Broken Heart of the City: Youssef Chahine's *Bab al-Hadid* (*Cairo Station*)

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Cairo Station/Bab al-Hadid (1958) is widely considered to be Youssef Chahine's signature piece. For Chahine (1926-2008), Egypt's most celebrated director, as well as most critics and viewers the filmic images became iconic. Yet because of its daring break with certain studio conventions, the film reaped negative reviews and public hostility upon its release. Despite its rediscovery in later years, it remains a film that is difficult to categorize, not quite neo-realist and not quite revolutionary, due to a strong melodramatic streak and a startling psycho-sexual, rather than political focus. This essay re-examines the classic film as the work of an artist struggling to bend genre conventions while exploring the kaleidoscope of a metropolis undergoing rapid sociological and political transformation. It explores the history of Cairo, and of Cairo's central rail station, the claustrophobic epicenter of the story — a site of constant motion, to and from the city, of youthful hope and, all too often, of shattered, and at times, demented dreams.

> This is Cairo Station, the heart of the city. Every minute a train departs and every minute another arrives. Thousands of people meet and bid farewell; people from all over, locals and foreigners, rich and poor, people with and without jobs. (Madbouli, narrator of *Bab al-Hadid* 1958)

Youssef Chahine's *Bab al-Hadid* (*Cairo Station*, 1958) begins with this spoken prologue on a normal day at 7.30 a.m. The train for Zagazig, a small Delta city, is about to leave the station, on time the loudspeaker announces. A group of men stand in line at the ticket window for Alexandria. A middle-aged *effendi* in a Western business suit and thick glasses ogles a young woman in a figure-hugging top and capris, her long hair hanging freely, who brazenly walks a small dog toward the platform. Suddenly, the seeming orderliness breaks down. A peasant at the head of the queue is in the wrong line, and the patrons behind him get testy. A porter suggests that he run for the departing train. It is all familiar to the late 1950s audience, and in many respects remains so

today. This mundaneness is what makes the film so real and what draws us into its escalating swirl of activity and action as, from here on, it hastens towards its climax, some 11 hours later in film time.

The primary plot concerns Kinawi, a crippled, mentally unstable newspaper hawker who works for Madbouli, the elderly owner of a kiosk inside the station who took him in when he arrived homeless one day from Upper Egypt (his name signifies that he comes from Qena province). Kinawi hops on a game leg, and often appears childish, although at times he seems to play the fool. Clad in a filthy *gallabiya* and a tattered woolen cap, he floats in between transients —— travelers —— and stationary figures —— kiosk owners, porters, ticket agents and the unlicensed soda girls who peddle soft drinks from buckets —— always one step ahead of the police. Often a figure of ridicule, the recipient of blows or kicks, not all undeserved, Kinawi sees all, even if he distorts much of what transpires. Outcast in a world that seems simultaneously obsessed with romance and lust, he collects magazine pin-ups of Western-looking models (see Figure 1); longs for the love of Hanouma, the brassiest of the gypsy soda peddlers; and becomes dangerously mesmerized by news of a serial killer in Rosetta.

Youssef Chahine, who passed away in Cairo on 27 July 2008, was Egypt's most celebrated and controversial director. He directed 36 feature films between 1950 and 2007, in addition to a number of celebrated documentaries and short films. *Bab al-Hadid*, his eleventh feature, marked a radical departure from his prior films, but was by no means representative or necessarily trend-setting, except for the increasingly personal auteur stamp he put on his work. As his films became increasingly idiosyncratic, particularly in the 1970s, he became the international face of Egyptian cinema, his retreat from convention celebrated, however unfairly, as the antidote to Egypt's "Hollywood on the Nile" (Gordon 2002, pp. 24—30). Combining genre styles, shifting from stark realism to slapstick or overwrought musical numbers, Chahine confounded many foreign critics, who hailed his artistry and humanism, but often failed to understand his own personal "masala" mix and just how rooted he was in con-ventional melodrama.[1] *Bab al-Hadid* is thus representative of Chahine's best work precisely for the confusion it wrought amongst critics and viewers alike.

