *ibn al-balad*, however, was inextricably linked to a nationalist ethos that was always composed of mixed identities, ethnicities, races, and languages. An example of this can be found in the popular films of the 1930s and 1940s directed by Togo Mizrahi through which he attempted to carve a space for himself as an internal other, but which have been ignored in Egyptian film history even though, as a Jew, Mizrahi rejected the ideological project of Zionism. In further chapters, El-Shammaa points out how the *ibn al-balad* identity (inclusive of *bint al-balad* and *awlad al-balad*) was a persistent representation in the films of the Golden Age (stretching from the 1940s until the early 1960s). It began to splinter, however, in the 1960s, before the 1967 Six Day War, which he discusses in his analysis of films from that decade in chapter six (133-58).

Chapters two and three focus on Salah Abu Seif, the renowned auteur of realist cinema of the 1950s-60s, and a textual analysis of Abu Seif's 1956 film *A Woman's Youth* (chapter three) to explore how the old concept of *awlad al-balad* worked alongside modernism to reinforce the patriarchy. It did so, El-Shammaa argues, through the female sexuality of star Tahiya Carioca, portrayed as huntress, which demonstrated the "appropriation of *awlad al balad*

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culture by the Egyptian middle class" at the height of its power (61). Chapter four discusses a new construct of patriarchy associated with Gamal Abd al-Nasser and the revolution of 1952–54, which was concerned with keeping both men and women in line with normative middle class gender roles through star actors like Faten Hamama and Abd al-Halim Hafez. Abu Seif's creation of a genre of "women's films" (62, 79, 84), many of which were adaptations of Ihsan Abdel Qudous novels, worked in tandem with messaging conveyed in women's journals like *Rose al-Yusuf* (83) and *Bint al-Nil* (87) that advocated for a state feminism where women's power was determined by how dutifully they fulfilled their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, even if they were educated and worked in approved professions.

Chapters six through eight bring us through the decade of defeat-conscious cinema in the 1960s to the present. In order to demonstrate the extent to which disillusionment with Nasser's revolution among leftists and intellectuals preceded the 1967 Six-Day War, El-Shammaa draws our attention, in chapter five, to data gathered from the Francophone Egyptian film journal *Cine-Film*, edited and published by expatriate Jacques Pascal, who held this position from 1948–60. This journal focused on "insider news about the behind-the-scenes movers and shakers of Egyptian filmmaking" (99) without which El-Shammaa claims we would be unable to understand the structure of Egypt's film industry during that period because of the scarcity of available and/or existing records (101). From this journal, he aggregates detailed information about production, distribution, and exhibition, and presents it in charts and tables about the income of male and female stars from 1957 to 1965 (103), number of films produced annually from 1938 to 1970 (106), percentages of revenue by region (109), domestic earnings of Egyptian films (110), estimated total movie viewership from 1951 to 1958 (114), number of films exhibited from 1953 to 1954 (122), major directors and the number of films they directed between 1950 and 1979 (125), and the number of films by genre (127).

Chapter six also recounts a series of turbulent episodes starting in the late 1950s that ended with Nasser's death in 1970 and encapsulated the brief chapter of the United Arab Republic (uniting Egypt, Syria, and very briefly Iraq), the attempted coups in Lebanon and Jordan, and Egypt's involvement in the Yemeni civil war (which affected the Egyptian film industry more so than did competition from the Lebanese and Syrian film industries). After the defeat of 1967 came the centralization, bureaucratization, and solidification of top-down state authority, and with Nasser's death came the end of Third Worldism in Egypt (135). In the wake of these events, a very critical cinema appeared which has been read as embodying critique of the state and self-examination. El-Shammaa points out, however, that many of these films were already in production before the 1967 defeat, "demonstrating the desire to deepen the revolution, not overthrow it" (136).

Chapter seven discusses thematic and aesthetic changes from the 1970s and 1980s including the transition to shooting in color and on location, and the appearance of new film stars and popular genres, all against the political backdrop of Sadat's corrective program to rectify the perceived failures of Nasserism. These were in turn affected by the rise of television audiences,

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the decline of movie theatre audiences, who became predominantly male, and the changing balance of funding opportunities from state, private, and foreign sources. El-Shammaa then discusses what he calls post-populist Egypt through analysis of films that critique Sadat's infitah policies: *Karnak* (1975) directed by Ali Badrakhan; *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1976) directed by Youssef Chahine; and *Bus Driver* (1982) directed by ʻAtif al-Tayyib. He points out that despite the increasing privatization of the film industry, which officially began in 1971–72 (174), the state still maintained control over half the movie theatres in Cairo and over the radio and television industries. From this emerged the new star of Adil Imam in films that were able to mask their critiques of the state in comedy.

