

**THE
NATIONAL
IMAGINARIUM**

THE

A History

NATIONAL

of Egyptian

IMAGINARIUM

Filmmaking

MAGDY MOUNIR EL-SHAMMAA

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PROLOGUE: THE NATIONAL IMAGINARIUM

Blessed by seemingly endless sunshine, filmmaking found a fertile ground in Egypt more than a century ago. The abundant natural light made possible many hours of outdoor shooting, a vital requirement for early European filmmakers drawn to Egypt, as did the locals who soon took up the art. This neophyte community of artists and the industry they begat is memorialized in fading photos, framed and hung on the equally aged walls of the famed Café Riche in downtown Cairo. There is a sense of apogee and decline steeped in this café's nostalgia for Egyptian films of the black-and-white era, a Golden Age still fondly recalled by—now mostly elderly—viewers, not unlike the patrons and clientele of the famed café. This is understandable. The stars and directors on the wall behind the manager's desk—in the curiously unused, wood-paneled main dining room—signified a period when Egyptian films, and the local filmmaking industry as a whole, dominated the local and regional market, and regularly attracted international acclaim. Layla Murad, Anwar Wagdi, Naguib al-Rihani, Faten Hamama, and Shadia are but a very few of the names and faces that dominated this industry, this age's silver screen, and the yellowing walls of a faded café, off a downtown Cairo square.

Much changed in the span of this century. For much of this time, filmmaking relied on celluloid, incandescent lights, and mechanical cameras, all products of nineteenth-century industrialization. Endless refinements of this technology over the course of the century finally gave way to a paradigm shift. Films in movie theaters lost their monopoly to television, whose early limited national networks gave way to exponential viewing options by century's end, with the birth of the Internet. Egyptian filmmaking struggled with these challenges. Unlike Hollywood's post-1970

reliance on big-budget studio blockbusters that consolidated its international dominance, or Bollywood that had a massive domestic audience base, the Egyptian film industry steadily lost its regional dominance as a variety of national cinemas, foreign films, and increasingly prevalent satellite television fragmented its core audience. Except for the occasional international praise of the auteur filmmaker Youssef Chahine, one may have the impression that Egyptian filmmaking has failed to achieve much of anything since its iconic Golden Age.

Yet, Egyptian films continue to have a magical hold on core Egyptian viewers. This popularity has engendered a cottage industry of pop-cultural studies in Arabic, mainly by Egyptians, but surprisingly few rigorous academic works. In English, there are two major works that deal with Egyptian cinema generally—Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, and more recently Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation*—as well as one work that addresses Nasserist cinema: Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*.¹ The present work builds on these earlier efforts to provide a far more comprehensive dive into this unfairly neglected topic. Beyond these works, this book relies and engages significantly with local histories and academic studies. The works by al-'Ishari and al-Sharqawi are especially critical for hard-to-find data, as is the grand chronicle produced by al-Haddari.² As would be expected, this topic receives much more attention from local authors; though much of what is produced is fan and popular histories, a few such as these strive for academic rigor.³

There are two possible reasons for the relative academic neglect of this topic. The first is the turbulent history of Egypt and the region more broadly over this past century. Decolonization, Arab–Israeli wars, the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf wars, 9/11, the War on Terror, and the Arab Spring have repeatedly focused attention on social and political events. Culture, when referenced, is regularly used in a shallow, cartoonish way to explain “deviant” ideologies and cultural practices, often in sensationalist terms. This is an often-missed opportunity since culture provides a window through which the onlooker can get a glimpse at what a society thinks about—its fears, its hopes, its aspirations. As we shall see, however, to fully decode the historically produced cultural artifacts that are films, an understanding of the wider and deeper context—social, political, economic—is also critical. The second possible reason for the relative neglect of Egyptian filmmaking by academics seems to be the continued focus on the Golden Age—and the narrative of decline that this produces.