Misunderstood Masterpiece

Bab al-Hadid did not sit well with audiences or critics when it premiered in 1958. Paying customers did not know what to make of the film, which repre-sented a major departure for a young director who had already bent melodra-matic genre conventions in several earlier films, but never quite to breaking point. Their "violent reaction" —— many walked out during screenings —— reportedly "devastated him" and caused him to doubt his talents (Fawal 2001,

1. 'Masala' here refers to the classic description of a successful Bollywood production as a mixture of spices —— dramatic genre shifts and mood swings to appeal to all audience types.

Figure 1 Dislocated dreamer —— Kinawi sits alone amidst his pin-ups (courtesy of Arab Film Distribution/Typecast Films).

p. 62). In addition to non-traditional casting and a script that contains competing plot lines, some only loosely sketched, the film felt too gritty and touched upon themes that were "strange to the minds of those used to superficial stories" (Al-Barudi 1984, p. 60). The ending did not lend the comfortable resolution to which viewers had become accustomed. Those ultrasensitive to Egypt's image abroad felt that the film did their country a great disservice. Foreign critics looking to pigeonhole the film into a neat category —— neo-realism or melodrama —— found it difficult to classify. Third Cinema devotees looking for more overt political content or class consciousness have judged the film to have fallen short, failing to make the leap from "mere description of individuals" to "offer an analysis of society as a whole" or to foreground activists —— one of whom does figure prominently in the film —— rather than "social outcasts" (Armes 1987, p. 246). The jury at the Berlin Film Festival, at least according to popular lore, mistook Chahine, who —— very much against studio tradition —— had cast himself as a lead, for a real cripple, and thus denied him a deserved acting award (Fawal 2001, p. 61).

The film has grown in stature over time. Twenty years after its premier, it was "rediscovered" by cinema enthusiasts. Screenings in art houses and on Egyptian and French television enhanced its international reputation and, as with other works now considered classics, prompted domestic re-evaluation (Thorval 1985, p. 25). A panel of 19 Egyptian film critics convened in 1984 by the arts journal *al-Funun* ranked *Bab al-Hadid* the seventh best Egyptian film to date; another of his films was voted number one.[2] Yet, in 1998, when

2. They ranked *al-Ard* (*The Land*, 1969) number one (Bahjat 1984, pp. 18-24).

Chahine received a lifetime achievement award at Cannes, it was *Bab al-Hadid* that the festival screened. The film is routinely described as his masterpiece; the "first film that illustrated his style and technique" (Bseiso 2006); "the rarest of achievements for a director —— a film whose story, cinematography, and social commentary cooperate in perfect unison" (McDonell 2004). The French Ministry of Culture produced a volume of *Lycéens au Cinéma* devoted to this film, casting Chahine's other work in its shadow (Astic 2004). Even for Chahine and his colleagues five decades later —— and despite reports that its prominence in the public eye annoyed the cineaste —— this singular work retained its prominence (Gauthier 1985, p. 56). In the reception area of Chahine's production company in downtown Cairo a large, poster-sized still of the climactic moment, in which Kinawi holds Hanouma hostage on the rail tracks, dominates the largest wall. In his penultimate film, *Iskandriya-New York* (*Alexandria-New York*, 2005), the fourth of his semi-autobiographical "Alexandria Quartet", it is *Bab al-Hadid* that is screened at a special Lincoln Center retrospective honoring the director "Yahya".[3] In *Hiyya Fawda* (*Chaos*, 2007), a work Chahine may well have expected to cap his career, there are explicit, albeit updated, textual references to Kinawi's sexual frustration.[4]

With its crisp, pacing economy of spoken word and action, *Bab al-Hadid* is a film that attempts to say —— and succeeds in saying —— much about life in Egypt's bustling capital city at a crucial moment in the nation's post-colonial history. The year 1958 was a momentous year in the region, a tumultuous finale to a turbulent decade of political upheaval and a cautious time of beginnings. In July 1952, a group of self-styled Free Officers seized power in Cairo; within a year they upended the old parliamentary order and abolished the monarchy. In 1956, the revolutionary Nasser regime nationalized the Suez Canal Company, sparking an international crisis, and then survived the "Tripartite Aggression" that had aimed to topple it. Riding a wave of popularity, Nasser and his associates now took their first hesitant steps toward nationalizing key sectors of the economy and spreading the call for Arab solidarity and decolonization. In February 1958, Egypt and Syria entered into the ill-fated United Arab Republic. In July, American troops landed on Beirut's beaches to help the Lebanese sort out an escalating civil war; simultaneously, British paratroopers shored up King Hussein's shaky throne in Jordan. No one could save Hussein's Hashemite cousins in Iraq, who fell to a bloody *coup d'état*.

