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SALAH ABU SEIF AND ARAB NEOREALISM

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Abstract: Egyptian director Salah Abu Seif contributed to the foundation of a neorealist style in Arabic cinema in the late Fifties. A style in line with European neorealism, characterized by stories set amongst the poor and working class, filmed on location, frequently using nonprofessional actors. In this paper we present a comprehensive analysis of Salah Abu Seif's characteristics and his artistic choices through his films during the neorealist period. In particular, we investigate the transition from realism to neorealism focusing on the choice of actors, the use of the symbolism of popular music in Abu Seif's works and his relationship with the viewer.

Introduction

Egyptian cinema has prevailed in the Arab world throughout the last century not only for the number of productions, but also for its quality. Throughout its history, various genres of this cinema have evolved alongside developments in the art world - locally and globally. Like any other cinema, it has been strongly influenced by the socio-political context of the country.

The first section of this article presents the evolution of Egyptian cinema in the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular the transition period between realism and the birth and development of the Egyptian neorealism. The second section highlights the role played by director Salah Abu Seif in the development of the neorealist school in Egypt, considering the external and internal factors that took him through this journey. The third section will illustrate

the distinctive characteristics of neorealist films directed by Salah Abu Seif. This section will start with the analysis of some of his films, highlighting the artistic choices of the director, his working methods, technique and style. In particular, we focus on the choice of actors, the use of the symbolism of popular music in his works and his relationship with the viewer. Finally we will conclude with summarizing the main contributions of Salah Abu Seif to Egyptian neorealism.

Egyptian Cinema: Towards Neorealism

If realism consists of looking at reality, understanding it, deliberating the causes of phenomena, highlighting moments of its transformation at the individual and general levels, then we can say that the realist movement began in Egypt in the late Thirties (Abu Chedi, 1998: 10).

The near absence of realism in Egyptian cinema till this period is due in part to an essentially commercial film industry, and in part to the absence of realistic literature that influenced the films of many cultures. During the Twenties, at the time of the first attempts of producing films, the novel in the modern sense had not yet appeared in Arabic literature as the literary movement focused mainly on poetry. In addition, under British occupation, the foreign films market was dominated by films coming from Hollywood. Realist films of Pabst, or films of social realism by Pudovkin or Eisenstein were not promoted in this market (Bordwell, Thompson, 2002).

Egyptian cinema began to show signs of a realist wave in the late Thirties as it attempted social critique, despite the presence of the occupants and a monarchy that sought to curb freedom of expression with censorship laws. Fritz Kramp, Kamal Slim and Kamel Al-Tlemessani took the first step towards a cinema of social criticism with their films, *Lachine* (Lachine, 1938), *Al Azima* (The Will, 1939) and *Assouk Assaouda* (The Black Market, 1946).

This new wave of Egyptian cinema with signs of realism started with *Al Azima* by Kamal Slim, who died in 1945. The characters moved out of luxurious and decorated apartments to appear in the streets of Cairo and in villages of the Egyptian countryside depicting ordinary lives. Kamel Al-Tlemessani, screenwriter and director of *Assouk Assaouda*, followed in the footsteps of Kamal Slim, but he furthered his critique by contemplating reality with a fuller and deeper perspective. As opposed to *Lachine* and *Al Azima*, this film not only depicts starvation but exposes its roots. The film presented the hard claim of hungry people representing it through

images, dialogues, relationships and evolution of the characters. It not only criticized the current system, but also proposed protest and rebellion.

The censorship law was enacted a year after the release of this film and represented the will of the monarchy to stop this kind of incitement to revolt. Fuelled by this law, commercial cinema tried to contain the criticism of the Egyptian cinema until the Revolution of 1952. Under the influence of this revolution cinema began to respond to socio-political developments in a more direct way. The ideas of political independence, economic and social equality were at their peak during this period. A confident certainty of overcoming the pessimism and the difficulties of the past to freely determine the fate of both individual and people were predominant at the time in Egyptian thought. For the first time in the history of Egypt, an opportunity was created for radical and leftist intellectuals to give way to critical movements in social, political, cultural and artistic fields. Despite heavy censorship, which continued until 1957—years during which the restrictive law was repealed—the Institute of Egyptian Cinema continued to churn out quality films and the path to a neorealist cinema was opened.

