

Other Titles in the Series

Jane Campion

Forthcoming:

Lars von Trier

Yash Chopra

Emir Kusturica

Terrence Malick

WORLD DIRECTORS

YOUSSEF CHAHINE

Ibrahim Fawal

 Publishing

First published in 2001 by the
BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE
21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN

The British Film Institute promotes greater understanding of,
and access to, film and moving image culture in the UK.

Copyright © Ibrahim Fawal 2001

Cover design by Ketchup

Set by Alden Bookset
Printed in England by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-85170-858-7 (pbk)
ISBN 0-85170-859-5 (hbk)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It gives me pleasure to acknowledge the critical help and invaluable advice I have received from friends, colleagues and former supervisors in writing this book. In England, I would like to thank Robin Ostle, Ian Christie, my editor Andrew Lockett and Sophia Contento; in the United States, Michael Leslie and Gerald D. Johnson. In Egypt, I am indebted to many who shared with me either their fond experiences of working with Youssef Chahine or their intimate opinions of him as the thinker and poet of Arab cinema: movie stars Hind Rustum, Yousra, Magda, Mahmoud Hemed and Seifeddin; film critics Ali Abu Shadi and Samir Farid; director/historian Muhammad K. al-Qalyoubi; film directors Radwan al-Kashef, Yousry Nasrallah, Khaled Youssef and Atef Hatata; and film producers Gabriel Khoury and Marianne Khoury. Also I would like to thank May Hossam at Misr International Films. Above all, I would like to register my great admiration and respect for Youssef Chahine himself who, with his thoughtful and compelling films, has brought honour to the Arab nation and enriched world cinema.

For Salem, Gina, Freeda and Rima

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 The Formative Years	22
2 Chronicle of Chahine's Career and its Context	37
3 Social Dramas and Melodramas	54
4 Wartime and Postwar Films	81
5 Autobiographical Trilogy	117
6 Historical Films	154
Conclusion	187
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Filmography</i>	226
<i>Index</i>	235

INTRODUCTION

Mirroring Egypt's personality on the screen has been Youssef Chahine's lifetime obsession. For half a century, and in thirty-four features and six documentaries, he has created an astonishing body of work that alternates between ambiguity and brilliance. By shedding light on Egypt in all her moods and dimensions, Chahine reveals his own tormented self: an artist committed to define Egypt's identity as well his own, daring to tell the 'truth' as he sees it, and advocating humanistic values. As an influential voice of modern Egypt, the internationally acclaimed Chahine is to Arab cinema what the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz is to Arabic literature.

Throughout his long career, Chahine has doggedly pursued a complex cinema of ideas in a country prone to sentiment and escapism rather than sophistication and serious art. Son of a petit bourgeois family that aspired to high society, Chahine was born in Alexandria and educated at the prestigious Victoria College which was often compared to Eton, and whose alumni include King Hussein of Jordan, Edward Said and Michel Shalhoub (who became Omar Sharif). After studying theatre and television for two years at Pasadena Playhouse in California, Chahine returned to Egypt to launch his film career and, as it were, to deliver a jolt to the mainstream Egyptian cinema. Mixed blood runs in Chahine's veins: his mother was Greek, and his father Lebanese. His wife of fifty years is a French woman born in Egypt. He himself was born and bred in Egypt, and educated in a British-style school and in America. No wonder he is multi-lingual and cosmopolitan in mentality. His Christianity in a predominantly Muslim country has not been problematic for him, his clashes with the Muslim fundamentalists notwithstanding. Chahine prides himself on being, above all, an Egyptian.

Over the years, Chahine has developed his own film-making style, which is characteristically frenetic, non-linear, multi-layered, cerebral and demanding. Many of his films 'read' like modernist scripts: fragmented, convoluted, with a dash of the Theatre of the Absurd. Of particular interest to his admirers is his innovative use of time, space, *mise-en-*

scène, memory, and the blending of genres in a single film. Rare is the Chahine film in which history and politics do not resonate, or the film in which a part of his own life is not integrated in its fabric. His provocative cinema appeals mostly to thinking audiences, though mainstream audiences often respond to his unique films and stirring themes. Naguib Mahfouz worked on several of his scenarios, and one of Chahine's masterpieces, *The Earth* (1969), was based on an Arabic novel, considered by the literary critics as a modern classic.

Besides being a consummate director, Chahine has been blessed with multiple talents: writing, dancing, acting, in addition to a sharp intellect and moral rectitude. Early in his youth he fell under the spell of the American musicals, particularly those of Gene Kelly. Other influences are hard to discern, except for Julien Duvivier's *The Great Waltz* and the melodramas of Douglas Sirk. Some of Chahine's films invite comparison with Italian Neorealism or hint at the French New Wave. The shoestring budgets and inadequate apparatus of his early years are reminiscent of the hard times Orson Welles had to endure later in his career. Chahine's emphasis on the actor's performance, particularly the Stanislavsky style of acting, puts him in a league with Elia Kazan. On another level, Chahine's concern about postcolonial Egypt brings to mind the similar concerns of Satyajit Ray and Ousmane Sembene regarding postcolonial India and Africa respectively. Chahine is of the same ilk as two other mavericks: with John Cassavetes he shares the integrity and intensity but not the improvisation; with Robert Altman he shares the nonconformity and experimentation but not the lack of structure. But unlike these two independent Americans who operated on Hollywood's periphery, Chahine was and remains at the forefront and at the centre of the Egyptian cinema. In his confessional mode, however, Chahine is comparable to extrovert Fellini and introvert Bergman, both at once. Chahine's use of song and dance in the midst of high drama recalls Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Richard Attenborough's *Oh, What a Lovely War*, though there is no evidence that he has ever seen either of these two productions. In short, Chahine is hard to pigeonhole simply because he is an original.

* * *

Chahine became a film director in 1950, two years before the watershed Revolution of 1952 which brought to power Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 'colossus' who has been described as the first native to rule Egypt in over two millennia. But just before the monarchy was overthrown, Egypt was already making more than fifty films a year, and had been involved in film production for at least thirty-five years. By the time Chahine arrived the cinema industry in Egypt was already thriving. To understand the society in which he lived and depicted on the screen, and to put the cinema within its political, social and cultural contexts, one should cast a panoramic look at the way it all began. An infrastructure had to exist before such an industry could take root, for it was the extended family of artists that staged plays and went on to make movies, and it was novelists and playwrights who supplied both stage and screen with scripts. When did all these art forms develop? And who undertook the financing?

During the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain conditions were created which were ultimately favourable to the rise of Egyptian cinema. The first crucial phase in this process was the reign of Muhammad Ali (1811-49), who assumed power in the aftermath of Napoleon's expedition (1798-1801). Though despotic and greedy, Muhammad Ali was shrewd enough to realise that modernisation can be used as an instrument of policy. Consequently he embarked upon a far-ranging set of social reforms and extensive programmes to industrialise Egypt and educate her vast populace. It was he who 'hired French officers who had flocked to Egypt in search of employment once Napoleon's army had been disbanded'.² Historians add that he 'who was illiterate until the age of 47, had an enthusiasm for education that verged on being a fetish'. To his credit, he did not limit this enthusiasm for education to his immediate family. 'His modernisation of the army led to developing and expanding a programme of education in terms of staff colleges, engineering corps, medical surgeons and veterinary surgeons. Schools were opened in Egypt and educational missions sent abroad to learn technology, not only in the field of military science but in other fields as well'.³

It was Muhammad Ali's grandson Khedive Ismail, 'the impatient Europeanizer',⁴ who built the Cairo Opera House to celebrate the opening

of the Suez Canal in 1869, giving Egypt great prestige, especially after *Aida* was premiered in it two years later. The building was a magnificent structure which cost the national treasury a huge sum of money. And the premiere was a lavish affair, a grand spectacle in its own right, to which kings and queens and the rich and famous from around the world had been invited. Ismail's fascination with everything western led him to declare: 'My country is no longer in Africa, it is in Europe.'⁵

Birth of the theatre

It was during the reign of Khedive Ismail in particular that the conditions were created which favoured the rise of the theatre in Egypt. Though cinema is considered the liveliest art, its existence depends on literature, music, dance, photography, painting, sculpture, mime and acting. For the Egyptian cinema industry to emerge and thrive, a convergence of many of these elements had to occur first to make it possible. Cinema is not only the most expensive of all arts, it is also a business, requiring sophisticated means of production, distribution and exhibition. A form of capitalism, a fledgling industrialisation, relative political stability, a measure of independence, and the presence of a large community of cosmopolitan foreigners — all contrived to make cinema happen in Egypt. Cinema in the rest of the Arab world lagged far behind, precisely because those essential factors that were available in Egypt were lacking anywhere else. One of the most important of these factors was the rise and early development of the theatre in Egypt.

Long before Egypt's indigenous playwrights began to return from their studies in France, their artistic horizons enhanced — and in some cases before they had even been born — it was from Greater Syria (which then included Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) that pioneers came to contribute to the establishment of journalism as a profession in Egypt and to stage theatrical productions, first in Alexandria and then in Cairo. The primary reason they came was Egypt's relative independence, where they could escape the oppressive Ottoman regimes in their countries. The first Arab to write a stage play was a Lebanese who came to Egypt in 1846, and who was followed by a succession of actors and theatre organisers from Greater Syria.