Cairo, suddenly the capital of a binational republic, had already undergone major structural and demographic transformation by the time Chahine started work on his film. Royal markers had been replaced, and the names of streets,

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3. Yahya is Chahine's filmic alter ego. The other films in the quartet are *Iskandariya … Lay?* (*Alexandria … Why?* 1978), *Haduta Misriyya* (*An Egyptian Tale*, 1982) and *Iskandariya … Kaman wa Kaman* (*Alexandria … Again and Forever*, 1989).

4. The lead character is a middle-aged police officer whose marriage proposal is rebuffed by the young woman who lives across the hall. He secretly takes her picture, enlarges it to poster size and hangs it in his bedroom, where he gazes upon it, often playing with his pistol. I have discussed this in a yet-to-be published paper, 'Chahine, Chaos, and Cinema — A Revolutionary Coda'.

squares and palaces changed to reflect the independent, republican, anti-aristocratic thrust of the new order. Foreigners and foreign-run establishments, however venerable, had been subject to attack, most dramatically in the Black Saturday riots of 26 January 1952 that had sent the old regime into its "golden death agony" (Lacouture & Lacouture 1958, p. 126). In the aftermath of the Suez War, foreigners and those minority populations suddenly defined as non-Egyptian —— Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Italians and others —— saw their property and finances sequestered. The names may remain on downtown store marquees —— Sidnaoui, Cicurel, Weinstein, Groppi —— but the city had undergone a dramatic demographic shift that many would later speak of with forlorn nostalgia.

All of this, off-screen and unscripted, is the backdrop to Chahine's film. One of the leading figures of a new generation of directors hungry to push the expanding boundaries of the cinematically acceptable, he clearly set out to make a statement —— or series of related statements —— about contemporary society, politics and morality in his homeland, with his camera focused on "the deprived or victimized" and without a mandate to hide his critique in historical garb (Fawal 2001, p. 187).[5] But how real —— or, in film terms, how "realist" —— is *Bab al-Hadid*? If Chahine's masterpiece, as some critics have noted, is not quite "neo-realism" —— it "almost became a melodrama", goes the argument, due to its heightened tension and ultimate focus on a character who "fall[s] off the precipice" (Fawal 2001, p. 60) —— few would deny the realism of its setting or the social issues it addresses. But what constitutes the "real" Cairo and, by extension, the "real" Egypt? Chahine's film, set entirely in and around Cairo Station, and peopled by a variety of characters who do not look quite like stock players (and most of whom are not), addresses such questions in a troubling, unconventional fashion.

Realism on Egypt's Silver Screen

Critics have noted the import of motion to the plot, setting and *mise-en-scène* in *Bab al-Hadid*. Cairo Station is a "site of indefatigable motion —— passengers, freight, roving and stationary peddlers, middlemen and hotel agents, police and adventurers" (Abd al-Malik 1984, p. 59). The population of this drama represents all social classes, from the desperately poor to the comfortably rambunctious, from the noble to the abject. Yet the story really takes off when the mundane action of daily life is broken by a series of climaxes to what we must understand to be habitual actions on the part of leading characters. The porters —— at least those who are conscious of their exploitation by the insidious boss Abou Gabar —— are attempting to form a union. At 5 p.m. they are slated to meet with a representative from the government labor federation who will certify a majority vote. Hanouma, the brassy ringleader of the gypsy soda vendors, will leave on the 6 p.m. train, accompanied by her trousseau, to

5. For relaxed censorship, see also Gordon (2002, ch. 2).

marry Abou Saria, the pro-union spokesperson for the porters. Most central to the story, Kinawi will lose his mental bearings and, emulating the notorious Rosetta murderer who dominates the tabloids he peddles, twice attempt to murder Hanouma in a fit of jealousy. The first time he will mistakenly assault another soda girl and stow her body in a trunk. The second time he will —— as on the poster on Chahine's office wall —— hold off arrest by holding a knife to her neck while cowering on the tracks.