Chapter eight focuses on the films of the 1980s and 1990s, as a new wave of populism and neoliberalism emerged during the Mubarak regime. To demonstrate the resurgence of a new kind of realist tendency in the 1980s, he conducts textual analysis of *The Kit Kat* (1991) by Dawud Abd Al-Sayyid, *An Important Man's Wife* (1987) by Muhammad Khan, and *Against the Government* (1992) by ʻAtif Al-Tayyib. To support his observation of the new populism of the 1990s, one of the films he focuses on is the comedy *Terrorism and the Kebab* (1992) written by Wahid Hamed, directed by Sharif ʻArafa and starring Adil Imam. The chapter concludes with a focus on *Nasser 56-Egypt '96* directed by Mohammed Fadel (1996), starring Ahmad Zaki, and focusing exclusively on Nasser's victory during the 1956 war and nationalization of the Suez Canal. The film came about, it is implied, at a moment when Egyptian audiences needed to be reminded of a unified moment in their national history, suggesting an attempt to sanitize the collective memory of Nasser's failures after 1956, and criticism of Mubarak's economic policies that were built on the foundations of Sadat's corrective program.

In the epilogue, after providing a brief analysis of Dawud Abd al-Sayyid's *Citizen, Cop and Thief* (2001), which sharply critiques the excesses of the Mubarak regime (234), El-Shammaa circles back to the idea of communal experience and identity to which he devoted this book. There are many more very informative charts in the appendix, drawn from his archival research in Egypt, which further emphasize the impressive labor and time that went into the writing of this book and the value it offers to the study of Egyptian cinema.

Chihab El Khachab's *Making Film in Egypt: How Labor, Technology, and Mediation Shape the Industry* conducts a media ethnography that theorizes about the imponderability of filmmaking in present-day Egypt. He uses the making of the independent feature film *Décor* (Ahmad Abdalla, 2014) as a case study to highlight "the conceptual work around labor, process, technology, and mediation in Egyptian filmmaking" (22). The concept of this book is reflected in its design, where four chapters are thematized around a specific aspect of the filmmaking process and two chapters are more theoretical.

Chapter one sketches the historical, political, and economic foundations of Egyptian film production, and focuses on how things rely on interpersonal relations and informal economies. Chapter two describes the components and stages or the "operational sequence" of the filmmaking process, which El Khachab describes as a "sociotechnical tool allowing filmmakers to probe

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the future and to understand the day-to-day work of commercial film production" (70). These processes are preceded by the screenplay, which can change many times during production as scenes can be rewritten to meet the changing understanding and needs of sequence and scene. This highlights the nonlinearity of writing and production.

Although these processes are not terribly different from what occur in other film industries, El Khachab introduces new ways of thinking about them. An example is the research question structuring this book, which considers how the unfinished film's future is mediated by the process of imagining and anticipating it, even if and as that process involves cutting images and scenes (and the labor behind making them) from the final film. He frequently draws on studies of Bollywood cinema, which is a refreshing departure from the usual focus on Hollywood and perhaps justified by the historic relationship of non-alignment and trade agreements between Egypt and India, although Egyptian cinema has historically drawn more from Hollywood than Bollywood formulas.

Chapter two includes observations that are somewhat universal though still under-examined in film studies, including the importance of social connections in advancing careers and the gendered labor hierarchy. El Khachab discusses the difference between *tanfizi* – the executive workers who perform the labor "necessary to actualize the artistic work" – and the *fanni* – the creative crew "responsible for designing all aspects of the film's audiovisual content." The labor division translates into different pay, decision-making powers, and meals on set (58-59), but all of these workers have responsibilities that impact the film's imponderable outcome. These outweigh differences in class: for example, low-level assistants in the artistic crew may be from upper-middle class families and/or may have attended a film program at university level, whereas members of the executive (decision-making) crew may originally be from a lower class and may have worked their way up.

Chapter three (83-112) dips into more discipline-specific terminology in discussing the function of "reserves" (a Heideggerian concept) from commodities and humans, and their use in the visualization of the film. He defines the reserve as something that can be both inanimate and human (84) and points out that cellphones and laptops are commodity-objects. Because these objects are part of everyday usage, their status as commodity-objects is almost forgotten and we, in relying on them, become part of the reserve that the objects signify, the reserve of their use value. Readers may find this a challenging theoretical concept to grasp, but El-Khachab is making a critical observation about our increasing reliance on technological objects in all stages of production, without which we cannot envision filmmaking, particularly in a densely populated place like Cairo where spatial challenges infringe on planned time schedules and budgets.