The first theatrical group 'consisted of 12 actors and 4 actresses',⁶ preferring Alexandria to Cairo for its liberalism and tolerance. Though Egypt could have developed theatre on her own eventually, the fact remains that the Syrian and Lebanese contributions at this early stage were crucial. Thus, due to a unique set of circumstances, the Egyptians found themselves decades ahead of the rest of the Arab world that was just beginning to emerge from the 400-year period of Ottoman rule. Consequently, Cairo became the unchallenged cultural centre of the Arab world — its Hollywood and Broadway.

Popular theatre

It is in the realm of the popular theatre that the relationship between stage and screen is the most profound. Both are mediums for mass audiences who find in them the least expensive and the most accessible entertainment. This was the case in America where performers in vaudeville found their way to the nickelodeons. As Charlie Chaplin progressed from stage to screen, so did two Egyptian comedians, Ali al-Kassar and Naguib al-Rihani. Illiterate spectators who could not appreciate opera or drama found their pleasures in music halls or the newly discovered language — cinema. For actors, working in either medium seemed natural. With the arrival of sound, the popular theatre became an essential training ground for playwrights who could write colloquial dialogue.

A founding father of both Egyptian theatre and cinema, Yusuf Wahbi, a young aristocrat, became a living legend. It was he who produced *Zainab* (1930), the first significant Egyptian silent film; and who wrote, produced and starred in Egypt's first sound film *Children of the Aristocrats* (1932). He is also credited for having established in 1930 'the first small studio in Egypt'.⁷ He called it Studio Ramses. Another founder of the Egyptian theatre was Fatma Rushdi, a remarkable young woman 'from traditional Muslim background with no knowledge of a European language'.⁸ From that humble beginning, she rose to become the Sarah Bernhardt of Egypt. Her Arabic plays were original historical dramas in classical verse. Adaptations from the world's dramatic literature in which she starred included *Hamlet*, *Joan of Arc*, *Camille* and *Anna Karenina*.⁹ Like Yusuf Wahbi, Fatma Rushdi

was primarily a theatre person who made a successful transition to the screen and was able to make a considerable contribution. In 1939, she starred in *Determination*, which many consider the first important Egyptian sound film. She was also one of the first women in the world to become a film producer.

Rise of the novel

Without the novel, the Egyptian cinema would have been impoverished indeed, for some of the finest films were based on published narratives, or benefited from the contribution of a novelist who worked either on the scenario or the dialogue. It is said that the daughters of Naguib Mahfouz watch the films based on their father's novels but never read the novels themselves. It has also been suggested that the Nobel Laureate himself has written a number of his novels with the cinema in mind. And Tawfiq al-Hakim, one of Egypt's most prestigious novelists and playwrights, played himself as an old man in an adaptation of his first novel, *Bird from the East* (1986), which he had written in 1933 about his time as a student in France.

While the Arabic novel is now considered one of the highest forms of creative expression, in the late nineteenth century and in its present form, it was not a part of Arab writers and poets' heritage. It arose decades after the theatre had taken root in Egypt. But within the relatively short span of less than a century, it developed sufficiently enough to win Naguib Mahfouz, in 1988, the Nobel Prize for Literature. Only the cinema came to rival the novel in its capacity to explore complex issues in depth and at sustained length.

By mid-century, the Arab world was in turmoil. Colonialism, communism, Zionism and nationalism were explosive ideologies. *Coups d'états*, revolutions, wars of independence, assassinations and shifting alignments were as real as the refugee camps that were rapidly dotting the landscape. One of the best known novels in Egyptian literature was published one year after the Revolution of 1952: *al-Ard* (*Egyptian Earth*), by the Marxist Abdel-Rahman al-Sharqawi. It depicted the exploitation of the *fellahin* (peasants) by their feudal masters. Within the same year Yusuf Idris published his seminal collection of short stories, *Cheapest Nights*, which represented the

lower strata of Egyptian society in a new way. Together, both books signified *iltizam*, a serious, committed approach to fiction. One of the most loyal adherents to the principle of *al-iltizam* is Youssef Chahine: a poet and thinker who happens to write his novels on the screen rather than the page.

The fine arts and music

The development of the fine arts and music in particular had salutary influence on the growth of Egyptian cinema. Film brings together hundreds of artists and craftsmen, but first the professions themselves have to exist. In most western countries such professions preceded the arrival of the cinema. In Egypt they almost emerged together as though in anticipation of providing a talent pool for the nascent cinema to draw upon. Towards that end, a few significant dates are worth noting. Three pioneers in the field of sculpture, music and painting were born within a few years of each other: the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891), the musician Sayyid Darwish (1892) and the artist Raghib Ayyad (1893). The School of Fine Arts was founded in 1908.

If the song-and-dance genre is the most popular in Egyptian cinema, an individual or a group of people must have contributed to the rise of that tradition. And if Chahine mobilises the *ughniya* (song) for maximum dramatic effect, there must be songwriters and composers who provide the material with which to punctuate his films. The acknowledged pioneer here is Sayyid Darwish (1892-1923). His lyrics were full of pride and nationalistic fervour and his tunes were simple yet rousing. He was the unofficial voice and conscience of Egypt as it struggled under colonialism. All the musicians who followed him revered his name, as did the Egyptian populace.

Musicologists trace the beginning of Egyptian interest in symphonic music to the opening of the Opera House in Cairo on 17 November, 1869, not particularly on account of *Aida* which had its premiere in Cairo in 1871, but because of the Italian operas and other western music that continued to be performed in Egypt during every winter season thereafter. Such musical evenings had direct and positive influence on the Egyptian elite. Some of them even began to compose pieces for the piano.¹⁰

Serious study of music began with three young men who wished to become pioneers in this art form. Ironically the three had graduated from university in fields other than music: Yusuf Jiryas, in law; Hassan Rashed, in agriculture; Abu Bakr Khairat, in engineering. But their first love was classical music, to which they devoted their time and money. Some of their compositions are still remembered.¹¹ Subsequent generations of Egyptian film composers are indebted to these three pioneers for having instilled in them the love and appreciation of classical music and for having indirectly paved their way to careers in cinema.

Radio came to Egypt in 1926, the same year Youssef Chahine was born. One cannot overestimate the role it played in spreading Egyptian culture in general and in paving the way for the acceptance of the Egyptian film throughout the Arab world. Radio introduced singers, popularised songs, and made drama a precursor for touring theatrical troupes or cinema itself. Film audiences throughout the Middle East were always entertained by a medley of songs before the start of a film as well as during intermissions. In many ways, radio played a crucial role in familiarising Arab audiences with the Egyptian dialect and idiom, a fact of inestimable importance for having made the Egyptian film the film of choice, especially when the general film-going public had not yet acquired a foreign language or learned to read subtitles. Consequently the Egyptian dialect and idiom are so dominant in the Arab world that they give the Egyptian film an advantage over films from other Arab countries.

With the infrastructure of the railway system, press, publishing, telegraph, phonograph, theatre and radio all in place, Egypt's fledgling cinema was poised to become a regional power in its own right, supported by the other media. Colonialism was waning and the Egyptians were eager to rule themselves and to assume leadership over the Arab countries. The outpouring of books, magazines, records and films from Cairo went to all parts of the Arab world. The Egyptian dialect became familiar from Morocco to Kuwait. Cairo streets, Alexandria beaches and Egyptian *aryaf* (countryside) were as familiar to Arabs outside Egypt as their own neighbourhoods. It is difficult to overrate the extent to which the Egyptian media – and radio in particular – created the conditions, from 1950

onwards, for the increasing number of receptive audiences throughout the Arab world. Overlapping these cultural developments was the birth and growth of Egyptian cinema.

The advent of Egyptian cinema

Less than a year after the first film was shown to a paying audience anywhere in the world, an Egyptian audience enjoyed a similar experience. The Lumière brothers' films were screened in the Salon Indien, a basement room of the Grand Café in Paris, on 28 December 1895; and on 5 November 1896, a Lumière representative screened a programme of their films in the back room of a café called Bourse Toussoun in Alexandria.¹²

'Bourse Toussoun' is a significant name not only because it marks the site of a historic cultural event in Egypt, but, more importantly, because it is not an Arabic name. Considering the number of foreigners who lived in Alexandria at the time, it is not surprising that they would play a major role in the development of the motion picture industry in Egypt. Even as late as 1927, when a Chamber of Cinema was established in Alexandria, the president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer were all Alexanderine of foreign descent.¹³ The history of Egyptian cinema is replete with names such as: de Langarne, Umberto Does, Osato, Mario Volpi, Alvise Orfanelli, Togo Mizrahi, Rocca, Maurice and Alexander Aptekman, Carol Boba, Fritz Kramp, Willy Rosier, Rene Tabouret and Stelio Chiarni. These were not Egyptians. Why and how these outsiders came to play such a pivotal role in the development of Egyptian cinema reveal what a multi-layered and tolerant society Egypt was. At the turn of the twentieth century there were at least a quarter of a million foreigners living in Egypt. Without the Europeans' contribution, film would have arrived at the shores of the Nile much later.

