CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CHANGING GENDER RELATIONS IN TODAY'S CAIRO

Dalia Said Mostafa

THIS ESSAY INVESTIGATES THE CHANGING gender relations and roles as represented in recent Egyptian films set in Cairo, in order to study the relationship between the individual and the restructuring of urban space in a rapidly transforming city. My main interest lies in what the new themes and approaches which Egyptian cinema offers to challenge the restrictions imposed on public and domestic spaces in Cairo, and the impact of such restrictions on the relationship between men and women occupying these spaces. I will focus on three Egyptian films which were produced in the past few years, namely: Dunia: Kiss me not on the Eyes (2005),¹ The Yacoubian Building (2006),² and In the Heliopolis Flat (2007).³ These films were selected because they challenge traditional ideas and conventions about love, sexuality and marriage in Egypt by redefining the relationship between people and the physical space they inhabit. The three films are not mainstream. The Yacoubian Building is the most renowned and popular of the three, both in Egypt and beyond.

I would like to propose a number of ideas as starting points. Firstly, the majority of the Cairene population are increasingly being pushed further away from public space (e.g. squares, streets, the traditional urban core, and pedestrian thoroughfares), in order to make way for tourists and investors. Secondly, the urban poor have reacted by exerting pressure on the authorities through protests and demonstrations in order to appropriate and reclaim their share in public space. Thirdly, gender relations have been transforming in the process of the restructuring of public space in the city. Fourthly, such changes have had a profound impact on the cultural scene in Egypt, including cinema. These proposals are informed by the study of a variety of cultural and popular material.

________________________

Dalia Said Mostafa is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in modern Arab Cultural History and Middle Eastern Studies in the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures at the University of Manchester.
produced in Cairo, and texts written on Cairo in the fields of anthropology and architecture.4

Cairo is a metropolis that is home to approximately 20 million people, that is a quarter of the Egyptian population (estimated at the present to be 80 million).5 It is characterized by a great variety of cultural, historical and class differentiations. As Janet Abu-Lughod remarks in her study Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious: "Cairo, far more than any Western city of comparable size, is a city of contrasts and contradictions, of extremes and anachronisms. [. . .] Given what we know concerning the ways people 'divide up' cities, our knowledge of Egypt's present diversity should prepare us to expect the coexistence of many very different 'cities within the city.'"6 Cairo is primarily comprised of the old Islamic core, the Coptic core, the downtown area and its surrounding districts, the rural suburbs, the slum areas, the "new cities" established in the desert areas surrounding Cairo such as 6 October and the 10th of Ramadan, and the newly established "gated communities" in the desert. In Abu-Lughod's study, which was published in 1971, she could depict "thirteen cities within the city."7 However, since the 1970s, Cairo has grown even bigger. For example, the slums which are considered to be a city within the city and home to 15 million people according to official estimates were almost non-existent in the early 1970s.8 The slums or ashwa'iyyat (the Arabic word for "random") are mainly populated by migrant workers from the Upper Egyptian south and the Delta in the north. Likewise, the modern middle/upper-class districts to the north of Cairo such as Madinat Nasr (literally The Victorious City), and Heliopolis or New Cairo (Masr al-Gedida), have multiplied in population over the past four decades.

The three films under discussion here are shot in various locations of Cairo whilst reflecting different and varied views of the city. In Dunia (which is the name of the main protagonist, and it is also the Arabic word for Life or World), we get to see Cairo through Dunia's eyes. The camera roams around the city following Dunia and her friends in the streets and alleys of Cairo, inside their small flats, and in the places where they meet for entertainment. One of Dunia's female friends is a taxi driver, which is seldom to come across in Cairo. We follow the stories of these women through their intimate conversations whilst driving around the city. The bond which exists between them is further emphasized by their close relationship to the city streets, rooms, cafés, and buildings. There are also many shots of the popular quarter where Dunia and her female friends live. As this place is not designated by a particular name, it is suggested that the events of the film might be taking place anywhere in the city.

In contrast to this broad view of the city, The Yacoubian Building9 focuses on the inhabitants of one famous building in the busy downtown area of Cairo. The core of the downtown area was established in the late 1860s by Khedive Ismail, the ruler of Egypt under the Ottoman Empire. Ismail aimed to modernize the architecture of Cairo by establishing a whole area following in the footsteps of Baron Haussmann's style in Paris.10 Accordingly, the Yacoubian building was built by a rich foreign businessman who resided in Cairo in the
Gender Relations in Cairo’s Cinema

early part of the twentieth century. However, as the downtown area has expanded and its population multiplied during the twentieth century, such a once modern core of the city has also changed. The film reflects on such drastic changes through the different lifestyles of the building’s inhabitants, whilst highlighting the wide gap between the rich who occupy the posh flats, and the poor who occupy the roof of the building.