Chapter four focuses on logistical foundations of filmmaking related to preproduction and coordination, addressing the issues of budgeting, scheduling, transportation, and execution. Chapter five attends to the mediators of image, including location scouting and sound design, which includes musical scores and sound mixing, but does not go into the work of color correction

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and grading (they are mentioned in the appendixes). Chapter six addresses the relationship with imagined and real audiences in terms of the desired (imponderable yet anticipated) outcomes of enchantment. The book ends with a concluding "Retrospective" that reiterates the main argument.

Readers who are familiar with the operational sequence of filmmaking within or outside of any film industry might wonder what makes the imponderability of filmmaking in Egypt unique, which would seem to require discussion about material limitations such as censorship, funding structures and economies, the relationship between media companies and film studios, the divergent economies around "art-house" and/or independent films versus "commercial" films intended for local theatrical release, and the impact of streaming platforms. El Khachab does, however, make important observations that are unique to Cairo. One is about how labor impacts imponderability, demonstrated in the tendency of artistic creatives (directors of photography, art directors, sound technicians, and mixers) to work on multiple projects across different media spheres (film industry, advertising, television) at a given point in time, because of the material necessity to work. Another observation is about the impact of time, where the infrastructural problems of road design and extreme traffic congestion in the densely populated neighborhoods of Cairo where the filming often takes place, can paralyze mobility for large blocks of time during the working day.

The third book, *Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Modernity from Reel to Real*, is the outcome of the Cinematic Cairo working group formed in 2018 by the book's editors, Nezar AlSayyad and Heba Safey Eldeen, who are professors of architecture, urban history, and planning. Although the volume's contributing authors are architects, city planners, and photographers who explore "Cairene modernity" (xxi) and its transformations over a period of a century in Egyptian films, this book draws conceptually from AlSayyad's prior experience making documentary films about urban architecture and previous book *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (Routledge, 2006).

In the prologue AlSayyad explains that films about Cairo may serve as a means to know the city, just as they are part of the imaginaries of the city. The book's organizing concept is to understand "the connection between the real and the reel in mapping the transformation of the city to urban modernity" (xxiii). He discusses the concept of the simulacra (from Baudrillard) to assert that one can "move out from the screen toward the city" (xxiii) or vice versa, and that the movement between them can be simultaneous, but it is unclear what distinction is being drawn between modernity and modernism. While he demonstrates a deep knowledge of the subject matter informing the book's concept, it would have been useful to clarify this distinction even if we may assume that modernity is a temporal expression and modernism an aesthetic movement.

There are fourteen chapters, each conducting textual film analysis, divided into two parts. Part one has a chronological structure, which focuses on films from 1930 to the present, whereas part two has an explicitly thematic structure, focused on the transformations of the city "under conditions of neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, and class and gender tensions" (xxiv). The

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chapters that stand out for their original and rigorous interventions are chapters one through three, seven, ten, and eleven.

The first three chapters highlight the influence of writers like Naguib Mahfouz on Egyptian cinema, echoing what we learned in *The National Imaginarium,* but here the authors attend to representations of modernity and middle-class life centered around a struggle between the traditional and the modern. Chapter one examines three films from the 1930s that reflect the realist tendency: *al-Warda*, *Yaqut*, and *al-'Azima*. Ameer Abdurrahman Saad argues that these films challenge the tendency to polarize the city between traditional medieval neighborhoods versus modernity. Saad argues further that these films "promised welfare and social mobility for the middle class but only by mediating between material modernity and tradition" (21). For the middle class and elite individuals represented, the conflict is not only about personal interests, but also resisting the changes brought by modernity (23).

In chapter two, AlSayyad and Mohammad Salama discuss the urban "mise-en-scene of a rapidly changing culture" (25) in three films, based on Mahfouz novels, directed by Hasan al-Imam between 1964–73: *Bayn al-qasrayn* (Palace Walk), *Qasr al-shawq* (Palace of Desire), and *al-Sukariya* (Sugar Street). These films follow the developments within three generations of a family living in the medieval section of the city, from the revolution of 1919 to the revolution of 1952, during which span of time they experience fundamental changes in the city, public spaces, and the freedoms of women. Like the novels, they represent the "tradition-modernity dialectic" of the city's transformations from colonial rule to the struggle for independence (26). By contrast, three other films adapted from Mahfouz novels explore the disintegration of the old in the wake of the new, which is shown not to offer a better way of life: *Cairo 30* (1966) by Salah Abu Seif, adapted from *al-Qahira al-jadida*; *Zuqaq al-Midaq* (Midaq Alley) (1963) directed by Hasan al-Imam; and *Tharthara fawq il-Nil* (Adrift on the Nile) (1971) by Hussein Kamal, all of which demonstrate that nationalism did not ensure complete social progress.