Domestically, as elsewhere, the heyday of cinema attendance is long past; the derelict hulks of once ornate movie palaces in downtown Cairo are a sad testament to this. This rather dour view is not necessarily inaccurate, but it is incomplete. A more complete narrative is certain to highlight that Egyptian filmmaking has flourished, struggled, but continues to survive, and even thrive. It has always produced cinematic gems that reflect the different facets of the society that produced them—no matter the time period. This narrative must certainly point out that over the span of this century, Egyptian films have been the medium that has nurtured a lush *national imaginarium*: a rich and vibrant space in which, and through which, Egypt and Egyptians were imaginatively made and remade.⁴

The community of filmmakers, the art they produced, and the time they lived in are a rich source of material to explore this imaginarium. The cultural production over this time period influenced national construction in three crucial ways. Firstly, these films provided a commonly shared viewing experience, a national canon of films. Secondly, they project what “the national character” was imagined to be onto the silver screen. Lastly, they rewrote national history and constructions of identity through the stories they told. This work is not heavily influenced by film theory, but that does not mean it lacks any such theoretical underpinnings. They are simply different, and hopefully they will lead to novel questions and answers. This book certainly does not shy away from films qua films: those dreamlike phantasms reflected on the silver screens of darkened halls. The main focus of this book, however, is not simply what is being reflected on the screen, but how those images got there in the first place. This shifts our lens away from films as texts unto themselves, and focuses more on the *process* of filmmaking.

Taking into account the *context* of Egyptian films that have captivated many viewers but elicited few studies is vital for the appreciation of the culturally produced historical artifact that is film. Who are the community of artists that made filmmaking possible in Egypt? What were the institutional networks, structures, rules—formal and informal—that bound this community together and made the very complicated industrial process of filmmaking possible in the first place? What was the changing social and political environment when these films were made? What role does the state play? Beyond the many contradictions and contestations that are reflected on the screen, by filling in the complexity of the process taking place behind the screen, by drawing back the curtain on this crucible of national identity, the power struggle among and between people over meaning and definition

is laid bare. The solutions to these questions, contestations, and obstacles are prior to the making of any one particular film. These questions are rarely asked, and unsurprisingly, we actually know very little about Egyptian films beyond their surface reflection. This book is largely an attempt to reveal the complex and rich story of how history, culture, and politics intertwined in the making of these endearing, and enduring, works of art.

Since Benedict Anderson's influential work on nationalism, the bourgeoisie, and print capitalism, many works have filled in the local specificities. Central to the original thesis, however, is the viewpoint of imagination as an active, participatory process in the construction of nationalism, as opposed to mythologizing or false consciences. Another major contribution of his work has been to point the way toward the use of new media technology, in this case print media, as the tool by which this active participation and imagination is institutionalized and disseminated. More recently, and in relationship to Egypt specifically, Ziad Fahmy has pointed to non-print media, in his case audio recordings, and its role in disseminating the national imaginary in largely non-literate societies. There is an underlying tension in Anderson's work, however. On the one hand, he is seeking to authenticate nationalism as against false consciousness, yet on the other hand he does not want to include the extremes of nationalism in the same camp. In other words, he does not want to authenticate fascism. Thus the book dichotomizes and opposes "linguistic nationalism" and "official nationalism." The former is "popular, grass roots, authentically horizontal," whereas the latter is a "strategic reaction" to the former, by an elite (probably the holdover dynastic ruler) threatened by marginalization. It is conservative, Machiavellian, and bottom-down.⁵ We shall see this tension in the construction of Egyptian identity.

What is Egypt, who is an Egyptian, and who gets to decide? On one hand, since the nineteenth century, those with the most power in Egypt—its governors, khedives, kings, presidents, ministers, bureaucrats, and experts—have pushed through, from the top down, their vision of society—and of themselves as the state. The society in this construct is remedial and in need of the visionary leadership by the holders of power—now conceptualized as the state—to remedy them, to remake Egyptians into modern, productive citizens. On the other hand, through popular culture, artists of all stripes and levels of professionalism have produced their own variety of alternative identity formations, and answers to those questions. These ideas are central to this work, in the examination of cinema as a reflection and

producer of larger cultural imaginings of the nation, and the very fact of imagination as an active and participatory process that is more than a top-down, state- or elite-driven process. This work situates itself as part and parcel of similar studies that have turned to popular culture to fill in the gap of how nationalist identity permeated society from origins other than intellectual or social elites.

National identity and nationalism is but one thematic that concerns this work; another is modernism. With respect to this theme, the present work builds on Armbrust's earlier thesis on the centrality of modernism in the conception of Egyptian middle-class identity; the emergence of the *effendi* is symptomatic of this in the early part of the twentieth century. In this vein we shall encounter the mantra of "authenticity and modernity/*al-asaala wa-l-tajaddud*," and the conception of *ibn al-balad* that is in turn offered up as a *populist* nationalist character. This all recalls Partha Chatterjee's classic examination of postcolonial nationalist movements.