The third film, In the Heliopolis Flat, is mainly shot in the streets and buildings of the middle/upper-class area of Heliopolis or Masr al-Gedida (New Cairo). It follows Nagwa, the main protagonist who is a music teacher residing in the Upper Egyptian city of Minya, and who comes to Cairo for the first time to visit her old music teacher Tahani. Nagwa knows that Tahani lives in Heliopolis, but when she finds her flat, she discovers that Tahani has been missing for a long time. Instead, she meets Yehia, the new occupant of Tahani’s flat. A good part of the film is shot in this Heliopolis building, and it becomes the place which bears witness to the love story that grows between Nagwa and Yehia. In the Heliopolis Flat emphasizes the concept of romantic love through the stories, experiences and memories of the characters, whilst suggesting that this kind of love can still be found in the big city, if one searches for it.

In this way, the three films share an interest in highlighting the significance of place and the position of the individual within it. How does the interaction with urban spaces shape the individual’s identity in a metropolis like Cairo? What are people looking for when they meet and interact in public and domestic spheres? Which spaces are more accessible to women to meet and entertain themselves in a city that is open but also traditional in many ways? How does the individual’s perception of her/his body evolve within the limitations of space? How do people create their own means to break the physical, emotional and ideological barriers imposed on them by the state, the family, or conventions, in pursuit of freedom? The three films critically engage with these issues whilst suggesting that gender roles change with the transformation of spatial relations.

SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In this section, and before turning to the three films under discussion, I argue that Cairo has been changing rapidly since the start of the new millennium mainly due to globalization as well as the imposition of neoliberal policies which have reached the political, legislative and economic systems. Furthermore, some crucial political developments in the Middle East have had a strong impact on Egyptian politics, particularly the breakout of the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in 2000, the war on Iraq in 2003, the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, and the Israeli war on Gaza which started in late December 2008. Moreover, and specifically since 2004, there has been a radical opposition movement, the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya – the Arabic word for Enough), sweeping the streets of Cairo and also stretching out to various provinces and districts. Even more importantly, and since December 2006, a
wave of workers' strikes has erupted and spread across the country.\textsuperscript{12} Such changes have dominated political debates, economic relations, cultural production, and the popular means of appropriating public space (for example, through protests, sit-ins, street theatre troupes, and popular songs and lyrics).

The state has been extremely ruthless in responding to the opposition movement and street protests. Since President Mubarak came to power in 1981, he has imposed an emergency law, which grants police and security forces sweeping powers, allowing them in effect, to hold Egyptian citizens indefinitely without charge. This has included systematic torture in prisons and police stations, and in many cases has led to death.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the discontent, the anger and the protests to get rid of this law, the Parliament has continued to renew it, under the pretext that it is there to protect the country from "terrorism." \textsuperscript{14}

Furthermore, by the beginning of the 1990s, and as a result of agreements with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Mubarak regime started implementing a structural adjustment programme. According to this program, most of the public sector and services would be privatized, public sector workers would be encouraged (and forced if need be) to go on early retirement, and permanent contracts would be replaced by temporary ones. Moreover, private factories would be built in the new industrial cities, such as 6\textsuperscript{th} of October and 10\textsuperscript{th} of Ramadan, so as to break up the workers' collective power and shift the concentration of the major industries such as textile, metal, and cement from their traditional industrial bases in Helwan, Kafr al-Dawwar, Shubra and Mahalla, to the new cities. The neoliberal policies have also imposed the relocation of the major wholesale food and textile markets [where they have existed for generations] to the outskirts of the urban core, thus breaking family ties and isolating entire neighborhoods.

The structural adjustment program has led to the impoverishment of the majority of Egyptians and the deterioration of their living conditions. It has led to a sharp rise in inflation, unemployment and the expansion of work in the informal sectors, which are most evident in the big cities like Cairo and Alexandria.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to these economic and social pressures, the government has found in tourism a primary source of revenue. As Caroline Williams remarks, "[t]ourism is now Egypt's number-one foreign currency earner."\textsuperscript{16} Whilst catering for tourists, the state has pushed the majority of Egyptians out of the public sphere, claiming that it is protecting tourists from the "threat" of the locals.

Furthermore, and in response to the needs of investors and the elite, newly built "gated communities" have enhanced the segregation and separation of the rich from the poor.\textsuperscript{17} Petra Kupping makes an important point in her essay "Exclusive Greenery: New Gated Communities in Cairo," when she stresses that such housing schemes have emphasized the concept of "fear" of the masses and the streets, hence bringing this concept into urban planning: "In the context of such fears, 'the masses' and the 'streets' turned into euphemism for urban disorder, decay and crime."\textsuperscript{18} Houses for the rich in the newly established desert communities surrounding Cairo are sheltered by gates and fences to hide
them from the public and to distance them from the noise, crowds and pollution of the big city. The urban poor, on the other hand, continue to inhabit the rundown and polluted areas of the urban core and the slums, as well as the low-income housing units in the new cities. As Kupinger observes, “since the mid to late 1990s, Cairo has witnessed an unprecedented boom in new desert development schemes at large, and gated luxury communities in particular.” These are also the years which have witnessed the implementation of the large part of the structural adjustment program.