In chapter three, AlSayyad and Doaa Al Amir discuss how the Egyptian revolution of the 1950s brought about class confrontation and enabled "an aspirational attitude toward modernity" (44) in their examination of *Law kunt ghani* (If I Were Rich) directed by Henry Barakat (1942) and *al-Qalb luh ahkam* (The Heart Has Its Rules) directed by Helmy Rafla (1956). In this comparison the bridges that connect the lower-class neighborhood Bulaq with the richer neighborhood Zamalek are signifying. In the former film, the bridge is a physical connector between neighborhoods and classes, whereas in the latter the bridge is a boundary. In *Ghani* the rich "can cross into Bulaq to discover poverty," and in *al-Qalb*, the bridge is a "one-way route from poverty to wealth" for any residents of Bulaq who can make the journey (44).

These films enable us to look at a contrast set up between the *hara* (poor neighborhood) as a place of tradition and safety vs. the "modern districts where the wealthy and powerful lived" (50). Yet in both films, the *hara* represents the same thing: "the true identity of Egypt, an identity that does not reject modernity . . . [but rather] . . . embraces modernity while maintaining

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an intermittent and deferential role for tradition" (60). In this chapter, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, the authors articulate a fundamental premise of the book. Using a phrase that is somewhat over-used, they argue that the distinction between the "real" and the "reel" is a "false divide" and that a film image often "has the power to define a given reality better than the reality it aspires to capture or represent" (51). They use the films as a means to analyze the changes that took place in the fourteen years between the films (1942–56) regarding work, household structure, lifestyle and entertainment, transportation, and social mobility (52). They find that *al-Qalb* presents a society that is more unified, where the "extremes of class are less truncated," which reflects the effects of the revolution and Nasser's policies (54). This includes a society that has become more Westernized, comfortable in Western clothing, and interested in Western goods. Yet, social solidarity was still important in the *hara* where the film's poor lover is from. They conclude that these films reveal that Egyptian modernity was superficial, "struggling for self-definition" and "would disappear a few decades later" (61).

The rest of the chapters pursue subjects variously related to Cairene modernity through a study of films produced during the United Arab Republic of 1958–62 (chapter four), a focus on the 1980s middle-class housing crisis (chapter five), depictions of urban bureaucracy in the 1980s (chapter six), studies of the shift from bad to worse by comparing *Sawa* (1982) by Atef Al-Tayeb with *Afarit Asphalt* (1996) by Osama Fawzy (chapter seven), the cinematic space of the suburb (chapter eight), further studies of the representation of the *hara* (chapter nine), the changing role of women in the city from the 1950s to early 2000 (chapter eleven), depictions of religious tolerance during the same period (chapter twelve), the clash of political Islam and modernity (chapter thirteen), and the depiction of poor women in the city (chapter fourteen).

Out of this array of interventions, chapter ten is outstanding for its focus on the coffeehouse as both a tool "for interrogating the impact of modernity on the urban restructuring of the city" and a setting (182). Author Khaled Adham discusses the "cinematic *qahwa*" and how its changing representation, from the colonial era (1910s to 1940s), and the socialist/nationalist era (1950s–60s), to the period of early Egyptian capitalism (1980s–90s), reflects changes in society and the public sphere. Where early twentieth-century coffeehouses were linked to burgeoning forms of mass media (e.g., newspapers and radio), the rising middle class of *effendiya*, the *hara* as represented in *Zuqaq al-Midaq* by Hassan al-Imam (1963), and the then-modern public sphere (183, 184), present-day coffeehouses, in neoliberal Cairo, have become inward focused, "reduced to a sense of comfort in a well-designed interior space where other people do not intrude" (195). The current modern public sphere is shown to be a diminished space, about which Adham wonders whether cyberspace is the substitute.

Although the chapters reveal diverse sources in their bibliographies, they all include Amin's *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* (2000), Rodenback's *Cairo: The City Victorious* (2000), and Abu Lughod's *1001 Years of the City Victorious* (1971) and most chapters invoke the opposition between "the reel" and "the real." These repetitions do not seem essential to the book's coherence, as

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demonstrated by the rich content of the chapters. While there are many illustrations and a useful filmography, it would have helpful to include an index to facilitate further research. Despite these minor issues, *Cinematic Cairo* offers a unique journey through cinematic representations of Cairene modernity, especially when read in combination with *National Imaginarium* and *Making Film in Egypt*.

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