As a result of an innovative literary movement at the time, Egyptian cinema discovered novels and modern Arabic authors who offered a multitude of new characters, ideas, analysis, views and emotions. This literary development can be defined as a "naturalistic" movement which proposed a study as objective and scientific as possible, in a society where the psychology of giving up all idealism by focusing on classes was the norm (Kacem, 1999: 13). The writers represented society's "illnesses" and denounced them, favouring social improvement, serving in this way, an important social function. The recognition of degraded social reality in which the urban proletariat were living while being a source of acute social pessimism, however, was mitigated by hope and progress.

Émile Zola was one of the greatest "naturalists" French writers and his book *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), was adapted by Salah Abu Seif in his film *Lak Yawm yâ dhâlim* ("Your Day Will Come", 1951). "Naturalists" Arab authors, in particular Naguib Mahfouz¹, Ehsan Abdel Qoddous, Ghourab Amine Youssef, Abdel Hay Adid, and Abdel Hamid Al-Sahar Goudah have played an important role in the transformation of Egyptian cinema.

The absence of screenwriters led to directors writing their own screenplays, adapting the works of literary authors. Romantic and naturalists novels were adapted to produce neorealist films as well as melodramas. Indeed in the '50s, Egyptian cinema began to see a radical change: it meticulously decorated its melodramas, eroticized its characters and took them to the street to tell the everyday life of the poor, seeking the collaboration of renowned writers and visionaries. The directors who founded the neorealist movement were mainly Salah Abu Seif, Youssef Chahine, Atef Salem, Kamal Ash-Shaykh, Henri Barakat, Niazi Mostafa and Tewfik Saleh, the only one who has used this kind of movement in all his works.

The Cinema of Salah Abu Seif

Salah Abu Seif has been described by Georges Sadoul as “the best director of the modern Egyptian cinema. An expression of popular life and a feeling for human truths characterize his best films” (Sadoul, 1972: 1). Salah Abu Seif was defined as “the artist of the Egyptian people” as he understood and expressed the soul of the Egyptian people, their ideas, their sufferings, their joys and hopes (Sa’adu Al Din, 1969: 5).

Salah Abu Seif was born on May 10, 1915 in Boulaq, a popular and poor neighbourhood in Cairo. He was raised in an environment where there was a mixture of workers and petty bourgeoisie. Most people from this neighbourhood worked in the state railways, as did his uncle, and his mother had hoped that he'd work there as well. This suburb was the centre from which all struggle against the conquerors of Egypt began.

The First World War left a strong mark in the mind of the child Salah Abu Seif. Stories and situations were impressed in his memory and he then tried to interpret and present them in his films. With his acute sense of observation, he was able to grasp the facts and gestures of those around him and he used these observations in his films along his career. After obtaining a degree in Economics in 1932, he began to work as an editor for the cinema. In 1933, he left for France where he completed his studies in Paris.

The Trip to Rome: New Techniques

Salah Abu Seif's came in contact with Italian cinema, in particular with neorealism in the late 1940s, during his trip to Italy. At that time Rome lived the fever of neorealist films² which painted the daily life and customs of the Italian people, in contrast with the unreal atmosphere of the comedies. As a result, these films had a great impact on viewers and attracted large audiences. Thus, Abu Seif saw films being shot in the streets, fields and villages. In Italian Neorealism, he found a cinema that produced films at low cost with high artistic level. It was then that he directed the film *Al Sakr* (1950).

Al Sakr / Lo Sparviero del Nilo ("The Hawk of the Nile", 1949) is the first Italian-Egyptian co-production, produced by "Studio Misr"³ and by the Italian company "Musso Movie", based on the making of two versions of the same film. The first version titled *Lo Sparviero del Nilo* was in Italian with Italian actors and the second one titled *Al Sakr* was in Arabic with Egyptian actors. The Italian production made Salah Abu Seif the Egyptian director, while the Italian director's role was attributed to Giacomo Gentilomo. All internal sequences of this film were shot in Rome, however, the external ones were shot in Egypt. This experience allowed Abu Seif to work directly in the studios of Cinecittà in Rome and thereby get the opportunity to meet with the Italian filmmakers.