Moreover, in his essay “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital: From Walled City to Gated Communities,” Eric Denis elaborates on the Egyptian government’s policies in producing new regulations to help investors build luxury gated communities for the elite (accompanied by golf courses, amusement parks, and shopping malls), hence isolating them from the rest of the population. Denis goes on to argue that by doing this, the government is reformulating the physical space of the city in order to enhance the divide between the rich and the poor, which is “completely in tune with the parameters of economic liberalization and IMF-driven structural adjustment.” Timothy Mitchell comments on this real estate boom in the capital by remarking that “structural adjustment was intended to generate an export boom, not a building boom. Egypt was to prosper by selling fruits and vegetables to Europe and the Gulf, not by paving over its fields to build roads. Real estate has now replaced agriculture as Egypt’s third largest non-oil investment sector, after manufacturing and tourism.”

Architects working on different sites in Cairo further illustrate how the government is isolating whole communities in various locations of Islamic Cairo and other historic areas in order to make them exclusively accessible to tourists and investors. Traditional public squares, parks, and pedestrian thoroughfares are being fenced and guarded by the state authorities to prohibit the locals from approaching them. For example, Yasser Elshehtawy observes that for cities in the Middle East today, “the danger is not from external forces (also known as orientalists, colonialists, imperialists, etc.) but from the inside, since local decision-makers view the general public as a threat that has to be dealt with and contained.” Caroline Williams stresses this point and argues that the Egyptian authorities pay little attention to the local communities, whilst embarking on their present ambitious program of restoring and refashioning 150 important monuments in Islamic Cairo. By ignoring the locals, the authorities “distort the nature of Islamic urban society. [. . .] Successful conservation programs must involve local residents since [. . .] historic cities and cultural centers are places where the heritage is part of a living, working community.” Another negative aspect resulting from restructuring the public space in Cairo and exploiting it for the benefit of the elite is the forced uprooting of whole communities from the traditional urban core and relocating them in remote places on the outskirts of the city in order to clear the way for building new bridges and ring roads.

All the above indicates that globalization has turned Cairo into a place where the gap between the rich and the poor communities is most evident. Behind the façade of the five-star hotels overlooking the Nile, the new luxurious
communities, the great Islamic and Coptic monuments, the large museums surrounded by parks and gardens, the Opera House and the classy cafés and restaurants, millions of the urban poor reside where they suffer from hunger, pollution, unemployment, and the lack of space. Thus, the urban poor have increasingly found themselves in a situation where they have to take matters into their own hands, to appropriate public space and reconstruct domestic space. In doing so, men and women have found themselves sharing common grounds, values and ideas that bring them together rather than separate and divide them. They go on strikes and protests side by side, they occupy factories together whilst demanding the payment of their wages and bonuses, they queue for bread in the streets together, and they are the ones who are jailed and tortured in prisons and police stations.

Men and women have found that abiding by strict traditions and conventions is no longer possible. For example, whilst most Cairene women wear the headscarf, this has not imposed any significant restraint on their mobility: veiled women lead demonstrations in the streets, they lead student protests inside the universities, and they sleep over night at their factories, along with men, when they are on strike. Thus, the stereotypical perception of the 'veiled woman' as obedient, shy and helpless is very misleading. Furthermore, under the present economic pressures, women and men increasingly find it difficult to afford the cost of marriage. Contrary to past traditions, it has become common that men and women get married in their late thirties, and many do not get married at all. Single women living on their own in the city does not stir conflicts as in the past; women being the sole breadwinners in families is accepted and respected; young women and men meeting in public places and getting introduced to each other, or having an affair before marriage have all become common practice. I am not arguing here that these changes have particularly led to the liberation of Egyptian men and women, but rather that certain conventions can no longer apply in a rapidly moving and changing city. However, such changes also embody the potential of the continued pursuit for more freedoms.

Globalization however, has also brought some positive aspects to Egyptian society. Egyptians have become more open to the idea of redefining and rethinking the concepts of equality, justice, democracy and freedom through encountering and communicating with the different 'other.' Egyptians feel that their problems are not isolated from what is taking place around the globe. Most Egyptian homes in today's Cairo, both rich and poor, have satellite TV and most of the educated population have access to the internet. It seems to me that in the 1990s, divisions and disagreements had characterized the relationship between the secularists and the Islamists in Egypt, whilst isolating them from each other and hindering them from finding the means to struggle against the oppressive measures of the state.

