

Egypt on the Silver Screen

Maggie Morgan

Egypt is the only Arab country that can boast of a commercial film industry. When people speak of 'Arabic films', they are referring to Egyptian cinema. In spite of the centrality of the industry, as the following article reveals, cinema is not exempt from the familiar frictions between art and society.

In 1991, Youssef Chahine, an internationally acclaimed filmmaker, was reviled in the press and later sued for screening his documentary, *El Qahira Menawara Be'ahlaha*, (Cairo Illuminated by Its People) at the Cannes Film Festival. The film was banned on the grounds that it ruined Egypt's 'reputation' by depicting poverty. Two years later, Nobel prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed and nearly killed, because of his novel *Children of Gebelawi*, a text that some interpreted as atheistic. In 1994, Chahine was once again taken to court for his feature film, *El-Muhager*, (The Emigrant.) The film borrowed from the Biblical-Quranic story of Joseph – and Islam forbids portraying religious figures on screen. It was banned for a time.

Egyptian cinema in the second millennium can only be analysed against this backdrop. No doubt, commercial factors control and shape the topics and the styles of Egyptian films. Yet, if filmmaking is a mode of self-expression and communication, then most Egyptian films are a broken, stunted, and incomplete dialogue. Director Hala Galal, one of the founders of Semat, an independent production house, explains the precarious position of filmmakers saying, 'It's a juggling act. We want to express ourselves while trying to pass the Censor, not offend viewers, and not tamper with this thing called "Egypt's reputation". Meanwhile we try not to make commercial flops... In the end, we feel like tailors or clowns, and what we do qualifies as anything except art!'

The narrow path that filmmakers are expected to tread is manifest in the layman's classification of genres. The dream of a commercial production is to be a film *qonbela* (bombshell), a film that is definitely a 'must-see', because it is both highly entertaining and inoffensive like the *El-Lemby* film series. Then there is the film *fi risala*, (a film with a message,) and such a label means that the film is morally constructive and hence 'forgiven' for not including sensationalist entertainment. In this classification, there are no misgivings that the message may be a tad too didactic.

To the majority, a film *mahraganat*, (festival film) is a derogatory description that implies depressing subject matter and a subtle and inaccessible subtext. Occasionally at a cinema entrance, people inquire of one another, 'qissa walla manazir?' (story or scenes?) The question refers to whether the film is just a story or if it includes love scenes. The sex scenes are a point of

attraction to repressed teenage boys, but they put off the wider, more conservative audience. Finally, there is the newly coined phrase, cinema nadhifa, (clean cinema) describing an entertaining film that does not offend conservative, religious sensibilities through promiscuity, obscenity, or critique of religion.

Since the moral epitaphs attached to films are a relatively new phenomenon, some argue that society is regressing into a narrow-minded state. Previously, subject matter was presented with less caution. But then again who was allowed to go to the cinema? Most women and children in the 1920s 1930s, and 40s would probably have never set foot in a cinema. Actresses were considered 'loose' women. At the time, the French word 'artiste' was appropriated by Egyptians and used synonymously for prostitute! In order to gain ground with a broader audience of families and women, morality was incorporated into cinema.



By the end of the 1960s, the off-screen personality of actors and actresses merged with their on-screen personas. This blurring of lines between the real and the fictional served to make cinema less of an immoral menace in the public view.

Box office milestones

Arab spectators, like any others, are predominantly drawn by the promise of entertainment and

escapism. Most, however, have an unconscious sense of guilt when they realise that they only want to see beauty, action, affluence, heroism and luxury. When people watch a truly enjoyable drama that carries a 'message,' they leave the theatre with smug satisfaction. They walk out with a dose of preaching sugar-coated in the entertainment.

The first striking box-office success in the last decade was Sae'eedi Fi El-Gam'a El-Amrikiya (An Upper Egyptian at the American University, 1998.) The lead actor was Mohamed Heneidi, a short man whose appeal comes from his naiveté in the midst of a cunning world. In addition to his appeal on screen, his off-screen personality scored him many points. He appears in television programmes to invoke blessings upon his mother. (To do good to one's parents, especially mothers, is considered the height of morality in Islam.) Whenever he is interviewed during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, Heneidi is proud to say that he is fasting, praying, and going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He emphasises that art has to be 'good and clean.' That audiences not only enjoy Heneidi's humour, but also wholeheartedly approve of him as a person, is a fact that cannot be overlooked in analysing the commercial success of his films.