Despite the presence of two major stars (Farid Shawqi/Abou Saria and Hind Rostam/Hanouma) and several key supporting players, *Bab al-Hadid* evokes the cinematic depiction of Rome by the great post-war Italian neo-realists. Chahine shot the entire film on location utilizing a hand-held camera to lend a "wobbly" effect and, for the first time, spurning fade-outs (Chahine 2006). The crowd scenes and the many shots of trains moving through the yards, whether framed from above or at ground level, look very different from the stylized urban landscapes reproduced on Giza's (then) 30-year-old studio lots. However successful a wunderkind director though, Chahine could not fully escape the fetters of studio control. Yet he achieved a remarkable degree of independence. Casting himself as the male lead represents a major break with studio conventions. Chahine gave himself third billing, presumably to fulfill professional obligations to his co-stars and to satisfy his backers. But the film *does* revolve around Kinawi, and the part was "probably" written with the director in mind (Chahine 2006).

This is a film that marks a triumph (not the only triumph, but a key victory) for a group of young film-makers who, working within censorial parameters that had been loosened considerably by a new revolutionary regime, increasingly took their cameras out into the streets and fields, endeavoring to capture a "real" Egypt in which a more honest exploration of social ills might be scripted and brought to the big screen. The basic plot outline, inspired by a short story about a murderer who stashes his victim's body in a crate, fits in with efforts by contemporary directors like Salah Abu Sayf and Kamal al-Shaykh, who both worked from tabloid headlines at home and abroad to create films that treated social inequity, civic responsibility and the sociological roots of crime. Chahine, a middle-class child of cosmopolitan Alexandria who got his first breaks into film in the early 1950s, situated his work at the intersections between rural Egypt —— which had heretofore generally been portrayed as idyllic or comically provincial —— and the new urban sphere, in which many sons and daughters of the countryside found themselves relocated and all too often lost. In *Ibn al-Nil* (*Nile Boy*, 1951), his second film, which he shot on location near Philae, Chahine depicted the bleakness of rural life through the eyes of a young peasant who seeks deliverance by escaping to the city, where he is corrupted and nearly ruined. In *Sira fi al-Wadi* (*Blazing Sun*, 1954), he captured the scenic wonders of the Valley of the Kings, but depicted an agrarian sphere in which peasants fall prey to unscrupulous feudal lords who play upon tribal codes of honor to spark vendettas and keep them subservient. Then, in *Sira fi al-Mina* (*Dark Waters*, 1956), Chahine took his crew onto the

waterfront to depict dock workers struggling against corrupt labor contractors. Chahine endeavored to give some voice to the plight of the workers, but admittedly "without understanding their problems" (Armes 1987, p. 246). In *Bab al-Hadid*, he portrays a true working-class hero who promotes unionization over the paternalistic clientelism of the guild boss, but it is all part of a series of subplots swirling around the story of Kinawi.

Out of this larger corpus, including these earlier Chahine films which Viola Shafik (1998, p. 135) has labeled "commercial realism", what is it that makes *Bab al-Hadid* unique? The director's casting of himself is, as noted above, highly eccentric. He joked that had he written the part for another actor, he would have been compelled to pen many more lines of dialogue, and recalled that his producer encouraged him to take on the difficult part. They surely suspected that no contemporary film star with box office draw, all of them "ruined" by the prior generation of actors and acting coaches, could handle Kinawi with the depth of feeling that makes him at once pathetic, repulsive and sympathetic, even attractive (Chahine 2006). Whether any of Egypt's leading men would have even entertained an offer to play a filthy, physically deformed and mentally disturbed urban peasant is highly doubtful, given the nature of the Egyptian star system. Moreover, Chahine was able to realize his "old passion" to act (Thorval 1985, p. 25).