But this has changed dramatically in the past eight years, and I would like to suggest that this past state of affairs has been replaced by some kind of "coexistence," which is particularly noticeable in the big cities. For example,
people are no longer paranoid and rigorous about religious issues because they are more concerned about the pressing economic and political problems. Another positive aspect is the sheer variety and quantity of cultural and popular productions in literature, cinema, music, theatre, documentary film, photography and even internet blogs. The cultural scene in Egypt at the moment is extremely vibrant. People are starting to come together in celebration of their shared creativity and agency, rather than concentrate on what keeps them apart. This is not to imply that all the cultural material produced is of high quality or artistically sophisticated, but the mere fact that people are creating their own tools to shape culture is in itself a positive step forward.

CAIRO IN EGYPTIAN CINEMA

In the light of the above, what is the role of Egyptian cinema in recreating, engaging with and also representing the changes that are taking place in Cairo, particularly where gender relations are concerned? What interests me in this regard is the process through which the form and content of cultural material are being shaped and influenced by this change “from below,” which characterizes today’s Cairo.

The Egyptian cinema industry is by far the largest in the Arab world. The industry goes back to the early decades of the twentieth century whilst passing through various stages of development. Throughout the last century up to the present, Egyptian films have been the most popular in the Arab world, as they are widely screened in cinemas throughout the region and Egyptian stars and actors are most well-known. Moreover, cinema audiences in Egypt itself amount to millions, as cinema is historically one of the most popular genres in the country, particularly in the big cities like Cairo and Alexandria. Over the last four decades of the twentieth century, Egyptian cinema has acquired wide acclaim in international film festivals on the hands of such directors as Salah Abu Seif, Youssef Chahine, Mohammad Khan, Dawoud Abdel Sayyed, and Yusri Nasrallah, and such actors as Omar al-Sharif, Souad Hosni, Nour al-Sharif, Yussra, and many others.

Indeed, Egyptian cinema has been shaped by internal as well as external dynamics. Internally, it has critically engaged with political and social changes in the country, whilst representing and reflecting on the monarchy (which was overthrown in 1952), the feudal system before the 1952 revolution, British colonialism (which also ended in 1952), the Nasserist ‘socialist’ era (1954-1970), the Sadat economic ‘open door’ policy era (1971-1981), and the Mubarak neoliberal era (since 1981). Censorship and restrictions on the freedom of expression have also played a large part in influencing Egyptian cinema, as directors and script writers have often had to express what they want to say through symbolism and metaphor. Externally, Egyptian cinema has been primarily influenced by the various wars in the region, by the Palestinian question, the impact of imperialism and globalization on Egyptian culture and society, and by the question of Arab nationalism.
Egyptian cinema has reflected and experimented with a variety of themes, techniques and motifs in its representation of Cairo. Such themes include: urban space, characterized by streets, neighbourhoods, squares and alleys in new and old districts; class divisions; the changing social attitudes and gender relations as a result of political and economic transformations; family relations and conflicts; questions of identity, freedom, resistance and justice; issues of power, corruption and abuse; and the memories, stories and dreams of the old and young generations in the metropolis. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a trend among both the old and new generations of Egyptian directors to express their harsh criticism of the distortions and contradictions of social relations which they believed resulted from the defeat of Arab nationalism after the 1967 war with Israel and the liberal open door economic policy. Some excellent films were produced during those two decades.

In contrast, the 1990s point to a setback in Egyptian cinema, as one can only recall a handful of good films produced during that decade. Viola Shafik remarks that the production of films in Egypt dropped from seventy fiction films in 1992 to sixteen in 1997, "the lowest output since the 1930." Then, over the past four years in particular, it seems that both local and regional affairs have had an impact on the once again rising Egyptian cinema. Perhaps the term which can best describe it in my view is that it has become 'the people's cinema' par excellence. I mean by this that today's cinema, with various degrees of technical and thematic sophistication, is primarily concerned with representing and recreating the people's way of life in the metropolis whilst providing some critical views on the transforming city. This cinema investigates and engages the people's social circumstances their attitudes, opinions, contradictions, struggles and their resistance against the neoliberal and global policies. For instance, director Yusri Nasrallah remarks that he finds joy in "narrating people's lives and stories: "This is what motivates me, to narrate people's lives because I like to observe them with their contradictions. The more complex they are, the more they stimulate my curiosity and desire to narrate them."