In another instance in the same film, Heneidy sings a song called, 'Chocolata' (Chocolate.) The chocolate to which he refers is a Sudanese prostitute. He teases her saying, 'When I turn off the lights, I can't see you!' The 'good girls' are Khalaf's conservative yet modern classmate and a veiled girl. They appear in stark comparison to the promiscuous girls of the American University.

Viewers were not critical of the film. The game of opposites: good versus bad and self versus other that is deployed passes largely unnoticed. His next film was *Hamam Fi Amsterdam* (Hammam in Amsterdam, 1999) a film about a young Egyptian living in Holland. Once again, 'good' traditional Islamic values are set against the 'bad' Western values of Amsterdam. The film's villain is a Jewish character, a successful tactic that draws upon, and affirms, the reservoir of animosity between Arabs and Jews.

The irony about the nationalist content of mainstream cinema is that the forms are certainly based on the American model. Present-day cinema culture is very much one of popcorn and coca cola at the cinema complexes in malls. According to gifted Egyptian director Dawood Abdelsayed, 'mall audiences are new breed of people. They are the ones reared in the eighties and nineties under the influence of the petro-dollar culture exported from the Gulf countries. They prefer the superficial, air-conditioned, commercial environment of malls, to the outside world with its hot and cold weather, crowds, and activity.'

To cater to mall-goers, contemporary Egyptian films are modelled on Hollywood productions in strategy and style. But of course, the villains and heroes are reversed. Hollywood's Arab terrorists are counterbalanced by Egypt's unsympathetic and immoral Americans and Zionists. The Arab/Israeli conflict and more recently the American aggression on Iraq have made the resort to this tactic more blatant. Even a director like Youssef Chahine, famous for his complex and thought-provoking work, succumbed to the temptation of resorting to anti-American sentiment to safeguard an audience. His latest film *Alexandria/New York* (2004), shown at the Cannes Film Festival, alongside *Fahrenheit 9/11*, was a more artistic rendition of the simplistic 'us versus them' principle.

Succès de scandale

The game of playing on the moral sympathies of people is relatively simple when politics are in question. However, opinions and sympathies become more muddled when the issues are family relations, religion, and sexuality. *Sahar El-Layali* (Sleepless Nights), a controversial social drama released in 2002, is a case in point. The plot of *Sahar El-Layali* revolves around four couples whose lives intertwine. The problems encountered by the couples are adultery, commitment-phobia, and sexual dissatisfaction among women. Not sure that it would attract an audience, the producers delayed releasing the film for a year waiting for a 'good moment'. Contrary to their expectations, the film proved popular and remained in the theatres for six months.

Although there was no truth to the claims, rumours circulated all over Egypt that *Sahar El-Layali* would be banned. The debate was probably more related to the subject matter than to explicit sex scenes. Wives who are not sexually satisfied, couples that live together out of wedlock are not run-of-the-mill subject matter in mainstream Arab cinema. In a society bombarded with values of puritanical morality and with stereotypes of wives and mothers who are selflessly devoted to their families, it is heresy even to suggest that women think about sexual pleasure! To make things worse, all the characters of the film were shown in a sympathetic light as 'good' people who make mistakes.

When the film was shown in London as part of an event called, 'Forbidden Films in the Arab

World', discussion flared up at home. As a result, Sahar El-Layali was in the media spotlight. The general consensus was that it was indeed daring, but at least it was truthful about 'what we all know but do not say.' Spectators saw the director as heroic and admirable for venturing into new terrain. Audiences vouched for the film. In this aspect, Sahar El-Layali is unique among many other subjects of controversy that vex both the censor and public opinion.

Other films are not so lucky when it comes to confrontations with either public opinion or the censor. Baheb El-Seema (I Love Cinema) was shot in 2001 and screened in 2004. Like Sahar El-Layali, it was controversial from the first day of its release. The events takes place in the late 1960s and are told from the point-of-view of Na'eem, the son of a middle class Egyptian Christian family. His father is a religious fanatic who forbids him to go to the cinema. Forbidden by her husband to paint nude figures, Na'eem's mother makes double-faced paintings to hang on her walls – with nature scenes on one side and nudes on the other. Her paintings mirror the two-faced society in which much is done and hidden and where appearances differ gravely from realities.

Baheb El-Seema showed no villains and it is not difficult to sympathise with the characters, even the 'fundamentalist' father. Unlike, Sahar El-Layali, however, this film did not gain the audience's overall stamp of approval. In a poignant line, the narrator reminisces about a visit to the doctor and says, 'I hate all those people who tell us what to do under the pretext that they know better what is for our own good.' The authority of a father, the rules of a headmistress, and the decrees of religious leaders are all implicated in this statement.