The initial showing of the Lumière films in Alexandria in 1896 generated great interest among the public. Before too long 'the public grew tired of always seeing these same imported films which presented foreign scenes without any connection between them and all unfamiliar to the Egyptian people'. So a certain de Langarne embarked on lavish productions revolving around local scenes.¹⁴ Until 1907 all filming in Egypt was by cameramen working for the Lumières, and all exhibition of film was carried out by for-

eigners living in Egypt. These early films whetted the public's appetite to the point that 'foreigners in Alexandria planned to produce dramatic films which they thought would earn substantial profits'. Again to satisfy demand another Italian 'set up the Italo-Egyptian Cinematographic Company with the Banco Di Roma as a silent partner. The company put up a number of buildings with glass ceilings and walls to provide the light needed for shooting.'¹⁵ Unfortunately, Umberto Does was no more successful than de Langarne had been before him. His dramatic films were so bad that 'These films (running time between 30 to 45 minutes) ... were not at all successful. The inconsistent subjects, the disconnected sequences, the French subtitles and non-Egyptian actors all contributed to the failure.'¹⁶ Consequently, Banco Di Roma was forced to pull out, causing the company to collapse.

Muhammad Bayyumi

As in all colonised countries, one's ethnicity was a sensitive issue in Egypt where the wealth and power still belonged to foreigners, the royal house not excepted. Since the Revolution of 1919, Egyptians wanted to control every aspect of their life, including the cinema. Thus they dismissed the early film activities in Alexandria and Cairo as the work of foreigners, and relegated the maverick Muhammad Bayyumi as the pioneer of Egyptian cinema.¹⁷

After having studied cinema in Germany and been admitted to the Austrian Society of Cinematographers, Bayyumi returned to Egypt in the early 1920s and immediately established Amun Films, calling it the first Egyptian film studio. His breakthrough came in 1923, when Prime Minister Sa'd Zaghoul returned from exile in the Seychelles. Many film historians consider that short documentary about the national hero's return to be the cornerstone of the Egyptian film industry. According to his biographer, Bayyumi described his filming of the reception of Sa'd Zaghoul 'as the first film that was produced by *misri watani* – a native and nationalist Egyptian – thus emphasizing film production in Egypt as a patriotic and nationalistic act'. He dismisses all earlier efforts by Alexandrian film-makers as 'works by foreigners as compared to natives'.¹⁸

Bayyumi went on to write, produce, direct and edit *Barsum Looking for a*

Job (1925), which again he was quick to label 'the first Egyptian film comedy'.¹⁹ According to al-Qalyoubi, the twelve-minute theatrical was highly influenced by German Expressionism as well as Chaplin's *The Kid*. Though it is hard to imagine a film influenced by both Chaplin's film and Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, he insists that this is not surprising considering that Bayyumi had studied in Germany. Probably the simple story was Chaplinesque while the photography 'looked' German.

A significant development in Bayyumi's career was his relationship with Tal'at Harb, the Egyptian industrialist and financial tycoon. After a congenial period during which Bayyumi headed a film subsidiary for him called Misr Film, the relationship between the giant and the novice floundered. In 1926, Bayyumi resigned, and for the rest of his life felt that he was cheated out of the industry he had founded. Though he made several silent films, he was a victim of his own failure to grasp that cinema may be an art and a technology, but, above all, it is a sophisticated business. In 1963 he died in a charity ward.

Three silent films

The year 1922 witnessed a widespread interest among Egyptians in the use of the film medium for educational purposes.²⁰ Newspapers published many articles by prominent people advocating similar ideas. One such person was Victor Risotto, a lawyer, who was particularly interested in farming. He urged the government to license the establishment of a company to produce instructional films dealing with new agricultural methods. His appeal was well received by the public. Ironically, many of the letters written to the newspapers called for a company to be controlled by natives and financed by local money.²¹ Although he was of Italian descent, Risotto regarded himself as a bona fide Egyptian and did not feel excluded. A year after he had published his letter to the government, Risotto took everyone by surprise. He released a fifty-minute theatrical film entitled *In the Land of Tut Ankh Amun*. He wrote, directed and produced it for £1,900, which he financed personally.

The plot revolves around an archaeologist, his kind daughter, his jealous and scheming adopted daughter, and the son of the Nile. The setting is the

Valley of the Kings in 1922, the year the tomb of Tut Ankh Amun was discovered. Described as 'Egyptian in meaning, foreign in structure', the film offered much to fill Egyptians with pride. Although parts of it were deemed by one magazine to be 'crude, disconnected and with scenes that were too long',²² both reviewers and audiences loved it for being 'an Egyptian film' and for its public relations value.

Much was written about *Laila* (1927) and its competition with *Qublah fil-sahra* (*A Kiss in the Desert*) as to which one marked the 'real' beginning of Egyptian cinema. *A Kiss in the Desert* was released five months earlier than *Laila*, but it failed to qualify because it had been made by Ibrahim and Badr Lama, two Palestinians who were born and raised in Chile. The issue remained unresolved for almost half a century: recent discoveries by al-Qalyoubi, however, give the distinction to *Laila*.

Laila is important for three other reasons. First, it was produced by a woman in her early twenties. Aziza Amir was a popular stage actress who had married well and had developed the project for herself. For a director she chose Wadad Orfi, a Turkish writer of Jewish faith, who had recently emigrated to Egypt. When difficulties arose between them, she replaced him with Estephan Rosti, an Egyptian who had studied cinema in Paris, but she retained the Italian cameraman, Stelio Chiarini. These are impressive decisions for a very young woman to have made, especially then. Second, Aziza Amir was among three women to enter Egyptian film production. As she was making *Laila*, another woman, Assya, was producing *Remorse*, directed by Ibrahim Lama. They, together with Fatma Rushdi, might have been among the first women in the world to enter the field.²³ Third, *Laila* touches on the problematic relationship between East and West, a subject that preoccupies writers up till the present. The plot depicts a young Egyptian woman whose misfortune is the result of an affair her betrothed has with an American woman with whom he leaves to live in her country. The lure of the West, as personified in that seductress, is what brings ruination to this innocent village girl.

The most important silent film was *Zainab*, directed by Muhammad Karim who would be enshrined in an Egyptian film pantheon had there been one. In the 1920s Karim travelled to Rome and then to Berlin for

training at UFA Studios. In his memoirs, he credits Fritz Lang, who at the time was directing *Metropolis*, for having given him an opportunity to watch the entire production and to 'look through the lens from every angle'. For this reason Karim called himself 'a graduate of *Metropolis*'.²⁴ Upon returning home in 1926, he was immediately employed by Tal'at Harb's film company, where he made a few shorts. He chose a distinctive novel, *Zainab*, for his theatrical film project. It was produced by Yusuf Wahbi, a famous stage actor and director.

Zainab premiered on 9 April 1930, and was an instant success. Dignitaries and high officials were in attendance. The 'Prince of Poets', Ahmad Shawqi, told the director in the presence of many journalists and literati: 'You have revealed poetry on the screen.' An important novelist wrote about the film in a weekly newspaper for three consecutive weeks. Every major magazine in Egypt covered its release. It was even covered in Turkish, French and German newspapers. The German magazine *Film Woche* told its readers: 'It is equal to the greatest of American films'.²⁵ The founder of Studio Misr wrote the director a letter congratulating him on his great success. However, the letter that touched the young director the most came from the author. He told Karim that the power and beauty of his images gave the subject 'greater clarity than any pen can dare show in a novel or a story'.²⁶

Every film has its detractors, and *Zainab* was no exception. Some considered the story unworthy of all the effort that went into making the film.²⁷ Others objected to the husband kissing his wife immediately after saying his prayers,²⁸ something no devout Muslim would do. And in the view of another reviewer: 'The director gave us a picture of the Egyptian *fellah* wearing silk, sleeping in a bed, covering the floor with carpets and rugs, using mirrors, drawers, servants, cutlery, towels, eating meat, and giving up his plough to eat chicken. In other words, the *fellah* is a graduate of Oxford!'²⁹

Sound comes to Egypt

Having led the Egyptian cinema towards realism, Muhammad Karim now turned his attention to the talking film. Here again he turned to Yusuf Wahbi, who was already having great success starring in *Children of the*

Valley of the Kings in 1922, the year the tomb of Tut Ankh Amun was discovered. Described as 'Egyptian in meaning, foreign in structure', the film offered much to fill Egyptians with pride. Although parts of it were deemed by one magazine to be 'crude, disconnected and with scenes that were too long',²² both reviewers and audiences loved it for being 'an Egyptian film' and for its public relations value.

Much was written about *Laila* (1927) and its competition with *Qublah fil-sahra* (*A Kiss in the Desert*) as to which one marked the 'real' beginning of Egyptian cinema. *A Kiss in the Desert* was released five months earlier than *Laila*, but it failed to qualify because it had been made by Ibrahim and Badr Lama, two Palestinians who were born and raised in Chile. The issue remained unresolved for almost half a century: recent discoveries by al-Qalyoubi, however, give the distinction to *Laila*.