Abu Seif said that collaborating with the Italians allowed him to learn their local working methods that were different from those in used in Egypt. One distinctive Italian method was to shoot each scene twice—something that was not done in Egypt. The Italians wanted to have one copy for distribution, and thought it wise to keep another copy on file.

Another aspect that Abu Seif found in the Italian film technique is that of dubbing, which was used to ensure good quality of the dialogues that were recorded in the studio. In some cases the voice of the actor playing the role was replaced with the voice of another actor who sounded better.

Once the Rome shooting of *Lo Sparviero del Nilo* was complete, Abu Seif went back to Cairo with the decision to submit and offer to the public the kind of film they liked, the kind of film that represented the movement of neorealism.

Relationship With Predecessors

Before he personally got to know Kamal Slim, Abu Seif was aware of his opinions. During their first meeting, they realized that they shared many beliefs and from that day a long friendship was born, with exchanges of books and advice. Kamal Slim was not only a filmmaker, but had his own political aspirations and was an expert in economics, art and philosophy. Abu Seif says that he had two great teachers he met along the way. Kamal Slim was his directing professor and Naguib Mahfouz his teacher for literature (Al Nahhas, 1997: 77). Abu Seif said: "Naguib Mahfouz is one of the first friends of the cinema, even if it is a strange friend" (Al Nahhas, 1975: 20). The partnership between Abu Seif and Mahfouz produced the following titles: *Mughamarât 'Antar wa' Abla* (The Adventures of Antar and Abla, 1945), *Lak Yawm yâ dhâlim* based on the novel *Thérèse Raquin* by Emile Zola, *Rayya wa Sakina* (Rayya and Sakina, 1953) adapted from a news report, *Al-Wahch* (The Monster, 1954), *Chabab imra'a* (A Woman's Youth, 1955), *Al Futuwwa* (The Tough, 1957), *Bayne-sama 'wal ardh* (Between Heaven and Earth, 1959), *Bidâya wa nihâya* (A Beginning and an End, 1960) based on the novel *Principle and End*, *Al-Qahira thalâthîn* (Cairo 30, 1966) adapted from the homonymous novel. The action of the film takes place in the streets and alleys of Cairo and these places have not only a geographical significance, but they become, just as in the works of Mahfouz, real characters. The protagonists are the children of these places, with all their talents, their cowardice, pettiness and their dreams of greatness to win at all costs.

These collaborations enabled the growth of Abu Seif's personality, giving rise to his style and his realistic thought. A common feature of the films produced by Slim and Abu Seif is to present "El Hara" (the district). We find it in both films *Al Futuwwa*, and *Al Azima*, for example, a panoramic long field of the market. This distinctive feature is typical of Egyptian daily life and appears therefore in Egyptian neorealism. Abu Seif says "[...] I consider the German silent film, and specifically those of Fritz Lang as the consciousness of cinema [...]" and declares that the people he considers masters of this kind of film includes Kamal Slim, Fritz Lang and John Ford (Salamini, 1992: 131).

Neorealism of Salah Abu Seif

His previous work experience in Rome and his understanding of the neorealist movement led Abu Seif to a new start in his film career. Evidence of neorealism's influence can easily be

found in the six films he made in the period between 1946 to 1957, especially in films like *Dâ'iman fî Qalbi* (Always in My Heart) to *Al Futuwwa*. Below, we highlight that this trend continues to appear in the work of Abu Seif, even though it is often expressed in different ways (Khayati, 1981). After his return to Egypt, Abu Seif began writing the screenplay for the film *Dâ'iman fî Qalbi* with the help of Naguib Mahfouz. The story is set in a Turkish bath near the market located in a popular neighbourhood. Abu Seif proposed his story to producers, but nobody wanted to risk producing a film that takes place in a popular Turkish bath.

According to producers, the most successful films are shot in rich surroundings, luxurious houses or castles with people belonging to a higher social class (Richter, 1974: 40). Abu Seif decided to produce the film himself and began to raise the money needed to accomplish this great task. He decided to sell his personal items, hypothecate his property and to borrow money from friends. The artists who collaborated to make this film helped Abu Seif by working for really low salaries.