If neo-realism entails "the use of non-professionals as actors, location rather than studio shooting, a concentration on social and political issues and a raw, sometimes almost semi-documentary approach to storytelling" (Jackson 1998, p. 172), Chahine's film partly fits the bill. The same holds for drawing the ire of nationalist critics, upset at "washing dirty laundry in public" and the lack of a "minimal commitment toward a healthy and constructive optimism that can help humanity move forward and gain some hope" (Klawans 2003). Unlike classic Egyptian studio productions, including his prior films (the last two of which had been musical comedies starring Farid al-Atrash), *Bab al-Hadid* is not filled with familiar faces or future stars. Chahine did film totally on location —— inside the terminal, warehouses, train cars and in the switching yard —— something that none of his "realist" cohort had yet achieved. His concerns are socially progressive and the emotions, at times, raw (although punctuated by his now characteristic humor). As a "day in the life" of Cairo Station, the film does carry a certain documentary feel. Still, despite obvious stylistic (as well as certain political and intellectual) linkages to post-war neo-realism, *Bab al-Hadid* defies monolithic categorization. Recognizing that the film's "greatest transgression" to critics and audiences alike "may have been its social realism", one recent critic has more keenly described it as a "thriller" and "psychosexual drama", filled with the "usual stuff of noir mysteries and suspenseful whodunits" (McDonell 2004).

In attempting to place the film —— and, indeed, Chahine's overall corpus —— it is important to recall his early training in acting and television production at the Pasadena Playhouse in the late 1940s (evoked with bitter-sweetness in his recent *Iskandariya-New York*), and the overarching allure and influence

of Hollywood on his work. Two important reminders are present in *Bab al-Hadid*. The first is a poster of *Niagara* (1953), a "steamily melodramatic thriller" starring Marilyn Monroe as "a sexpot honeymooner scheming to kill her husband" (Pym 2000, p. 730). This hangs on a station wall outside the shed in which Kinawi surreptitiously observes Hanouma dressing, and later overhears her and Abou Saria fighting and cavorting. Also present is the haunting Miklós Rósza musical theme from the soundtrack of *Lost Weekend* (1945), which punctuates the suspenseful moments when Kinawi stalks his female victims. Viewers in 1958 would have (if they noticed) certainly connected the Hollywood sexpot emblazoned on the *Niagara* poster to Hind Rostam (Hanouma), who was known for her looks and star persona as the Egyptian Marilyn. Such sound and sight references reinforce the notion that Chahine's film, however much it may look neo-realist on the surface (and thus, perhaps, disappoint certain critics), is equally, if not more deeply, rooted in the psychological thrillers of Hitchcock and Wilder and their closest collaborators and imitators.

If *Bab al-Hadid* is, indeed, a hybrid, it fits well within the broader corpus of what has been called Egyptian social realist film, a genre that has antecedents in the era of the constitutional monarchy, but which really took off with the onset of the Nasser revolution. Such films never dominated the industry, but young film-makers eager to address the intersections of rural and urban poverty, class exploitation and crime found ample opportunities with the relaxation of censorship regarding such themes and, indeed, the charge to explore the social origins of Egypt's ongoing revolution. Chahine's film technique in *Bab al-Hadid* did look decidedly different, but his bow to relatively new (for Egypt) studio genres — film noir, psychological thrillers and crime stories — put him very much in league with his cohort. In this respect, *Bab al-Hadid* should be viewed alongside other contemporary classics such as Salah Abu Sayf's *Raya wa Sakina* (*Raya and Sakina*, 1953) and *al-Wahsh* (*The Beast*, 1954), Atif Salim's *Jaaluni Mujriman* (*They Made Me a Criminal*, 1955), and Tawfiq Salih's *Darb al-Mahabil* (*Fools' Alley*, 1955), all of which have been praised for their "realism", but none of which were ever mistaken for "neo-realist".

The "Heart of Cairo" — but Which Cairo?