In today's cinema, and even in the films of veteran directors like the late Youssef Chahine or Mohammad Khan and Dawoud 'Abdel Sayed, we do not see complex cinematic techniques, allegories, fragmentation or abstractions in the films which portray Cairo and its people. We do not observe a great deal of experimentation with various forms, or even an embodiment of symbolic and metaphysical reflections. What we see most of all is how urban space is being restructured and redefined, the transformations in the relationships between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, as well as the continuous conflict between those who have the power to impose laws and restrictions on people's lives and freedom, and those who are resisting and struggling against different forms of injustices. The three films under discussion here are examples of the new directions in Egyptian cinema at the present.
DUNIA: KISS ME NOT ON THE EYES

Dunia is directed by the Lebanese director Jocelyne Sa‘ab, who is also known for her Lebanese films such as A Suspended Life (1985) and Once Upon a Time: Beirut (1994). “Kiss me not on the Eyes” in the film’s title is a famous song by the late Egyptian singer and composer Mohammad Abdel Wahab, who was known for his passionate love songs. Through such a reference in the title, it is implied that the theme of love is an integral part of the film.

In fact, the theme of love here is discussed in a broad context: love of dance and art, love between friends and lovers, love of classical Arabic poetry and literature, love of the freedom of expression, love of one’s body, and love of one’s city. From the first scenes of the film, there is a particular emphasis on Dunia’s feelings about her body. Until her marriage, Dunia has lived on her own in a small room on the roof of a building in a low-income popular quarter of Cairo, but her maternal family reside in a village in Upper Egypt. Dunia’s late mother, however, broke the rigid social rules of her village by becoming a famous belly dancer and ran away to Cairo. Yet, her daughter Dunia could not escape the trauma of female circumcision. As her relationship to her body is rather ambivalent, Dunia becomes fascinated by the theme of pleasure and sexual desire in classical Arabic poetry, which becomes the subject of her MA dissertation, particularly after professor Bechir agrees to supervise her.

The film portrays Dunia’s struggle to come to terms with her bodily desires, sensations and movements through dance, the memory of her mother, music, poetry, and love-making. The viewer follows Dunia’s journey and her unrelenting efforts to transcend the mixed feelings towards her body. In her pursuit of freedom, she is guided by the experiences and stories of her female friends. She feels curious in relation to the women who are comfortable or at ease with their bodies, which she finds manifest through their movements and dance, and through their sexual relations with their lovers. She is also inspired by Bechir, the literature professor and public intellectual, who was subjected to a brutal attack which cost him his eyesight. He was attacked by Islamic militants after writing articles in the press defending the freedom of expression particularly the publication of the complete version of One Thousand and One Nights. This incident in the film is a symbolic reference to the attack which Naguib Mahfouz (the well-known Egyptian writer and Nobel laureate) was subjected to on the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists back in 1994.

Thus, the film directly addresses the issue of female circumcision in today’s Egypt, and interweaves the feelings of detachment felt by the victims of such a practice with the ability to redefine one’s relationship with the body through love and art. As a result of tackling such a “taboo” issue, the film was harshly attacked in Egypt when it was screened during the Cairo International Film Festival in 2006.

What interests me in this film is how the different characters try to reshape both the public and private spaces they interact with through their
continuous search for various means of free expression. In a huge metropolis like Cairo, how can women and men still be subjected to oppressive traditions and restrictions imposed by the family, society, or the state? What are their means to break free? Dunia’s answer is to be a able to define her bodily and sexual desires and to express herself through dance. On the other hand, Bechir’s answer is to continue to write freely despite the attack he was subjected to.

The film portrays the relationship between the characters as a product of their specific urban context. Many scenes are shot in the streets of Cairo whilst Dunia’s friend drives around in her taxi. Other scenes are shot in the alleys and flats of the popular quarter where Dunia and her friends live and where they get together to dance, cook or chat. And many other scenes take place in the room where Dunia practices dance with her tutor. The film encourages us to consider and think about the relationship between the protagonists and how they perceive their physical and social position in the city. The film ends with a dream-like scene of Dunia dancing (perhaps her dance of liberation) on a plateau with a long shot of the city, after she and Bechir have fallen in love, even though she is still married to Mamdouh.

Dunia becomes a symbol of her own city, Cairo. Her quest for independence and freedom as a young woman living on her own in a huge metropolis points to the possibilities which can be found in this city. The city changes when its inhabitants seek to change it, and when their social and economic relations transform. There are shots of Dunia sitting alone on roofs of buildings and looking at panoramic views of the city. In fact, we see Cairo through Dunia’s eyes. Dunia’s body is set in harmony with the physicality of the city. Moreover, throughout the film, Sa’ab emphasizes the theme of “color.” Women’s dresses, gowns, and jewellery are colourful and lively. Dunia’s red dance outfits (an allusion to passion and sensuality) are contrasted to her white wedding dress (an allusion to neutrality and coldness). Footage of the various places reflects colourful images of Cairo, a city that is being recreated in the film as an historic and authentic place, and as an open space that is pregnant with endless possibilities for both women and men.