Laila is important for three other reasons. First, it was produced by a woman in her early twenties. Aziza Amir was a popular stage actress who had married well and had developed the project for herself. For a director she chose Wadad Orfi, a Turkish writer of Jewish faith, who had recently emigrated to Egypt. When difficulties arose between them, she replaced him with Estephan Rosti, an Egyptian who had studied cinema in Paris, but she retained the Italian cameraman, Stelio Chiarini. These are impressive decisions for a very young woman to have made, especially then. Second, Aziza Amir was among three women to enter Egyptian film production. As she was making *Laila*, another woman, Assya, was producing *Remorse*, directed by Ibrahim Lama. They, together with Fatma Rushdi, might have been among the first women in the world to enter the field.²³ Third, *Laila* touches on the problematic relationship between East and West, a subject that preoccupies writers up till the present. The plot depicts a young Egyptian woman whose misfortune is the result of an affair her betrothed has with an American woman with whom he leaves to live in her country. The lure of the West, as personified in that seductress, is what brings ruination to this innocent village girl.

The most important silent film was *Zainab*, directed by Muhammad Karim who would be enshrined in an Egyptian film pantheon had there been one. In the 1920s Karim travelled to Rome and then to Berlin for

training at UFA Studios. In his memoirs, he credits Fritz Lang, who at the time was directing *Metropolis*, for having given him an opportunity to watch the entire production and to 'look through the lens from every angle'. For this reason Karim called himself 'a graduate of *Metropolis*'.²⁴ Upon returning home in 1926, he was immediately employed by Tal'at Harb's film company, where he made a few shorts. He chose a distinctive novel, *Zainab*, for his theatrical film project. It was produced by Yusuf Wahbi, a famous stage actor and director.

Zainab premiered on 9 April 1930, and was an instant success. Dignitaries and high officials were in attendance. The 'Prince of Poets', Ahmad Shawqi, told the director in the presence of many journalists and literati: 'You have revealed poetry on the screen.' An important novelist wrote about the film in a weekly newspaper for three consecutive weeks. Every major magazine in Egypt covered its release. It was even covered in Turkish, French and German newspapers. The German magazine *Film Woche* told its readers: 'It is equal to the greatest of American films'.²⁵ The founder of Studio Misr wrote the director a letter congratulating him on his great success. However, the letter that touched the young director the most came from the author. He told Karim that the power and beauty of his images gave the subject 'greater clarity than any pen can dare show in a novel or a story'.²⁶

Every film has its detractors, and *Zainab* was no exception. Some considered the story unworthy of all the effort that went into making the film.²⁷ Others objected to the husband kissing his wife immediately after saying his prayers,²⁸ something no devout Muslim would do. And in the view of another reviewer: 'The director gave us a picture of the Egyptian *fellah* wearing silk, sleeping in a bed, covering the floor with carpets and rugs, using mirrors, drawers, servants, cutlery, towels, eating meat, and giving up his plough to eat chicken. In other words, the *fellah* is a graduate of Oxford!'²⁹

Sound comes to Egypt

Having led the Egyptian cinema towards realism, Muhammad Karim now turned his attention to the talking film. Here again he turned to Yusuf Wahbi, who was already having great success starring in *Children of the*

Aristocrats, a melodrama he himself had written. They decided to make it as their first vehicle into sound, with Wahbi himself repeating his stage performance on the screen. In preparation, Wahbi purchased additional film equipment and renovated his Ramses Studio. El-Charkawi says: 'The silent part of the film was shot in this studio with sets built by Muhammad Karim himself, while the sound part (40%) was shot in Paris. *Children of the Aristocrats* premiered at the Royal cinema on 14 March, 1932, and enjoyed a great success.'³⁰

Again the plot deals with a theme that was already touched on in *Laila*: the relationship between East and West. It revolves around a married Egyptian man who has an affair with Julia, a French girl living in Egypt. When his wife discovers his affair, he and his mistress flee to France. But when he discovers Julia in the arms of a new lover, he kills her. The lurid story was hugely popular. The French and the European community in Egypt called the film racist,³¹ because the French girl was blamed for the young man's misery, imprisonment and eventual death.

The significance of the controversy is that by 1932 the Egyptian film had already entered international discourse. Unwittingly, what the film-makers had produced was now being regarded as an expression of national character and personality, and not just an artefact intended to entertain. Egyptian cinema's merits as well as faults were now under scrutiny. It had assumed a new role: to reflect Egyptian values, attitudes, biases and beliefs – and through it the outside world was judging Egyptian society. That was a major leap into seriousness that neither Karim nor Wahbi had probably contemplated.

Singers as movie stars

Egypt did not have the same kind of problem with sound as Hollywood, but it was equally vexing. It concerned the nature of Arabic songs themselves, for in those days they did not lend themselves well to cinema. They were too long and repetitious. Although *Song of the Heart* (1932) was filmed at the Eclair studio in Paris, had two great singers and one of Egypt's best actors, it was a total disaster. That it was written by one of Egypt's leading authors, and directed by Mario Volpi, did not make it any more lively. The

problem was that the Arabic songs did not consist of breezy lyrics and catchy tunes sung lightly. They were meant to be absorbed at leisure, and to intoxicate the aficionado. The average song lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes.

Once again Karim came to the rescue. For a new challenge, he looked towards the musical. He collaborated with Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, the most famous singer and composer in the Arab world. Their first film together, *al-Warda al-Bayda* (*The White Rose*, 1933), became a major triumph for all concerned and led Abd al-Wahhab to trust the direction of his seven films only to Karim – the director never made any films of significance without his singing star.

Technically *The White Rose* broke some new artistic ground. The indoor scenes were again shot in Paris studios. In due course, Karim was able to set the standard (even the format) for the Egyptian musical for a long time. After shortening the song to six minutes, he would focus the camera on the singer while he or she was actually singing and then move the camera around while the orchestra was playing. During the musical bridge, he would 'cut away to two pigeons, or a scene of the Nile, or a sailing vessel with masts, or a garden, or a rural landscape – or whatever the song suggests'.³² Now short and light, the songs 'developed to the point where, on occasion, they took the form of dialogue and constituted an integral part of the action'.³³ While popular, these musicals were melodramas with singing interludes – never 'musicals' in the Hollywood sense.

The role of capitalism

One of the most important figures in the history of the Egyptian cinema was the industrialist and banker Tal'at Harb, who was also a nationalist with a desire to see the arts flourish in Egypt. It was he who, in 1935, founded Studio Misr – a modern complex where artists and technicians could work. Modelling it after Hollywood studios, he went on to create all the departments from photography to carpentry, and to install in the sound stages all the latest equipment. In addition, he created a system that for the first time provided the film-makers with a sense of security, even putting employees, technicians and movie stars on contracts.

On 10 October 1935, Tal'at Harb officially opened Studio Misr 'with a lavish reception for over 500 guests, including outstanding figures in politics, finance, the arts, literature and journalism'.³⁴ Then he sent many promising young men to Paris to study all aspects of film production, and recruited those who were already studying in Germany. Shortly thereafter Egypt had several more film studios: Lama, Jalal, Lotus, Nassibyan and many more. Film production rose from three to five films a year during the silent period to about fifteen a year during the early sound period. Film societies had by now sprouted throughout the country.

A new landmark in the Egyptian cinema

Prior to Chahine's arrival as a director, the Egyptian cinema could boast of a few film-makers who were professional and serious enough to be considered his artistic predecessors. One was Muhammad Karim; another was Kamal Salim. Most film historians now agree that with *al-Azima* (translated either as *The Will* or *Determination*) Egyptian cinema reached a level of maturity. It was made in 1939, by a twenty-six-year-old whose death before the age of thirty-two was a major blow to Egyptian cinema. Unlike many contemporaries who had managed to study in Paris or Berlin, fate denied Salim the opportunity. He taught himself foreign languages so he could read cinema books, took private lessons in painting and piano, landed a job at Studio Misr, wrote scenarios and ended up directing.

The success of *Determination*, his second film, was unprecedented both commercially and critically. All the elements that are essential to making a good film are under control. Particularly commendable are the skilful use of camera movement and the handling of the *mise-en-scène*. For the first time Egyptian audiences were able to identify with the characters on the screen. The characters engaged the audience, spoke to them without reliance on song and dance, touched their souls, and they responded. In *Determination*, the protagonist, Muhammad, is one with his people. He is an ordinary fellow – just like them. He is *ibn al-balad*, a native from the lower classes, just like them. His aspiration matches theirs. Neighbours and strangers can relate to his troubles and to the obstacles in his path. And when he wins over the forces of evil, they are elated for him and themselves. Their values have been endorsed.

During the 1930s, Egyptian cinema reflected the gap between the rich and the poor, *ibn al-zawat* and *ibn al-balad*, educated and uneducated, tradition and modernity, native and foreigner. Egyptian society was an amalgam of competing strands. The gulf between classes was obvious, but they did not know how to bridge it. Like all art, cinema began to play a role in making the Egyptians examine and assess themselves and their society. The enigma of their identity began to materialise on the silver screen.

What may be considered Egyptian cinema's booming age began after World War II. One historian cum film director describes those years of expansion and prosperity. 'By 1944,' he writes, 'the Egyptian cinema faced a serious problem in the form of shortage of actors. Directors made do with singers and dancers and no longer bothered to train or discover new talents [sic]. The problem stood out particularly in this period when the total number of films screened rose from 106 during the War, to 364. The production companies likewise increased from 24 to 120',³⁵ for commercial cinema was robust and a potent Egyptian export. Actors were transformed into stars. Distribution reached out to audiences across the Arab world and as far as South America where there are large Arab communities. Large crowds queued up to greet the release of every Egyptian film in order to see their movie idols. If the success of an industry is measured by its audience's response, the Egyptian cinema can claim that it had succeeded in creating generations of film addicts. That many of these Egyptian films were imitative of Hollywood films was unnoticed by the general public. What mattered was that the stars and characters spoke and sang in Arabic, appeared in Arabic settings and wore Arabic clothing. Huge, glossy photographs of these stars adorned magazine covers and the walls of the cinema lobbies next to Hollywood stars. Tal'at Harb's wish for Studio Misr to make 'Egyptian films for Egyptian people' was more than fulfilled.