The case of Baheb El-Seema was last summer's hottest scandal. Whereas the pattern has been for Muslim fundamentalists to challenge certain modes of artistic production, Baheb El-Seema showed the start of a similar trend among Christian viewers. Because the family around which the story revolves is Christian, the Christian minority in Egypt reacted very negatively. Hardly ever portrayed on screen, the film showed a mother who, suffocated by her husband's vow of chastity, has an affair. The enraged Coptic audience wondered, 'Are they implying that Christian women are whores?'

The film also had obscene language and fights that took place within a church. Several Copts gathered to file a collective lawsuit against the scriptwriter and director, both of whom are Christians, against the censor for releasing the film, the Minister of Culture for allowing it, and the Minister of Interior for not perceiving it as a threat to national security and an impetus to sectarian strife and violence.

The scandal was so broad and the anger so tangible that the Coptic community held demonstrations. Ikram Lam'ei, the Protestant pastor in charge of the church in which some of the scenes were shot, was asked for an explanation by the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Egypt. Other than the fighting and swearing in the church, there was a scene where two young people are caught kissing on the church rooftop. In an effort to placate people's anger, Lam'ei was forced to publish an explanation in Rose el-Youssef, Egypt's most widely read current affairs magazine. In it, he said that he was not informed of the film's content, and that anyway, the kissing scene was not on the rooftop of his church! The banality of the accusations was matched by the ridiculousness of his response!

The film remained in the cinema for eight weeks. The lawsuit did not succeed in banning it. Not yet, anyway. Many speculate that without the controversy, Baheb El-Seema would have not stayed in the cinema half that time. When no controversies arise the majority of artistic productions, like Baheb El-Seema, screen at international festivals, and get no attention outside critical circles at home. Arak el Balah (Date Wine, 1999) by Radwan el Kachef and El-Medina (The City, 2000) by Yousri Nasrallah hardly stayed in Egyptian cinemas for one week!

For better or worse, these notorious 'festival films,' appeal to agencies of foreign funding. Invariably, such topics revolve around current affairs: like Islam, women's status in the Arab world, and the question of Palestine. Yousri Nasrallah's latest release, Bab El-Chams (The Door

of the Sun, 2004) is about the Palestinian dispossession. Few Egyptian cinemas will screen it, fearing that if they do, they will be stigmatised as cinemas that show the dreaded 'festival films.'

'Lone Ranger' among directors

Dawood Abdelsayed, renowned for his artistic integrity, makes films that fit none of the pigeonholes. He cannot call himself a director, he says, because by definition a director is someone who can be hired to direct someone else's script. Nor can he call himself a writer/director because he refuses to be commissioned to write and direct a film. According to his own, well thought-out definition, he is 'a filmmaker who makes films when I feel compelled to do so.' Abdelsayed, born in 1946, has only made seven films so far and is currently working on his eighth.

His latest release *Muwaten, Mokhber, Wa Haramy* (A Citizen, Detective, and a Thief, 2003) did well commercially because one of the actors, Sha'aban Abdelrehim was at the prime of his singing career at the release date. Like a true man of the age, Abdelrehim's album was a bestseller thanks to a song called 'I Hate Israel.' His casting in *Muwaten* raised eyebrows: the epitome of popular culture in its basest form, appears in a film by the respected Dawood Abdelsayed?!

In fact, Abdelrehim was beautifully cast in his role as an ignorant thief who had no knowledge of art or culture but became a publisher. He asks a writer to take out the inappropriate parts of the novel, 'because religion says this is wrong.' The ironies raised by the thief's situation, an almost illiterate, yet devout, publisher, are paralleled by the actual reality of the artistic field – contemporary producers may or may not have picked up on the allusion!

Some films get critical acclaim because of the timeliness of their release. Dawood Abdelsayed's films do not succumb to the temptation of tailor-made relevance. When asked to take up a certain topic geared towards foreign funding, he prefers not to. 'When you try to answer the unanswerable questions... that is what art is all about. Such questions include the big existential questions like why was I born, why am I here... but also other less grand unanswerable questions. Why and how do we fall in love?' His work in progress, *Retha' Ala El-Bahr*, (Seaside Eulogy,) is a romance. Such films do not have an expiry date.

Commercial cinema in Egypt succeeds in the quasi-paradoxical task of entertaining and indoctrinating the unsuspecting viewer. Controversial films are thought-provoking. Yet when it comes to the art of making heart-piercing films, Egypt – no different from the rest of the world – can only boast of a few Diogenes-like filmmakers who persist in the midst of commercialism and controversy to express themselves honestly... regardless. The future belongs to them.

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