THE YACOUBIAN BUILDING

The film’s director Marwan Hamed belongs to a younger generation of Egyptian filmmakers who are trying to produce new themes in their cinema through the use of high quality cinematic techniques and innovations. Other directors who belong to this generation are Hani Khalifa, Hala Khalil, Sandra Nasha’at, and ‘Atef Hatata, who began producing their films at the turn of the century.

After its release in Egyptian cinemas, The Yacoubian Building raised a massive controversy between two main camps: those who found it progressive and realistic in addressing many ills of today’s Egypt, and those who found it in total contradiction to religion and traditions, particularly the film’s portrayal of a gay relationship and the rape of a male political prisoner in a police station. The
film has indeed broken a number of rules, not only because of the visual representation of a gay relationship, and the turn of the character Taha into an Islamic militant after being tortured and raped by the police, but also because of the portrayal of the severely distorted relationships between men and women, rich and poor, secularists and Islamists, as seen through the inhabitants of the Yacoubian building. The film suggests that these corrupt and abusive relationships are primarily a result of economic pressures, social injustices, and the limitations imposed on both domestic and public spaces in the metropolis. The characters of the Yacoubian building lead isolated lives, completely separate from one another, a feature which Marwan Hamed argues is characteristic of today’s metropolis.34

For example, we see Dawlat kicking out her older brother Zaki from his own apartment because she wants it for herself and her children after her death; Zaki’s neighbour Malak wants to cheat him by making him sign forged papers because he wants to acquire his apartment; a poor security guard from Upper Egypt enters into a homosexual relationship with a prominent newspaper editor because he has nowhere else to go in the city; and a young mother agrees to be the second wife of a rich and corrupt businessman because she has no money to secure her son’s future after the death of his father. Thus, a large part of the film portrays how the various characters are fighting for a better apartment, or even a better room on the roof, to live in.

However, the relationship which is of particular interest to me in the film is the love story between Bouthayna, a young woman in her twenties who resides on the crowded roof of the Yacoubian building and Zaki, the son of a late Pasha who is much older than her but owns one of the rich flats of the same building. This love relationship ends in marriage and the film concludes with their wedding party.

Bouthayna finds herself under extreme economic and social pressures which lead her to accept Zaki’s marriage proposal. From the first scenes of the film, we see Bouthayna struggling to provide for her mother and brothers and sister, as she is the sole breadwinner of the family after her father’s death. She agrees to prostitute herself with the shop-owner where she works in order to keep the job. We even see how her mother and her friend encourage Bouthayna to stay in this poorly-paid job despite the pressures she is going through. At the start of the film, both Bouthayna and Taha who are neighbours on the roof of the building, are engaged to be married after Taha has graduated and found a job. However, this never happens as Taha is refused entry to the Police Academy because he belongs to a low-class family despite his good grades which could have secured him a place in the Academy. He eventually joins an Islamic militant group after being tortured and raped in jail. Taha is later killed in an operation organised by his militant group to avenge the police officer who tortured him.

Bouthayna and Taha break off their engagement whilst each drifts into different directions. Bouthayna finds a new job as Zaki’s secretary. She finds herself attracted to Zaki despite the age gap between them because she feels that
he respects her. Unlike her previous encounters with men, Bouthayna feels safe with Zaki. Their relationship develops until they are found in bed by Zaki’s sister Dawlat who brings the police to his apartment accusing them of adultery. Bouthayna and Zaki feel humiliated after this incident and they end up getting married.

The representation of a love story between two people from different classes with a wide age gap between them is rather unique in Egyptian cinema. Such a relationship would have been subject to harsh criticism in earlier decades, but with the increasing economic pressures on the low-income strata in the metropolis, similar relationships have become commonplace. In The Yacoubian Building, the relationship between Bouthayna and Zaki is portrayed as legitimate and the intimacy between them is characterized as human and normal. Their love is intertwined with the need they feel towards each other: she needs a man who can protect and care for her and provide economic security, and he needs a beautiful young wife as a companion in his old age. She wants to climb the social ladder and move away from the suffocating roof to a nice flat, and he is an old, lonely bachelor who wants to be with someone even if this woman is far younger than him and from a different social background. The film prompts the viewer to consider this relationship in a new light, whilst locating Zaki and Bouthayna’s story in the context of the restrictions placed on their movement in public spaces which they experience in the city. One of the successful representations in the film is the creation of contrasting images between the narrow, crowded rooms on the roof and the luxurious, spacious apartments of the Yacoubian building.

Thus, Bouthayna can be perceived as Dunia’s opposite, even though they belong to the same age group and share a similar social background. While Dunia finds her happiness in independence and by breaking away from conventions and restrictions on her body and soul, Bouthayna comes to represent what is regressive about today’s metropolis. She is unable to attain her independence and continues to be confined to the prison of social and economic pressures.