In his influential work, Chatterjee examines a dilemma facing postcolonial regimes that seek to create a new hegemony by which to lead national state formation. The dilemma is that the ideology employed is derivative of post-Enlightenment rationalist thought; yet those who must be mobilized for the war of liberation (the masses) were unfamiliar with and often antagonistic to this "alien" discourse. At "the moment of departure," then, the intelligentsia and elite were brought under the influence of this borrowed discourse, which had penetrated these societies through the structures of capital and feeling, a penetration that was uneven. At "the moment of maneuver," the actual war of liberation or revolution, the masses had to be mobilized through a hegemonic discourse that employed signs and symbols familiar to these masses. By thus using "their" language (not necessarily a secular nationalist ideology; indeed, many religious and traditional signs and symbols were employed), they were brought into the nationalist struggle. At "the moment of arrival," the multiple discourses and groups which had been mobilized are "resolved." This is done through a "discourse of order." The resolution occurs in one of two ways: either a bourgeois-landowning alliance against workers and peasants, or a national populist government in opposition to the previous political, social, and economic elite.⁶ In Egypt, the Free Officers movement led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser was decidedly of the latter type.

Populism emerged in Egypt during the interwar period, as it did in vast numbers of countries in the shadow of the Great Depression. From

the fringes it moved into a variety of neophyte political movements and groups that sought to take root among the urban middle classes. It grew to enormous power with the ascension of the Free Officers, who espoused this ideological worldview. To survive and thrive, this movement and its charismatic young leader, Nasser, sought to expand beyond their urban middle-class base by reaching out to the working and peasant classes in opposition to the monarchical-era social elites and their political remnants.

In cultural terms, this amorphous populism is probably best encapsulated by the emergence in Egyptian literature, song, and cinema of the identity trope of *ibn al-balad*. Over the course of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century this trope becomes the source for an “authentic-yet-modern” national identity. Though this does become part of an official state-popularized national identity, it does not mean that it was solely a matter of top-down dissemination by political and intellectual elites who employed it to cynically harness the masses as “clients.” Yes, that did happen; yet recurring upsurges of this populist ethos have repeatedly invigorated the making and remaking of Egyptian culture and national myth making, sometimes in support of state authority, more often in opposition.

Perhaps the reason the Golden Age of Egyptian cinema is regarded so highly—beyond the endless, fruitless, but delightfully engaging debates based on pure aesthetics—is because it was the cultural product of a hegemonic moment. “The true conditioning of hegemony,” Raymond Williams reminds us, “is effective *self-identification* with the hegemonic forms: a specific and internalized ‘socialization’ which is expected to be positive but which, if that is not possible, will rest on a (resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary.” Williams here is relying explicitly on a Gramscian definition of hegemony that does not rely on punishment or violence, and creates a “historic bloc”: a broad cross-class alliance.⁷ As we shall see, this hegemonic moment comes to an end in the wake of the 1967 war and Nasser’s death in 1970. The historical moment that followed came to rely on increasing repression and violence, sundering the broad cross-class alliance that had existed during this Golden Age period. The films produced after this period may have soured on the promise of modernity, but they also maintained a populist streak. Unlike the peak hegemonic period of Nasserism, these films used populism to criticize the direction of change in Egypt.

Another factor that will force itself repeatedly onto this story of Egyptian filmmaking, spanning the length of the twentieth century, is generations. This biological engine of history will move our story inexorably forward. We

shall encounter four generations along the way. The first generation was born before the First World War; they will be the first generation that participates in the initial process of national identity making, after the independence of Egypt in 1923. The cinematic faces of this generation have been mostly forgotten, victims of neglect as Egyptian silent films and early talkies—the physical celluloid reels and their images—have largely been lost to the ether.

The second generation that we shall encounter is the revolution's generation. Born in the interwar period, they will construct an alternative national identity, one that challenges the first generation's hold on social and political power. Much of this struggle will be carried out in cultural terms, before the political changes following the 1952 revolution institutionalize many of these conceptions. This generally accepted Golden Age of Egyptian cinema bequeaths to us the iconic visages of Faten Hamama, Shadia, and Soad Husni, to mention a few headliners from a catalogue of black-and-white classics.