Abu Seif presented for the first time in Egyptian cinema, a series of films based on real events as *Rayya wa Sakina*, *Al-Wahch*, *Chabab Imra'a* and *Al Futuwwa*. In *Al-Wahch* he expresses the power of the feudal system, in *Chabab Imra'a* he expresses the power of the sex and finally the power of capitalism in the film *Al Futuwwa*.

Al Futuwwa is considered the first political film in Egypt after *Assouk Assaouda* by Kamel Al-Tlemessani. In both films, the directors encourage the viewers - the Egyptian citizens - to realize the situation of their lives and at the same time to work actively to change these conditions, revealing the mechanisms of capitalist society (Khayati, 1981). However, the messages of both directors are different, Kamel Al-Tlemessani calls upon the viewer to use violence to affront the protagonists of the black market, and Abu Seif insists that Egypt needs a radical and constructive change in the mentality of people.

After Neorealism

The camera of Abu Seif excels in a realism (Khayati, 1981) that may be compared to Marcel Carné, since it works towards exposing social inequality as in *Bidâya wa nihâya*. The camera creates a visual that is simultaneously warm, sensual and intimate in the way it evokes

the life of ordinary people.

In the Sixties, Abu Seif worked with the great Egyptian writer Ehsan Abdel Qoddous and their meeting has been termed by critics such as Hachem al Nahhas and Saad Eddine Tewfik as a new stage in his artistic life. Beginning around 1957, this phase, says Hachem al Nahhas, is characterized by the expansion of the neorealist themes and messages. The public of Abu Seif's cinema became wider after the success of his first film, so he decided to deal with the social environment (Al Nahhas, 1997: 101).

Characteristics of Salah Abu Seif's films

In this section we will illustrate the characteristics of films directed by Salah Abu Seif during the neorealist period. We will analyse some of his films, highlighting his artistic choices, working methods, techniques and style. In particular, we focus on the choice of actors, the use of the symbolism of popular music in his works and his relationship with the audience.

Relationship with actors

Following the practice of Italian Neorealism, Abu Seif too took the risk of working with non-professional actors in his films. For instance, the lead actor in *Lâ waqta lil-hubb* was a common man he frequently met at a bar. After working with Abu Seif, a number of these 'common' people like Abdel Hafidh tetani and Abdel Adhim Charawi became well-known actors.

Abu Seif said about his relationship with the actors: "the actors with whom I worked knew exactly what I wanted, they participated actively in the creation of the film, [...] Among the actors of this kind I can think of Faten Hamama, Soad Hosni, Ezzat Al-Alayly, Farid Chawki and Chokri Sarhan" (Al Nahhas, 1997: 227). Farid Chawki who played the protagonist Haridi in the film *Al Futuwwa*, had previously worked with Abu Seif for the lead role in *Al-Osta Hassan* ("Foreman Hassan", 1952). This actor is among the most important of the Egyptian cinema for quality, diversity and number of roles he played, and has seen the most important roles of his career offered by Abu Seif, such as *Bidâya wa nihâya* and *Al-Saqqa mat* (The Water Carrier is Dead, 1977) (Wassef, 1995: 138).

Places and Locations

A main characteristic of Abu Seif's films is that most of them are located in Cairo, in its suburbs (in Arabic "Hare"), in its narrow streets and in its markets. Since films were shot on location, many typical elements of Egyptian daily life appeared in his films. Indeed, Cairo offered the filmmaker a chance to use it as a set, as real neighbourhoods, alleys, palaces and picturesque corners with anonymous backgrounds, living spaces and history. Undeniably, neorealist directors celebrated Cairo as a star, making it a central part of their cinema. The director adapted all that novelists like Mahfouz and Abdel-Qoddus could offer as descriptions of situations set in the heart of Cairo.