IN THE HELIOPOLIS FLAT

The film is directed by the veteran director Mohammad Khan whose films are mostly located in Cairo and engage its places and residents with their concerns and problems. In this new film, he provides a rather optimistic view of today’s Cairo contrary to what The Yacoubian Building offers: romantic love, the music of love, and the people’s ability to find intimate relations based on true love are still possible in the big metropolis. The film is dedicated to the late Egyptian singer Layla Murad, whose love songs have inspired generations in Egypt and the Arab world.

Yet, on another level, the film aims to unfold the stereotypical perceptions of a number of relationships. Nagwa, a music teacher from the Upper Egyptian city of Minya arrives in Cairo for the first time with her pupils
who are performing in a national music competition. In her spare time, she decides to visit her music teacher Tahani whom she has not seen for 14 years, but has kept in touch with through the post. Nagwa travels a long distance to Heliopolis in search of Tahani. Contrary to how Cairenes perceive Upper Egyptian women as ignorant of modern city life, shy and submissive, Nagwa proves to be anything but this image. She has character and integrity, she is passionate, strong and feels completely at ease with herself and the space around her. She is neither ignorant nor backward but a capable and talented woman. She walks in the streets of Cairo as if she has lived there all her life. Her passion, unpretentiousness and talent attract Yehia, the new occupant of Tahani’s flat. He leaves his glamorous Cairene girlfriend Dahlia in order to be with Nagwa. Nagwa’s honesty is set in contrast to Dahlia’s pretentiousness and fake glamour. When Yehia asks Nagwa why she is so keen to find Tahani, Nagwa replies that she wants to ask Tahani whether she still believes true love exists.

Many scenes of the film are shot in the streets and buildings of Heliopolis. Perhaps this particular area is chosen because it dramatizes the differences in class, perception and attitude between an Upper Egyptian woman and the inhabitants of one of the most modern and well-off suburbs of Cairo. Even in the presence of these differences, Nagwa and Yehia find common values to share, topics they joke about, streets where they drive on Yehia’s motorcycle, and they eventually fall in love. However, and contrary to romantic films which usually end with the consummation of the relationship between the lovers, the final scene shows Nagwa and Yehia agreeing to keep in touch, as Nagwa heads back to Minya on the train.

This is one of the strong points about the film. It does not fall into the clichéd and naive portrayal of a traditional romantic love story, but integrates elements of suspense and mystery within the main theme. Nagwa’s visit to Cairo turns into a journey in search of Tahani in order to unfold the enigma of her disappearance. The Heliopolis building is turned into a space where Yehia is haunted by supernatural spirits and voices (or ghosts as he imagines), only to discover towards the end of the film that these sounds come from a labourer who is painting one of the building’s flats during the night. It is as if the director is playing a tricky game with the viewer, a game that incorporates a mixed bag of entertainment, suspense, and a love story. Even though we only see Tahani in the opening scene of the film, her energetic spirit and love of music are present throughout the film to inspire Nagwa.

Furthermore, during her short stay in Cairo, Nagwa experiences the human face of the metropolis. There are revealing scenes shot in the girls’ hostel where Nagwa stays in Cairo, the intimacy and fondness which grow between her and the hostel’s landlady and the other resident girls, their chats and laughter and their singing and dancing. The message that is repeated over and again in different ways throughout the film is that Cairo is still a place which cares for its people and where love exists and is possible. The people of this huge metropolis are trying to defy the distorted relationships by forging new ones based on principles that bring them together rather than keep them apart.
Indeed, the three films reflect present-day Cairo and its people in a new light. The three protagonists Dunia, Bouthayna and Nagwa perceive the issues of love, marriage, independence, and their future in the city in different ways from each other. Each of them is located within specific spatial and social contexts, and their stories are intertwined with the story of the metropolis.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this study that there is a certain tension arising from the restrictions imposed on public space reflected and recreated in many films produced in Egypt today. The three films I have discussed here belong to a body of work by Egyptian filmmakers who have engaged with the restructuring of urban space in the age of globalization and its impact on the population. Their cinema has challenged the state’s policies which have relocated many communities in order to build new ring roads, bridges, blocks of flats for the elite, and new gated communities in the desert. Such directors as Youssef Chaine in his last film Heya Fawda (Chaos, 2007, co-directed with Khaled Youssef), Khaled Youssef in Heena Maysara (Until Better Times, 2007), Hala Khalil in Qass we Lazq (Cut and Paste, 2006), and others have portrayed and criticised the new reality of the lack of space and its impact on reshaping gender relations, particularly with regards to questions of love, marriage, and sexuality.