The third generation, the revolution's children, will experience defeat, victory, and a bewildering host of social and political changes. Their cinema will be very much different from what came before it. The faces of this generation in Egyptian cinema are captured by color film. There is a new cadre of stars that will mark this cinematic period. As a generation they too will rise up against their elders, but they will be defeated. Their cinema will record this stigma of defeat and bewilderment.

Lastly, their children, the revolution's grandchildren, will grow up with little of the revolution left around them, except for its increasing authoritarianism. Unlike their parents they were not a defeated generation, but reared by their parents and chastened by their experience, this will not be a generation very optimistic about the possibility of change. This generation, Generation X, will be the face of Egyptian cinema by the end of its first century of filmmaking, at the end of the twentieth century. Their audience, the millennial generation, still too young to have made it onto the screen itself by then, does not show up in this history. Their story is a future still untold. This generation, perhaps more optimistic than its elders by the turn of the millennium and its technological boom, was watching—consciously forming their own alternate visions—and waiting for their turn to take the stage.

The book proceeds chronologically, with a different thematic emphasis in each chapter. The first chapter sets out the narrative for the emergence

of filmmaking in Egypt, featuring the director Togo Mizrahi. It uses local histories but explicitly aims to recast their nationalist conceptions through the lens of an emergent populism during the interwar period. It demonstrates the profound impact this development will have not only on how this history was conceptualized by Egyptians, but also on the evolution of cinematic depictions of “Egyptians” and their “others” during the twilight years of Egypt’s “cosmopolitan” moment. In previous treatments of this period, the reader has been presented with a dichotomous view of a positive cosmopolitanism that is quashed by xenophobic nationalism, centered on the Nasser period and the midcentury revolution. Yet filmmaking began in Egypt well before the interwar period. As Egyptian filmmaking came to maturity with sound in the early 1930s, the “cosmopolitan moment,” later romanticized, had already come to an end, well before the Nasser period. Instead of reading interwar films as signifying a communitarian ethos that is simplistically brought to an end by the exclusivity of a populist “racial” nationalism, I present these films as an imagining and yearning for a world that no longer existed, and historically, never actually did—at least, not as it was romantically and retrospectively depicted on-screen.

Besides actual films produced during this time period, this chapter also makes use of census data, historical background, and Egyptian nationalism during the interwar period. The chapter also lays out the nascent industry’s initial setup—introducing the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors, and the relationship among them. The argument that is presented is that the social, economic, and political structures that were born of nineteenth-century globalization and imperialism were radically changed as a result of war, economic depression, and social dislocation. While it is true that Levantine, Italian, and a plethora of Jewish artists of various nationalities—as part of a “colonial” cosmopolitanism—animated early Egyptian filmmaking, their eclipse by local talent was also part of the new social world that came into being during the interwar period. Converging at the nexus of filmmaking, therefore, was a contest over the identity of modern Egyptians that had as much to do with questions of colonialism and race as with issues of class.

The contest over a new national identity during the time period when Egypt first gained its problematic independence from Britain is the centerpiece of chapter two, featuring the director Salah Abu Seif. The projection and promotion of the *ibn al-balad* character is presented as a solution to the struggles over modernization and the parameters of cultural authenticity

in the postcolonial world. This presentation is nestled within a social and political context, ongoing since the interwar period, which sought to promote a genuinely popular culture in order to politically mobilize middle- and working-class segments of the population in opposition to colonialism and the local social and political elite. This chapter is in keeping with Armbrust's elaboration of this identity as central to middle-class Egyptian national identity since the interwar period, yet in the postrevolution period, it is also linked to a "state populism" in a significant attempt to broaden the base of support for the new revolutionary regime beyond the middle class.

There is an important historical distinction between the modernist discourse of the nineteenth century and what was unfolding in Egypt during the interwar period and eventually became institutionalized by the postrevolutionary regime. Though one may point out the continuity of the modernist discourse, as Timothy Mitchell does and as I will also discuss, and critique it for being more about surveillance, control, and the furtherance of capitalist-compliant relationships than about liberation and progress,⁸ yet there is a distinction in how this thematic becomes internalized in the Nasserist period. This transformation, which allows for a class alliance among the middle class, labor, the peasants, and the poor, in opposition to the social, political, and economic elites of prerevolutionary Egypt, had a transformative effect on the state and society taken as a whole. By becoming institutionalized through a political program that shattered the power of the old elite, expanding the economic and even political horizon of new segments of the population, this transformation allowed for this new understanding and imaginative construction of the people, their relationship to each other and political authority, to take hold.