Abu Seif learned from his predecessor Kamal Slim that if he could not shoot directly on location, he could reconstruct in the studio exactly what he had seen outside. The fake and imaginary could substitute for the real. He said: "at that time, many Egyptian movies were like 'white telephones'⁴. Most of the scenes took place in luxurious interiors, populated by characters who seemed to come from another world. In *Al Azima*, however, characters inspired from real life in local districts were presented for the first time on screen: the barber, the butcher, the baker, the clerk, the farmer. Despite the scenes being filmed in a studio, the entire reconstruction was so realistic that everyone thought that the film was shot on location." (Sa'adu Al Din, 1969: 26)

The use of popular songs

The music was the first voice heard in Egyptian cinema with the birth of sound. The Egyptian musical called on the singers, who found some success in musical theatre, to participate in films as actors. The cinema had become a kind of extension of the radio and record production. The music was composed and written specifically for films, following the model of American musical comedies.

In his first film *Dâ'iman fî Qalbi*, Abu Seif introduced the use of popular music as background music in Egyptian cinema. In particular, the song "Ah Ya Zin" is chosen by the director as a leitmotif in this film and later we find it in many other works. Critic Sa'adu Al Din says that "the most famous in Salah's cinema is his use of popular music" (Sa'adu Al Din, 1969: 243)

Through the use of popular music, often associated to scenes of celebrations, weddings,

or as background music, Abu Seif approached the viewer by appropriating his own music: the music being a fundamental element of Egyptian society. In the movie *Al Futuwwa*, for example, the director presents a clou scene, introducing music and popular poetry using the voice of the poet Abu Rabab, who tells the story of a popular character, Al Hilali, known to have used cunning and malice to fight the tyrant Diah. This sequence is very important in the structure of the film because it represents the geometric centre beyond which the action of the film is reversed for the benefit of popular forces hitherto inert. The change seems a natural result achieved through the dramatization of the song associated with the popular legend. Abu Seif resorted to folk memory to determine the future.

The Relationship with Audience

In his choice of script and message, Abu Seif considered the type of audience to which he addressed his films. He seemed to be handpicking his audience. The typical viewer, like the director, came from the slums of the capital or from the Egyptian countryside of Saiid. The mark of these localities is predominant in his work, and that is why Abu Seif was designated as the artist of the Egyptian people.

The use of symbols is a feature of Abu Seif's work that appeared in his films in the fifties and sixties, and these symbols were always clear and straightforward, and never masked or hidden. The director did not want the viewer to lose their meaning, and often used the symbol to reinforce the significance of a scene or to highlight it. Abu Seif presented scenes of everyday life in the streets of Cairo, offering the possibility to reflect on these usual images.

The recurring theme that Abu Seif dealt with in all his films was that of injustice. The issue of the oppressed man who suffers the pressures, is driven by powerful forces that dragged him far, on roads he did not choose. This is the character set first in *Al-Osta Hassan*, then in *Chabab imra'a*, *Al Futuwwa*, *Al-Tariq Al masdoud* (The Blocked Road, 1958), *Bidâya wa nihâya*, *Al-Qahira thalâthîn* and *Al-zawja Thania* (The Second Wife, 1967).

The society that Salah Abu Seif paints in his films is not unknown to him. The director grew

up in the district of Boulaq and was in close contact with the oppressed people who tried to save themselves from the bondage of politics power of Egyptian society of the Thirties, Forties and early Fifties.

Conclusion

From 1946 to 1957, Salah Abu Seif helped to build a neorealist style in Egyptian cinema, following the footsteps of his predecessors of the realist school of Fritz Kramp, Kamal Slim and Kamel Al-Tlemessani and on the other hand, introducing a technical and vision which he acquired and developed after his direct contact with Italian neorealism. With their popular social content and humanist elements, Abu Seif's films opened the way for a sharp social critique and a vision that had not been pursued by Egyptian cinema till then. The “naturalist” movement in Arabic literature, specifically the novels of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, influenced Abu Seif to found the movement of Egyptian neorealism. There are a multitude of characters, ideas, analysis in common to these two great artists in the history of Egypt. In its literature, Mahfouz dedicated much space to the detailed study of his characters, giving them a voice by writing about their daily lives. Similarly, Salah Abu Seif studied its characters and places in detail for several months, trying to penetrate the world he wanted to represent. He devoted special attention to all its main and secondary characters. In fact, his camera focused on their features, filming the pulse of everyday life, capturing people, spaces, decorations, objects etc. The knowledge of a character becomes the knowledge of his world and his environment. This multiplicity of characters of Mahfouz and Abu Seif lives in the heart of the city of Cairo which became a main character in the Egyptian Neorealism. Indeed, Cairo is a specific element of Mahfouz's literature and Salah Abu Seif's film.