In Dunia, The Yacoubian Building, and In the Heliopolis Flat, we find two main contrasting views of today’s Cairo: the city as a liberating space, where young women like Dunia and Nagwa are able to explore freely their feelings and desires; and the city as constraining when Bouthayna finds no one to turn to but a rich old man who helps her, through marriage, to escape her harsh economic and social reality. The three films succeed in raising many important questions about traditional ideas and conventions in relation to young women struggling to create a space for themselves in today’s Cairo.

ENDNOTES

3. Mohammad Khan, dir., Fi Shaqqat Masr al-Gedida [In the Heliopolis Flat] (Egypt, 2007).
4. There is an impressive body of work produced in these two subject areas on the Middle Eastern metropolis. See for example: *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*, ed. by L. Carl Brown (New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1973); *People and Pollution: Cultural Constructions and Social Action in Egypt*, ed. by Nicholas Hopkins et al. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001); Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in Global Cairo* (CA: University of California Press, 2002); *Planning the Middle East City: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalising World*, ed. by Yasser Elsheshtawy (London: Routledge, 2004). In addition, the Egyptian English newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* has been publishing a series of articles and feature stories about the changes taking place on the urban planning scene in Egypt since the late 1990s.


7. For a complete illustration of these thirteen cities within the city, see ibid., 188-220.

8. According to the 2001 UN-Habitat report, the total population in Egypt was 69m, the urban population was 29m, and the slum population was 12m. It is common knowledge that the slum population is concentrated in Cairo. See the report on the UN-Habitat website: [http://www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org) (accessed 15 January 2009).


10. For a description of Khedive Ismail’s plans to modernize Cairo, see Janet Abu-Lughod, “Cairo: Perspective and Prospectus,” in *From Madina to Metropolis: Heritage and Change in the Near Eastern City*, 101-103. For a critical discussion of a multi-million pound project launched by the Ministry of Culture to restore and renovate the most important buildings in the downtown area today, and the various architectural, social and political dynamics of this project, see Galila El Kadi and Dalia ElKerdany, “Belle-époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District,” in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalised Middle East*, ed. by Diane Singerman and Paul ‘Amar (Cairo and NY: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 345-71.


14. The emergency law was renewed for two more years in May 2008.


17. For an enlightening discussion on the government’s trend to encourage investors to build new exclusive communities for the elite in the desert areas surrounding Cairo through the deregulation of desert landownership, see Petra Kuppinger, “Exclusive Greeneries: New Gated Communities in Cairo,” City and Society, 16:2 (2004), 35-61. For a comparative study by the same author on the dynamics of both global and local policies and their impact on two communities in the Giza province (at close proximity to Cairo), see “Pyramids and Alleys: Global Dynamics and Local Strategies in Giza,” in Cairo Cosmopolitan, 313-44.


19. Ibid., 46.

20. Eric Denis, “Cairo as Neoliberal Capital: From Walled City to Gated Communities,” in Cairo Cosmopolitan, 47-71 (49).


22. Yasser Elsheshtawy, “Urban Transformations: Social Control at al-Rifa’i Mosque and Sultan Hasan Square,” in Cairo Cosmopolitan, 295-311 (297). The essay also provides an enlightening discussion on the “privatization of public space” in an old historic area of Cairo. Even though I agree with Elsheshtawy’s main assumptions in his essay, it is important to point out that such internal neoliberal policies both feed into and are influenced by broader imperialist policies in the Middle East.


24. For a general overview of the most important phases of Egyptian cinema, see Viola Shafik, Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), and Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press,
Gender Relations in Cairo’s Cinema


27. For an informative discussion on audience reception and how the class factor plays a role in determining audiences’ feedback in Egypt, see ibid., 281-319.

28. For a number of extended studies on Egyptian cinema since its inception in the 1920s until the early 1990s, see issue 15 of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, entitled “Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative,” (1995).

29. I have discussed the transformations which took place in Egyptian cinema during the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through the films of the most popular Egyptian actress Souad Hosni, in my article “Souad Hosni: ‘Indama Yarabub al-Fann bil Hayat’” [Souad Hosni: Art and Life], in *Nizwa Quarterly Journal*, 43 (July 2005), 181-200 (Arabic).


31. I would like to suggest that this situation was caused by two main factors: the sharp polarization between the Islamists and the secularists, and the brutal crackdown of the state on the various forms of free expression. These questions, however, are quite complex and need to be addressed in a separate study.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Films

Hamed, Marwan, dir., 'Imarat Ya'qubian [The Yacoubian Building], Egypt, 2006.
Khan, Mohammad, dir., Fi Shaqqat Masr al-Gedida [In the Heliopolis Flat], Egypt, 2007.
Sa'ab, Jocelyne, dir., Dunia: Balas Tibusni fi 'Enayya [Dunia: Kiss me not on the Eyes], France, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, 2005.

Books & Articles


**Websites**