Using the films of Salah Abu Seif, this chapter examines the particular masculine construction of *ibn al-balad* as it pertains to midcentury populism, as well as the position of the progressive artist, the role of pedagogy, and the persistent power of the modernizing discourse. Ultimately the chapter argues that what is missing from Armbrust's analysis of anticolonial middle-class nationalist identity as constructed through modernity, one that vacillates between the poles of tradition/authenticity and modern scientific/assimilation, is precisely the addition of social justice and equity, as hallmarks of the then-emergent anticolonial Third Worldist movements. This new global consciousness added another critical layer to the formulation of Egyptian nationalism that conceptualizes the nation and the people in opposition to a corrupt anti-nation and a venal elite.

The third chapter is a close reading of the iconic Salah Abu Seif film *Shabab imra'a* (A woman's youth, 1956). It builds on the previous chapter's presentation of authenticity and class with the added focus on patriarchy and midcentury gendered relationships. It is also a more intimate look at the visual language of Abu Seif's cinema. Following this, chapter four further explores this construction of patriarchy during the midcentury period—featuring the films of iconic stars such as Faten Hamama, Shadia, and Abd al-Halim Hafez. Other writers, notably Shafik and Gordon, have paid due attention to the centrality of gender in Egyptian films during this time period. What is different about this work's treatment of this topic is that it is placed within the context of patriarchy as a source of friction between generations as well as gender. In a short article, Gordon does use the problematic of generation in the construction of patriarchy after the military defeat of Egypt in 1967. I argue that this was a latter-day restatement of the generational conflict that was central to Egyptian films long before the 1967 war.

Chapter four demonstrates that control and the “cultivation” of children, young men as well as women, is central to the patriarchal discourse and the films produced at the height of the Nasser period. On the one hand, discourse about the modern Egyptian woman and her depiction on screen is shown to be the product of a long-developing process that intensified during the interwar period as a component of modernity and the nationalist debate. On the other hand, by broadening the question of patriarchy to include a generational as well as the gendered problematic, this chapter situates this contest in terms of the Free Officers and *their* generation's struggle against the established social and political elites/elders. Thus the chapter demonstrates that the depiction of the revolution's children is part and parcel of a populist discourse defining the “nation” and its perceived “anti-nation” in gendered and generational terms. This is especially true as the industry and the films discussed toward the end of this chapter are now produced by the state-owned sector.

The changing relationship of the Nasserist state and the industry is part of a much larger story that chapter five sets out to tell. The chapter is an ambitious attempt to recreate the industry aspect of Egyptian filmmaking during the midcentury period. The quantitative material presented in this chapter sets this work apart from almost any other existing study in English or Arabic about Egyptian filmmaking, with the major exception of Andrew J. Flibbert's work on Mexican and Egyptian cinema.⁹ Following

in Flibbert's pioneering footsteps, this chapter relies heavily on the data published by the unofficial trade journal at the time, *Ciné-Film*, edited by the tireless cheerleader for Egyptian cinema, Jacques Pascal.

This chapter takes a deep dive into this archive of Egyptian filmmaking to map out the community of filmmakers, and provides some conclusions that are crucially divergent from previous works. It provides a sketch of the various sectors in the industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) and the conflicts among them. It provides many graphs, tables, and hard-to-find concrete quantitative material about the economics of the Egyptian film industry before and after nationalization. Along with an examination of the audience makeup, and changes in the structures of production and exhibition, the nationalization of the film industry is shown to be as much an outgrowth of internal industry struggles and demands as of the state's aspiration for social control and engineering.¹⁰ The end of this chapter is not the end of this book's focus on the industry aspect of filmmaking. Like the first chapter, chapters seven and eight will integrate the economies of the film industry into the narrative of each time period—the 1970s, and Mubarak's Egypt (1980s–90s), respectively.