While it obviously fulfilled a national need and satisfied cultural appetite, Egyptian cinema up to the Revolution of 1952 was undermined by greed. The profit motive, however, was not unique to Egypt, for it was also the driving force elsewhere, albeit with local variations. In Egypt, between 1945 and 1951, 'film mongers'³⁶ began to multiply. This was the condition of Egyptian cinema when Youssef Chahine inaugurated his film career with

Daddy Amin in 1950. Creative and obsessed, he never ceased to make films that are a far cry from the legacy he had inherited. Yet it is possible that he might not have been the artist he has become without the traditions established in Egyptian cinema, even though he has often seemed to struggle against them.

Over fifty years, Chahine has directed thirty-four features and six documentaries. He is renowned for using *al-ughniya* (song) in most of his films – several of his features starred famous singers: Farid al-Atrash, Shadia, Laila Murad, Majda al-Rumi, Daleeda, Latifa; and a number featured Muhammad Munir. His only operetta was with the inimitable Fairuz. The classification of a film as a musical is problematic because Egypt has no celluloid equivalent of *Singing in the Rain*, *All That Jazz* and *A Hard Day's Night*. Except for a relatively few films that successfully balanced narrative and singing – such as the irresistibly charming *Khalli balak min Zuzu* (*Beware of Zuzu*, 1972) – the Egyptian musical genre remains a hybrid rather than a pure form.

Like all industries, Egyptian cinema was directly affected by the political tides that swept Egypt during Chahine's years of productivity. Revolution, nationalisation, de-nationalisation, wars, plus the normal vicissitudes of commerce, have all helped shape his career. Little is printed on the economics of Egyptian cinema, yet Chahine's financing can be charted in two phases: reliance on small independent producers; establishment of his own production company, Misr International Films, and co-production arrangements with other Arab countries, such as Algeria and Lebanon. Since 1985, his financing problems have stabilised, mainly through mutually satisfying co-productions with France.

Stars forgo their salaries just to be in a Chahine film. It is true that many stars do the same in the United States or United Kingdom, in order to be in low-budget and art movies. But in Egypt, where stars' salaries are infinitesimal by Hollywood standards, the sacrifices are much greater. Producer Marianne Khoury says, 'Stars don't get paid much when they work in a Chahine film. They work for him for very little because what they seek most is the prestige of having appeared in any of his films and for the opportunity to observe and learn. They value the experience, exposure and prestige far more than money.'³⁷

Mahmoud Hemeda who starred in three Chahine films – *The Emigrant* (1994), *Destiny* (1997) and *The Other* (1999) – concurs. For *The Emigrant*, he only took token payment. Hemeda's case, however, may be special. A founder of a new film company, he had his own reasons for forgoing his salary. He explains:

Chahine's films are costly, and he doesn't have money to pay his actors. His distribution is limited and he's not making the millions people assume he's making. Nothing of the sort. He's on the run. He's basically a semi-institution. He has a few services that he offers to foreign producers making films in Egypt. He now has a few movie theatres. But he doesn't have any laboratories or such. He rents Studio Galal from the government. So when I decided to work with him, it was because I wanted to learn. For me to shave my head and sit around seven months working for him for nothing, that's something else. But I learned from him administration and how this semi-institution is run.³⁸

On the other hand the employees of his company are well paid. Chahine is considered the best paying producer in Egypt: his generous nature also makes good business sense. According to Gabriel Khoury, Chahine's nephew and partner,

Chahine takes pride in knowing that he's providing employment to so many people: eighty working at the office and at the cinemas, and an additional hundred-and-twenty whenever we're in production. Two hundred families depend on the checks they receive from Misr International Films, and this to Chahine is reason enough to keep the company running.³⁹

The mutual loyalty between Chahine and his cast and crew is unparalleled in Egyptian cinema. After calling Chahine enigmatic and rebellious, and after comparing him to soft moving sands that hide a volcano, Hind Rustum, star of *Cairo Station* (1958), waxes elegant when she talks about him. Yousra, who starred in several of his films, considers him her friend and mentor. She dismisses the twenty-five films she made before appearing in his *An Egyptian Story* (1982), adding, 'I began making quality films with him.'

And yet, the winner of film awards around the globe, who is also the premiere director in the Arab world, Chahine is not free of worries. 'My torment is sometimes physical, not just spiritual or internal,' he admits. 'Sometimes I hit my head against the wall.' As to being called rebellious, he adds: 'I agree, although we must watch out for the different meanings the word carries to different regimes. It has become a slogan. It's normal for me that when I see cowardice or treachery to try to do something about it.'⁴⁰

What is significant about Chahine is that despite (or perhaps because of) being tormented, and despite operating under difficult circumstances – financing obviously being only one of them – he has carved for himself and for Egypt a respectable niche in the pantheon of world cinema.

* * *

Because Chahine's corpus is relatively large, I had to settle on a manageable number of films for analysis. Thus the problems of selection and arrangement arose. The chosen fourteen films are those I believe to be his best and which are the most illustrative of the diversity of his style. Chahine himself concurs. There are three films I would also like to have included. *Al-Yawm al-Sadis* (*The Sixth Day*, 1986), and *Bayya' al-Khawatim* (*The Ring Seller*, 1965), 'which the critic Jean-Marie Sabatier called the finest musical comedy of the Arab cinema'⁴¹ were both excluded because of lack of space. *Al-nas wa al-Nil* (*People and the Nile*, 1968), a controversial Egyptian-Soviet co-production depicting the building of the economically vital Aswan Dam, was another film I was eager to find, but the only print Chahine recommended for me to see proved inaccessible. Further confirmation of my choices came in September 1998, when the Film Society of the Lincoln Center, in New York, held a retrospective on Chahine. Their selection of fifteen films coincided precisely with my fourteen (plus one extra). Then came the question of arrangement. A chronological approach promised to be the easiest but it proved to be the least satisfactory. Within a short time span Chahine made films in different genres, going on to repeat the cycle. To move rapidly from social drama to a war film to a historical film and then flip back and forth would have been too confusing. Instead, I have chosen

to group them thematically, and to arrange the genres so that there is a broadly chronological projection. The clustering around themes is more logical and illuminating than following a linear succession, even though there is an element of overlapping in the arrangement.

high-rise apartment building is close to a major boulevard, but its entrance faces a side street that is narrow and dark. His study is cosy and its walls are lined with bookshelves and CDs, not unlike the inner sanctum of a professor, content to be alone with his thoughts or one of his friends. White German liqueur, however, is his passion.

Having no children of his own, Chahine looks upon his films, his students at the High Cinema Institute and his protégés as his legacy. Profit for its own sake is secondary. In contrast a Hollywood studio mogul reputedly admonished his subordinates by reminding them that they were not in the business of making movies: they were in the business of making money. Though the producer to whom this remark is attributed is anonymous, he undoubtedly spoke for the majority of producers.

Two

Chronicle of Chahine's Career and its Context

It is instructive to situate Chahine's bio-filmography within the context of Egyptian cinema and the overall political and cultural scene, for the seeds of many of his films were sown in historical events which he witnessed. It is significant, for example, that the year he made his debut as a film director (1950) happened to fall in between two major historical turning points. In 1948, the Arabs lost Palestine and Israel was born; in 1952, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led the bloodless Revolution which ended a corrupt monarchy. The significance of these two watershed events, artistically speaking, is that they shaped the society which Chahine chose to portray on the screen for the next fifty years. It is useful, then, to divide his career into three phases, each of which contributed to shaping him as a director and allowed him to tackle national themes that became the hallmark of his cinema.

In his early period (1952-70), Chahine was preoccupied with the large issues of his time: the liberation movements that were sweeping the Arab world, be it colonialism or monarchy; the Egyptian *fellah*, whose welfare was central to the Revolution; the rise of a new kind of leadership, as exemplified by the charismatic Nasser; and by Arab socialism and the betrayal of it by those who put self-interest above national interest. The seismic Revolution of 1952 which ended the 141-year-old dynasty that Muhammad Ali had started in 1811, made the Free Officers who engineered it instant heroes, and inaugurated the new era of pan-Arab Nationalism. Serious Egyptian film-makers were also encouraged by what they were hearing in regard to their own medium. The first president of the new Republic, General Muhammad Naguib, delivered a major speech which resonated throughout the Egyptian film industry. After criticising the '[e]fficiency and moral depravity' that had reflected the old regime, he added, 'Today we cannot accept from Art or from those in charge of it any-

thing like what used to happen in the past.' The industry was now in concert with the policies advocated by the new regime. While some directors were in favour of the government becoming involved in the film industry, Youssef Chahine 'was satisfied to listen and not comment'.²

* * *

Two years before the Free Officers' Revolution, Chahine had his own ideas on film-making. With his first film, *Baba Amin (Daddy Amin)*, which he made at the age of twenty-four, he conceived an agenda for himself: while accommodating genuine requirements of local tradition, he would deal with more urgent themes. This introduced a new departure from contemporary Egyptian cinema in seriousness and originality. From the very beginning Chahine began to lay bare parts of his autobiography, for the father in the film is modelled on his own father. Even though *Daddy Amin*



A new kind of cinema: entertaining but not frivolous (*Daddy Amin*, 1950)



Nile Boy (1951): the first Chahine feature to be submitted to an international film festival

contains three songs, imposed on him by the producer, the film is fundamentally serious and deals with family values and fiscal responsibility. More important, with *Daddy Amin*, Chahine was heralding a new kind of cinema: entertaining but not frivolous. The young Chahine might have looked ungainly, but his debut as a director was extraordinarily promising.