Abu Seif attacked the gangs and the corrupted administration that feeds it that supports it. He denounced the social and political system, informing the viewer of what is happening behind the scenes of power, making him think about what should be done, all without giving the final solutions and without offering ready answers. Essentially, the cinema of Salah Abu Seif raised questions that a lot of Arab cinema was afraid to ask.

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Notes

¹ **Naguib Mahfouz (1911 - 2006)**

Naguib Mahfouz began writing when he was seventeen. His first novel was published in 1939 and ten more were written before the Egyptian Revolution of July 1952, when he stopped writing for several years. One novel was republished in 1953, however, and the appearance of the Cairo Trilogy, *Bayn al Qasrayn*, *Qasr al Shawq*, *Sukkariya (Between-the-Palaces, Palace of Longing, Sugarhouse)* in 1957 made him famous throughout the Arab world as a depicter of traditional urban life. With *The Children of Gebelawi* (1959), he began writing again, in a new vein that frequently concealed political judgements under allegory and symbolism. Works of this second period include the novels, *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *Autumn Quail* (1962), *Small Talk on the Nile* (1966), and *Miramar* (1967), as well as several collections of short stories. He is now the author of no fewer than thirty novels, more than a hundred short stories, and more than two hundred articles. Half of his novels have been made into films which have circulated throughout the Arabic-speaking world. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988.

² **Italian Neorealism**

Quite often, Italian Neorealism is considered a phenomenon which exploded onto the cinema scene when the Fascist regime fell, giving Italian film makers the artistic freedoms which were denied to them for over 20 years. It is commonly regarded as a smooth break from the repressive Fascist era. Neorealism's prescription for cinematic realism, set forth by film scholars and critics, called for the use of non-professional actors, regional dialects, current subject matter, authentic locations, documentary aspects, and the use of the film as a social statement. In 1945, Roberto Rossellini was hailed "The Father of Neorealism" with his first international success "Rome, Open City" which was consistent with the neorealist prescription. His next two movies, "Paisà" and "Germany, Year Zero" likewise did the same. However, the similarities between Rossellini's realism and that defined by the mainstream end here. (For review see Bondanella, P. (1993) *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, New York :Cambridge University Press).

³ **Studio Misr**

How far away is this year of 1935, when the legendary *Studio Misr* (or Masr as Egyptians pronounce it, meaning Egypt) saw the brink of day at the footsteps of the pyramids, founded by Talaat Harb. Up until it became state

owned, the *Studio Misr* housed the blooming of Egyptian cinema, symbolized by film directors such as Salah Abu Seif and Shady Abdel Salam, incarnated by stars such as the eternal diva Om Kalsoum, Farid El Attrash and Soad Hosni, who all were its artisans. The laboratory can develop and print 35 mm and 16 mm films in a space equipped with ultramodern material.

⁴ **White Telephone**

Over the course of the 1930s, large sectors of the Italian film industry increasingly came to be dominated by the partisans of the Nazi's eventual Fascist ally in Italy, Benito Mussolini. The Mussolini regime founded what would become one of Europe's most influential film schools, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, in 1935, and funded construction of the great Cinecittà studios two years later. For a significant period of time between 1938 and 1945, the Duce's son, Vittorio Mussolini, became one of the leading "creative" forces in the peninsula's cinematic culture. The numerous so-called *white telephone* films produced during this period — directed by now-forgotten filmmakers like Carlo Bragaglia, Guido Brignone, and Gennaro Righelli (who, interestingly enough, also made Italy's first sound film, *La canzone dell'amore* [*The Love Song*, 1930] —projected an image of serene glamour to the viewing public that was rarely sullied by the violent turmoil of the war. Other directors with promising careers, including even such future luminaries as Roberto Rossellini, were recruited by Mussolini's regime to make transparently propagandistic films.

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