Chapter six is the bookend chapter of Nasser and Nasserism. It takes a look at the cinematic response to the defeat of 1967, and it features a series of critical films by Youssef Chahine before his semi-autobiographical trilogy won him enduring international fame. The films screened in the aftermath of the defeat are generally assumed to have been given a “green light” by the state so as to vent popular anger, but as the chapter demonstrates, these were well in production before the June war. They represented a radical critique designed not to bring down the revolution but to hold it up to its populist ideals. But the massiveness of the 1967 defeat, Nasser's death in 1970, and the withdrawal of the state from its social welfare commitments translated into a collapse of the populist consensus that had characterized Nasserism. In the examination of films before and after the military defeat and the death of Nasser, we shall see the emergence of an even more radical populist critique of the state and its perceived failures. The “hegemonic moment” that had characterized Nasser's Egypt was no more.

Chapter seven picks up with the turbulent 1970s. Once more it is clearly demonstrable that a solid contextualization of the social and political changes occurring during any given period of production is crucial. By now, Egyptian cinema was introducing a new generation of stars and color film. A new generational struggle, the withdrawal of the state from production,

and increasing censorship of cultural productions critiquing these social and political changes in the post-Nasser Sadat period, are all the substance of cinema during this new period. Instead of the hegemonic consensus that had existed in previous years, we shall witness a sense of bewilderment taking its place as Egyptians try to cope with the dizzying array of changes.

This chapter demonstrates that the convergence of a number of factors, including the development of new technologies and markets (videotapes and the Gulf expatriate market), the privatization of production, and increased censorship, all come together to facilitate the expression of social criticism through the use of laughter and satire. Though no longer cloaked in the high modernist discourse of “respectable” social realism or melodrama, these works display the same populist framework that divides the nation between “a people” and “an elite.” The important difference is in who is being cast as the new “anti-nation”: the new ruling strata and the emergent socioeconomic elites of the Sadat and, later, the Mubarak period. Through the treatment of the early comedic films of Adil Imam, and the upswell of a new wave of “realism,” it is made clear that the hegemony created during the Nasser period, which tied the state and the ruling strata to the “people,” had come to an end. From hegemony in the Nasser period, the populist discourse has now become an oppositional discourse.

The role of populism as an effective cultural and political discourse is examined with the concluding chapter’s look at end-of-century cinema. The films of a new generation of directors such as Muhammad Khan, ‘Atif al-Tayyib, and Dawud Abd al-Sayyid—spanning the 1980s and 1990s—produced damning indictments of the corruption of Egypt’s social and political culture. Though they had to contend with censorship and were appropriately metaphorical in their presentations, there is a distinction between the films produced in the early Mubarak years and those that were produced in the 1990s.

The chapter describes cinema produced during the 1980s as “thick description” films, producing some of the most sublime portraits of the beauty of the mundane in a society where nothing seemed to get better. They also produce visually rich presentations—time capsules—of life on Cairo’s streets at the time. This reference to thick description is drawn from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Arguing against Orientalist essentialism in his classic study, he tells the story of how Islam was introduced to Morocco and Indonesia: how it interacted with pre-existing social and political structures and local traditions to produce the culturally

distinct form that it took in each place.¹¹ Geertz's work is an inspiration not simply for describing these films, but for this entire study, in presenting Egyptian filmmaking in a rich cultural, social, and political context.

The shift from the sleepy 1980s to the roaring 1990s with its "economic liberalization" was somewhat jarring. These "reforms" severely aggravated many of the problems of social justice and freedom at the core of Egyptian populism, and ultimately provided the context for Egypt's latest political and social upheavals. The films produced during the second half of this period are decidedly darker. Egyptian audiences at this time were treated to some of the best works yet produced by their favorite stars, Adil Imam and Ahmad Zaki. Yet something else was also happening as Egyptian cinema introduced the most recent generation of stars to grace its silver screen—the faces that will carry it forward into the new millennium. The youth and energy of this generation will reinvigorate Egyptian cinema, but the Egypt depicted by this cinema no longer enjoys its former hegemonic appeal.

This book, and the story it seeks to tell about the history of Egyptian filmmaking, concludes with a brief epilogue, referencing the 2011 revolt that brought down the Mubarak regime, and reviewing the evidence produced by its research.

In the end, the approach followed here, of providing thick contextualization for the films being discussed, is not necessarily better than others—it is different. The story of the nation, national identity construction, power, and art is a very complex story, and others will hopefully find their own way to retell it. Above all, this work does not aim to be the end of this conversation, but the beginning of a much broader one. There is no pretense that this is a comprehensive accounting of Egyptian filmmaking in its many guises. There is much left which remains tantalizingly untold. It is this ardent desire to push the field of inquiry further which has ultimately seen this work through to its end.