The day after his wedding in 1951, Chahine started his second film, *Nile Boy*, which was 'an adaptation of the stage play *Nature Boy* by the American Grant Marshall'.³ The film is important for two reasons. One, it deals with the Egyptian *fellah* a subject to which Chahine would return several times. The plot revolves around a young Egyptian *fellah* who is lured into and corrupted by the city, but finds his redemption upon returning to his village and family. Two, the film marks Chahine's entrée into international film festivals. The way he went about it is also illustrative of his resolve to broaden his horizon and to bring attention to Egyptian cinema in general. Still in his twenties and unaware of procedures, Chahine carried his film cans

under his arm and headed for Venice, only to be told that his film could not be scheduled. Because he had neither submitted an application nor been invited to enter his film, it would not be shown. But Chahine stood his ground. He argued and sought assistance from another Egyptian director, Niazi Mustapha, who happened to be there, until *Nile Boy* was given a slot out of competition at ten o'clock in the morning.

In one of his early films, *The Blazing Sun* (1954), Chahine introduced Omar Sharif to the screen. Omar Sharif was at that time still known by his real name, Michel Shalhoub. He was a fellow Alexanderine and a graduate of Victoria College, which Chahine had attended six years earlier. In this film, Chahine again dramatised the exploitation of the Egyptian *fellah*. And for the first time in Egyptian cinema, Chahine shocked audiences by showing the hanging of an innocent man, and by suggesting that the taboo of a marriage between a boy and a girl from two different classes could be broken. Visually, *Blazing* represented something new in Egyptian cinema. The



Omar Sharif's introduction to the screen – courtesy of Chahine. (*The Blazing Sun*, 1954)

chase and the extremely long shots and high angles in the exotic setting of the monumental columns at Luxor reminded viewers of the director's affinity with Hollywood. This last characteristic became particularly apparent in some of the musicals he directed at this time, such as *My One and Only Love* (1957), which contains one of the loveliest and most inventive duets in the history of Egyptian cinema. Here we find two singers enacting the love / hate relationship of young lovers, with charm and liveliness that was often missing in Egyptian musicals. During his first seven years, however, Chahine also became known as the 'wrecker of producers'.⁴ He earned the epithet after *Devil in the Desert* (1954), also starring Omar Sharif. While the film was Chahine's first major box-office failure, the label itself was really placed on its young director too early in his career.

A series of political upheavals intervened before the next phase of Chahine's career. Their relevance to Chahine was more indirect than direct, but nevertheless they help reveal his political growth and the psychological condition of his potential audiences. On the positive side, Nasser was able to negotiate a peaceful evacuation of the British troops from Egypt, but after the United States reneged on its promise to finance the Aswan Dam, Nasser retaliated by nationalising the Suez Canal. The crisis escalated into the British-French-Israeli invasion of the Suez Canal zone in 1956. After the shooting had stopped, the Canal remained in Egyptian hands and Nasser was hailed as a hero in much of the Arab world. Syria invited Egypt to form a union with her. Though reluctant, Nasser agreed to form a republic with him as its president, and many thought of the newly formed United Arab Republic as a harbinger to the Arab unity they desired.

During the late 1950s, Chahine's own star was also in the ascendant. He made the significant *Cairo Station*, which depicted the tormented life of a marginalised segment of the Egyptian society. The early screenings pleased the critics but incensed general audiences. Chahine says that he 'was literally spat on by one of the viewers'⁵ for having given Egypt a bleak image. The experience was so traumatic that Chahine felt he had no right to gamble with other people's money. Then he was asked to make a film on the subject of the Algerian Revolution. Consequently, *Jamila* (1958), marked a turning point in his career, for it was his first overtly political film to date. Co-

scripted by Naguib Mahfouz and some of Egypt's best writers, and filmed on a lot near the Pyramids, *Jamila* proved to be a powerful film and an instant triumph throughout the Arab world. In this film, Chahine began to experiment with mixing genres, one of his signature traits. A year later, in 1959, the Higher Cinema Institute was established in Cairo for the training of a new generation of Egyptians in the arts and sciences of cinema. Chahine was one of its founders and a regular member of its faculty. The Institute proved to be a vital source of new talent on which the cinema counted.

These two successes by Chahine were followed by a string of failures, primarily because they were commercial vehicles rather than artistic expressions. The years 1959-61 marked his lowest period as a director. Four commercial and artistic flops – *Forever Yours* (1959); *Only You* (1960); *Lovers' Complaint* (1961); and *A Man in My Life* (1961) – filled him with self-doubt to the point that, at the age of thirty-five, he dusted off the books on the shelf in hopes of re-learning dramaturgy. It was one of his gloomiest periods. On the national level, too, the motion picture industry was experiencing a major crisis. Nasser's sweeping nationalisation of all industries did not spare it. The agrarian reforms might have been badly needed, but the cinema industry was a casualty. In 1961, a law was passed to nationalise Misr Bank, with all its motion picture subsidiaries. Besides Studio Misr, other studios were also nationalised. The end result was devastating. Military men, ignorant of cinema practices, were now running the studios. They offered contracts, paid out huge sums of money, but most of the films were never made. It was a period of unparalleled chaos. Outside interference took its toll and did incalculable damage. The cinema industry as a whole has yet to recover from that debacle.

Despite these dire conditions, Chahine found himself inheriting a colleague's pet project. Director Izzidin Zulfikar had written a script he was about to start filming when he discovered that he was terminally ill. Although he had a brother, also a film director, the dying man chose Chahine to realise his dream. *Saladin* (1963) was an epic composed for the greater glory of Gamal Abdel Nasser, equating him with the legendary liberator of Jerusalem during the Crusades. The 195-minute epic was the biggest production in Arab cinema up till then. During filming (1961), the

union between Egypt and Syria collapsed. Chahine himself regarded *Saladin* as the awakening of his consciousness regarding the realities of international power politics. It was also his first use of colour and widescreen. Suddenly things went askew. Despite the enormous logistical support Chahine had received from Nasser's regime in the production of *Saladin*, he was denied seventeen awards. The problem had arisen because of an acrimonious confrontation with the Deputy Minister of Culture over a script Chahine was preparing on the building of the Aswan Dam, to be called *Tomorrow Life Begins*.⁶ The only award *Saladin* received was for a minor technical achievement, which was correctly perceived by Chahine and his allies as a public rebuff of the film's creator. The award deliberately highlighted the fact that *Saladin* was indeed in competition but lost. That year's top award went to an inconsequential film called *Soft Hands*, based on Tawfiq al-Hakim's stage play. *Saladin*, however, did garner an award from the Egyptian Catholic Centre for Cinema.⁷

With his eighteenth film, *Dawn of a New Day* (1964), Chahine addressed the subject of socialism which Nasser's regime had adopted for Egypt. Like many intellectuals, Chahine embraced socialism as a means to salvation. Poverty and illiteracy in Egypt were endemic, further exacerbated by a population that was exploding. The social problems were so immense and serious that although socialism might not have been a panacea, it was a badly needed remedy. He aimed his salvo at the greedy bourgeoisie who betrayed socialism. Contrary to some accounts⁸, it is one of the few Chahine films which featured a woman in the central role.

While attending *Dawn of a New Day*'s premiere in Lebanon, Chahine was approached by the Rahbani brothers, famous musicians throughout the Arab world, to make a film starring Fairuz. Chahine welcomed the opportunity, thus abandoning *Tomorrow Life Begins*, the film about the Aswan Dam, which was already in bureaucratic trouble. Chahine was among thirty-five Egyptian directors to flee 'to Lebanon looking for opportunities to make their films'.⁹ The film Chahine made in Lebanon was *The Ring Seller*. He loved listening to Fairuz's singing and to the music of the celebrated Rahbani brothers, but the Lebanese technicians were too inexperienced to suit him. Then he went to Spain, where he made *Golden Sands* (1966), an

unabashed adaptation of *Blood and Sand* (1941), starring Tyrone Power. Although his film in Lebanon was evocative, with images worthy of Fairuz's voice, his effort in Spain was one of his poorest even though it starred Fatin Hamama, the first lady of the Egyptian screen.

Out of Egypt Chahine felt homesick and at a loss. Worried about the state of the cinema industry in general and his recent failures in particular, he regarded himself as in a self-imposed exile and out of place. Then a message reached him that President Nasser had hinted that *al-magnoon* (the madman) Chahine could return. Chahine was overjoyed. He was apprehensive, too, for he did not know whether the red carpet or the red cap (symbol of a death sentence) would be awaiting him. Neither was in sight.¹⁰ Instead, he was asked to direct the first Egyptian-Soviet co-production. Immediately he started planning what would become *People and the Nile*. In the meantime, he made *Eid al-Mairoun* (*Sacred Oil*, 1967) a thirteen-minute documentary on the origin, preparation and significance of holy oil in the Coptic church. It is a beautifully haunting film which, in its chiaroscuro photography and striking compositions, recalls Andrej Tarkovsky's *Andrey Rublyov*. Its slow tempo represents a departure from Chahine's usually frenetic style, and reveals a spiritual side to him that is rarely seen. And it marks the first time he alluded to his Christian roots. Born a Melkite Catholic, he is not an observant of any organised religion.

The region was soon engulfed in a new war. Within only six days in 1967, Israel decimated the Arab armies and occupied Sinai, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. The *blitzkrieg* and the depth of defeat forced Nasser to offer his resignation, but he stayed in power by popular demand. A few years later, Chahine would return to analyse the roots of that catastrophe in *The Sparrow* (1973), one of his most poignant and intelligent films.

In 1968 Chahine commenced filming the much-publicised *People and the Nile*. It was a huge production which he shot on location in Aswan, Moscow and Leningrad. Egyptian and Soviet technicians collaborated on it, but the result was a major disappointment. Chahine managed to displease both sponsors, for each demanded certain changes. Some of the objections seemed petty. The Egyptians objected to a Soviet engineer walking ahead of his Egyptian counterpart. The Soviets objected because they had telephone

booths on the streets of Leningrad, which Chahine did not show. Adamant that the film was less than they had expected, both sponsors, for disparate reasons, insisted on major alterations. Chahine re-shot many scenes with a new cast, disgusted with what he considered a 'made-to-order' film.¹¹ The version he himself preferred was stored at the *Cinémathèque française*, which, according to him, 'contains some of the best footage in my career'.¹² The experience taught him never to get involved in a project sponsored by governments. His private version of the film was not exhibited until 1999 — and in France before Egypt. As late as 1999, the film was still not acknowledged in the records of the Egyptian Chamber of Cinema.¹³

But Chahine forged ahead, not waiting for the controversy to subside or for *People and the Nile* to be released. For his twenty-second film, which he made in 1969, he turned to a subject he cherished, the exploitation of the Egyptian *fellah*. *The Earth* was based on a modern Egyptian classic, written in 1953 by his Marxist friend, Abdel-Rahman al-Sharqawi. It was a big project which had taken Chahine ten years to realise. This time the public's verdict was quick and heartwarming: *The Earth* was hailed an instant triumph and the word masterpiece has been attached to it ever since. It was screened in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, and its distribution throughout France was the first international recognition of Chahine as an artist. The last shot in the film remains one of the most memorable in Egyptian cinema, for it shows the protagonist clawing at the land as he is being dragged away.

As he had vilified the bourgeoisie and the betrayers of socialism in *Dawn of a New Day*, in 1970 Chahine vilified the Egyptian intellectuals, including himself, for not having done their share in building the new society the 1952 Revolution had promised. This indictment was the subject of *The Choice* (1970), of which he says: '*The Earth* was about a man who said "NO", and *The Choice* is about a man who said "YES". By compromising and betraying himself, he lived a schizophrenic life'.¹⁴ *The Choice* was screened at the Carthage Film Festival, which honoured Chahine with a lifetime achievement award. It was in the course of the festival that he was approached by Algerian film-makers to co-produce films with them. The co-operation that ensued between Misr International Films and the Algerian film industry is significant for it allowed Chahine to make three of

his important films: *The Sparrow*, *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1976), and *Alexandria ... Why?*, in collaboration with Algerian television.

Chahine's first twenty years as a director reveal that he was a man of great energy working in great haste. The energy is commendable, the haste less so. High-powered productivity does not allow time for meditation and reflection. This trend continued: some of his films could have been more cogent or sharp, and some of his pitfalls could have been avoided, had he been less obsessed with being in constant motion.

Chahine's middle period spanned 1970-81. In 1970, Nasser suddenly died of a heart attack and was mourned by millions. No sooner had Anwar Sadat succeeded him and settled in office than he embarked on abolishing most of his predecessor's policies. In the main, Sadat's 'corrective revolution' replaced socialism with capitalism, wrested Egypt out of the Soviet bloc and aligned it with the United States. After crossing the Suez Canal and achieving a partial military victory over Israel in the October War of 1973, Sadat felt emboldened enough to launch his policy of *al-infitah*, 'an opening to increased economic relations with the west and especially to western investment'.¹⁵ Sadat's economic liberalisation led to 'the growth of a new-rich class of entrepreneurial middlemen and demi-monde of wealth allied with graft that impedes efficiency and alienates ordinary people'.¹⁶ A class of millionaires soon arose and the gap between the rich and poor again widened. In one of his darkest films, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Chahine was to address the economic imbalance that resulted from such policies.

While Sadat was instituting those 'corrective' measures, the cinema's fortunes continued to languish. Unable to get financing from the public sector (before the cinema was denationalised in 1972), Chahine established Misr International Films. Reflecting on those days, Marianne Khoury says: 'When he first started his company he had one of the richest men in the Arab world as a partner, and then another. Both times the relationship failed. Chahine cannot work with partners.'¹⁷ During that period, Chahine began to respond to the sea change that was reshaping Egyptian society. He refused to compromise his art by pandering to public taste, and his suspicion of officialdom persisted.

In fulfilment of his agreement with Algeria, Chahine, in 1973, directed

his twenty-fourth film, *The Sparrow*, which is a brutal dissection of the Six Day War catastrophe. Upon watching it, the Minister of Culture was furious. Believing that the villain on the screen was modelled after his own brother, he wanted to burn the negative.¹⁸ Luckily, the negative had been stored in a Paris vault. Arab intellectuals meeting in Beirut reacted more positively. They issued a strong statement defending the film and exhorting Arab governments to release it. An example of the way some of Chahine's films evolve out of each other can be found in the case of *The Sparrow*. During its filming Chahine had a heart attack, and was rushed to hospital for open heart surgery. The imminence of death became the genesis of the second part of his autobiographical trilogy – *An Egyptian Story*.

In 1973, Sadat abruptly launched a massive military campaign to liberate Sinai from Israeli occupation. With one act of courage, Sadat restored pride to a nation yearning for a modicum of victory. Even Israel's quick recovery on the battlefield – mainly due to Washington's limitless support – did not diminish the Arabs' feeling of satisfaction. Chahine produced a ten-minute film for the Egyptian Army, *Forward We Go* (1973), celebrating what became known as the October War. Shortly thereafter, the ban on *The Sparrow* was lifted. His abiding concern with the economic deterioration and the spread of corruption all around him, inspired Chahine to direct *Return of the Prodigal Son*, a film which he termed a 'musical tragedy'. It was his twenty-fifth film. Acting as a self-styled barometer of the Arab world, not just Egypt, he foresaw the inevitability of an internecine tragedy, thus predicting the civil war in Lebanon. The film was produced by Chahine's newly formed company and the Algerian cinema. It was the second such collaboration between the two countries. During the same year (1975), Chahine invited Salah Abu Seif to direct a film for his company. The result was *Death of the Water-bearer*, considered by many to be one of Abu Seif's finest films.

Empowered by his success during the October War, and perhaps succumbing to American pressure, or both, Anwar Sadat once again jolted the region when, in 1978 he committed the unforgivable in the eyes of fellow Arabs by unilaterally signing a peace treaty with Israel. The Camp David Accords shattered the fragile solidarity among the Arabs, leaving each state from then on to fend for herself. Demonstrations erupted throughout the

Arab world, with many groups and individuals publicly vowing to kill 'the traitor'. Egypt was now isolated, and the Arab League's headquarters were moved from Cairo to Tunis.

Chahine was caught in the crossfire. When he released his latest film, *Alexandria ... Why?* in 1978, the controversy over the Camp David Accords was raging. Arab intellectuals, who were eager for a film which would give vent to their frustration and would fuel their anger at Sadat's defection, were stunned. What they saw, instead, was a film depicting the Egypt of the 1940s, and speaking of forgiveness at a time when the Arabs felt surrounded by enemies. Some went so far as to accuse Chahine of complicity with Sadat in promoting normalisation of relations with the Jewish state. *Alexandria ... Why?* constituted the first part of his autobiographical trilogy. It won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, and its star won an acting award. Furthermore, the German television channel ZDF supported Chahine's company with a grant of approximately 400,000 Egyptian pounds.¹⁹

During this second period, Chahine was at the pinnacle of his creative power. It is likely that the slower pace of his productions contributed positively to their artistic impact. Instead of making a film a year, here he only made six films in eleven years. Four out of these six are among his most challenging and demanding. It was at this time, too, that his films began to generate controversy. The rumbling that surfaced after *People and the Nile* took root with the release of *Alexandria ... Why?* ten years later. From then on, bitter controversy accompanied each of his films.

Chahine's latter period (1981-2001), was imbued with conflict and controversy. The overwhelming characteristic of this period, which began with the assassination of Anwar Sadat, is Chahine's clash with the rise of extremism. Chahine viewed the Muslim fundamentalists as intolerant, and they viewed him as subversive. The controversy that surrounded his films in the 1990s seemed to be in direct proportion to the acclaim the outside world bestowed upon him, which in turn made him more suspect.

The issues that preoccupied Chahine in this period were personal and national identity. By completing his autobiographical trilogy, he sought to come to terms with himself, and to aspire for Egypt to rise as a nation with

boundaries that are broad and inclusive, not narrow and exclusive. And by mediating between the past and the present, as in *The Emigrant and Destiny*, he hoped that Egypt would avoid repeating past mistakes. The freedom of the individual and that of Egypt herself were at stake, and Chahine sounded the alarm.

Nearly a decade after his open heart surgery, Chahine wanted to take stock of his life. The result was his twenty-seventh film, *An Egyptian Story*, in which he played himself as a successful film director tormented by memories. It was based on an article by a famous writer and novelist, Yusuf Idris, who himself had had open heart surgery in London. Chahine's filmic adaptation – which he calls 'cinematic vision' – became the second film in which he appeared as an actor.

In 1985 Chahine's financial situation seemed to stabilise. In that year he met the French producer Humbert Balsan who provided him with new opportunities. The co-production of *Adieu Bonaparte* with France became possible because the president of the main French television channel (at the time a public service broadcaster, TFI), Hervé Bourges, was interested in the Middle East and the Arab world.²⁰ Since then, a co-production arrangement has been maintained between Chahine and France. Film production money is packaged from different sources: from his own company, Misr International Films; from French cultural organisations, television stations in France and other European countries; and in the form of advances from theatre chains and video distributors. The relationship has been both satisfactory and problematical for Chahine. It has sustained his ability to make films, but created some political difficulties for him among detractors who view his professional dealings with France as a sort of 'collaboration' at Egypt's expense. The accusation does not come only from Muslim fundamentalists, for Chahine's friend and fellow film director, Tawfiq Saleh, echoed comparable sentiments.²¹

The controversy which engulfed *Adieu Bonaparte* raged to the extent that when the film was about to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival, the Egyptian government sent a committee to Cannes to watch and listen. Eventually *Adieu* was allowed to be screened, but the controversy has yet to subside. Continuing his relationship with France, Chahine made *The Sixth*

Day, a novel by Andrée Chedid, an Egyptian writer living and writing in France. It dealt with the cholera epidemic that had swept Egypt years earlier. It starred Daleeda, an Egyptian of Italian descent who had migrated to France and become a famous singer, in her first and only role as an actress. Chahine himself turned the poetic novel into a blend of drama and complex musical numbers, and paid homage to Gene Kelly by dedicating the film to him. Chahine appeared in a minor role, playing a Palestinian villager living in Egypt who returns home to do his share of the fighting to regain his occupied homeland.

During the same year, and for the first time in the history of Egyptian cinema, the Actors' Union held a general strike. For several weeks, actors – and sympathetic directors – barricaded themselves inside the Actors' Union building, in protest against the government's arbitrary revamping of the laws governing their industry. Chahine took a leading role in the whole affair. Three years later, he utilised the episode in *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989), which concluded his autobiographical trilogy.

Paradoxically, during the 1990s Chahine was both the recipient of a high honour and the target of fierce condemnation. Immediately following the Gulf War in 1991, upon seeing young people demonstrating in the streets, he focused his camera on them and made a twenty-two minute documentary, which was to cause him problems. Instead of producing a sort of public relations film, which the average Egyptian had expected, he delivered *Cairo ... as Told by Chahine* (1992), a powerful indictment of the authorities and society at large for having neglected the younger generation. From then on, Chahine's detractors kept a watchful eye on him. But his film activity was interrupted when, in 1992, he was invited by the *Comédie française* to direct a stage play of his choosing. He directed *Caligula*, by Albert Camus. The choice is significant, for exposing tyranny is one of Chahine's favourite themes. The play opened on 15 February, 1992, with a French cast. In 1993, the civilised world was stunned at the stabbing of Naguib Mahfouz, the feeble eighty-four-year-old Nobel Laureate, at the hands of Muslim fundamentalists. His 'punishment' was for having written a book decades earlier which the Islamists still resented.

It was in 1994, and in this climate of cultural conflict, that Chahine

released *The Emigrant*, which caused an immediate and protracted squabble. This time the fundamentalists accused him of committing sacrilege by portraying the prophet Joseph on the screen. Chahine's protestations went unheeded. Relying on the fact that the Qur'an proscribes representations of prophets, the fundamentalists sued him in a court of law. The film, which was drawing crowds at the cinemas, was suddenly banned. Soon things got more precarious for Chahine. Having uncovered a plot to harm him physically, the Ministry of Interior assigned him round-the-clock protection, which he at first accepted and then declined after three days.²⁴ Chahine went so far as to visit al-Azhar and to submit his case to the clerics. After explaining his position, he declared that he would rather be killed than allow security police to trail him day and night.²⁵ The trial was held in the glare of the press and television cameras. A few weeks later Chahine was acquitted, but he has yet to silence his critics. Throughout this ordeal, the Board of Censors was a witness on his behalf.

* * *

Honours and rejections came to Chahine concomitantly. The first two accolades of the 1990s that came his way were the Locarno Film Festival's thirteen-day retrospective of all his films (1996), and *Cahiers du cinéma*'s special October issue on his career. Then in May 1997, the Cannes Film Festival screened his latest film, *Destiny*, in competition. The film was shot in Syria, Lebanon and France. Its general release in the Arab world again exposed Chahine to the wrath of the fundamentalists. The film depicted the twelfth-century philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroës), who, Chahine's critics claimed, was not treated with suitable dignity. The Islamists also took issue with Chahine because he, they claimed, depicted many of them as fanatics. But Chahine had as many admirers as detractors. Though he did not win the Palme d'Or he had hoped for, he did receive the Cannes Film Festival's 50th Anniversary Prize for Lifetime Achievement. A year later (1998), the Lincoln Film Center in New York held a retrospective of fifteen of his films. The programme was so successful that it toured many American cities and also went to Vancouver, Canada. While in New York attending the retro-

spective, Chahine filmed a cameo with Edward Said to include in his next film, *The Other*, which was screened at the film festivals in Cannes, New York and London.

Also in 1999, Chahine's favourite version of *People and the Nile* was released in France under a new title: *The Nile and Life*. This was the Egyptian-Soviet production about the building of the Aswan Dam (1968), which displeased both the Egyptian and Soviet authorities. France's continual interest in Chahine's cinema is evident in the fact that during summer of 1999 two of his films (*The Other* and *The Nile and Life*) were simultaneously shown throughout the country.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Egyptian cinema was in steady decline. Production fell from over fifty films a year to around fifteen, and the number of cinema salons shrank from 200 to 120.²⁴ It is true that local and national cinemas everywhere have declined, unless financed by television (which is what is missing in Egypt), but the decline in Egyptian cinema cannot simply be attributed to a worldwide trend. There seems to be a tacit apprehension of the inherent power of the film medium itself to sway the masses. Enough concrete examples exist to prove that the decline is deliberate and not generic. The taxes levied on Egyptian producers and exhibitors are exorbitant; the restrictions posed at every turn, frustrating. The government does not seem to value the cinema as an industry. Nor does it seem interested in exporting and promoting the Egyptian film, even when the fruits of such endeavours are obvious. Government-controlled television itself is a culprit, not only in keeping audiences at home, but also in denying production companies adequate residuals for screening their films. Recent attempts to rectify the situation do not impress Chahine. New legislation stipulates that no film production company can be formed without a capitalisation of a minimum of 200 million Egyptian pounds (approximately U.S. \$40 million). Film-makers worry that such an exalted level of financing will destroy independent companies and stifle creativity. Nor is Chahine excited about the proliferation of the new multiplex cinemas, for he and other like-minded artists view them as showcases for the Hollywood blockbuster – not the Egyptian film.

Chahine voiced reservations about these matters in October 1999, when

the Goethe Institute in Cairo honoured him by showing eleven of his films. On that occasion he reminisced about having won the Silver Bear for *Alexandria ... Why?* at the Berlin Film Festival in 1979, and about the financial support that the German television channel, ZDF, had given his company. Then he accused successive Egyptian governments of choking the film industry. As to the 200 million pounds required for starting a new company, he exclaimed sarcastically: 'I don't even know how many zeroes there are in a million. I even get confused when I count ten pounds.'²⁵

Chahine's two latest films recapitulate themes and motifs of his earlier films. Half a century of celebrity and a canon of films to his credit do not seem to have diluted his concern for the common people. In *Al-Akhar* (*The Other*, 1999), he exposes globalisation as a charade played out by the industrial nations for their own benefit. The poor and developing countries should expect nothing from it except false hopes and broken promises. The reviews were mixed, mainly on account of over-simplification. *Skout... Hansawar* (*Silence... We Are Shooting*, 2001), depicts a female singer who allows love affairs to distract her from her duty to herself and her audiences. To Chahine, Art is a sacred mission, and the Artist's commitment should be tantamount to taking a 'vow'.

Even in this light piece of entertainment, Chahine reiterates his concern for the Egyptian *fellah*, his pride of being an Egyptian, his love for the musical genre, and his derision of inane comedies. Since it is a film within a film, the title may be construed as the usual command on the set just before filming. But nothing in a Chahine film is that obvious or simple. The title is a barb aimed at his critics and detractors. 'Stop bothering me,' he is admonishing them, 'and let me do my work.'