Surprisingly, the familiar Arabo-Moorish exterior facade of Cairo Station, so unlike much of the other architecture of its era which is strikingly European, appears only as a backdrop to the opening credits. Nonetheless, the station dominates the action, a microcosm of the metropolis that was Cairo in 1958. The terminus was first constructed in the mid 1850s to mark the completion of the new rail line connecting Cairo to Alexandria that was opened in 1856. An expanded and modernized station was completed in 1868 and lit up to mark the arrival of gas lighting to the city (Fahmy 2002, p. 162). Cairenes referred to the station by its association to the old cartography — it sat near the site of the medieval "Iron Gate" (literally "gate" [*bab*] of "iron" [*hadid*]), the last

vestiges of which the French had razed when they subdued the city in 1798 ——
although popular belief held that the reference to "iron/*hadid*" originated with
the railroad station (the Arabic for "railroad" is literally "iron way", *sikkat
al-hadid*) (Raymond 2002, p. 307). Incoming migrants knew it more generically
as *Mahatat Masr* or "Cairo Station" (Al-Barudi 1984, p. 59). At the time of its
construction, the station sat to the north-west of the city; by 1958, when ren-
ovations left it in its present form (as depicted in *Bab al-Hadid*), the station
had become surrounded by sprawling neighborhoods, some, like Shoubra,
almost cities in themselves. The spacious roundabout that adjoined the station
had also become congested with traffic. Later on, when crossing the wide
boulevards that passed by and provided access to the station would become
nearly impossible, a hideous blue iron pedestrian walkway would provide
passage —— an all too familiar case of the unsightly modern impeding upon the
old.

Cairo Station sits at the edge of a vast, modern, European-style quarter
which Egypt's rulers constructed in the nineteenth century alongside the old
medieval city that had been the capital of caliphs and sultans. The modernist
impulse took off under the leadership of Ismail (r. 1863—1879), the hereditary
viceroy and grandson of the "founder of modern Egypt", Muhammad Ali
(r. 1805—1848). Ismail inherited and expanded upon the major transportation
projects initiated by his two predecessors. Abbas (r. 1848—1854) had signed a
concession for a rail system to link Alexandria to Suez (1851) and Said
(r. 1854—1863) had in 1856 (the same year that Cairo Station opened) granted
Ferdinand de Lesepps the right to charter an international consortium to dig
the Suez Canal. Following his visit to the 1867 international exposition in Paris,
Ismail ordered the drafting of a master plan for the construction of a new city
quarter that would bear his name and initiate the refashioning of his capital as
"Paris along the Nile" (Fahmy 2002, p. 161).

Ismail's dream came true, although mounting debts and escalating national-
ist outrage at European intervention led to his deposition and exile in 1879.
Following a "frenzied" construction boom between 1867 and 1871, Cairo came
to resemble Paris far more than the cities of Saladin or Qaitbay. To those
Egyptians and foreigners who developed and visited Cairo in the late nine-
teenth century, the "dichotomous development of the city" appeared an
incontrovertible fact, and the history of Cairo has ever after been written, as
Khaled Fahmy (2002, pp. 162—164) reminds us, according to this narrative.
Janet Abu-Lughod captures the essence of the dichotomous view in her author-
itative biography of the city:

> To the east lay the native city, still essentially pre-industrial in technology,
> social structure, and way of life; to the west lay the "colonial" city with its
> steam-powered techniques, its faster pace and wheeled traffic, and its Euro-
> pean identification. To the east lay the labyrinth street pattern of yet unpaved
> *harat* and *durub*, although by then the gates had been dismantled and two new
> thoroughfares pierced the shade; to the west were broad straight streets of
> macadam flanked by wide walks and setbacks, militantly crossing one another

at rigid right angles or converging here and there in a *roundpoint* or *maydan*.
(Abu-Lughod 1971, p. 98)

The history of Cairo in the second half of the nineteenth century is, as Abu-Lughod notes, the history of the new city.

European visitors, along with Egyptian modernizers, emphasized the insularity between two separate cites, one European the other Egyptian. The former was ever changing; the latter, denoted as the "real" Cairo, remained "practically what it always was" (Fahmy 2002, p. 163). The former was "modern, infinitely more attractive", whereas the "old" city "seems destined to prolong its agony and not to revive, being unable to struggle against progress and its inevitable consequences" (Pieron 1911, quoted in Mitchell 1988, p. 163). Ismail's new city might well have been in Europe's league: "Cairo need not envy any of the great European cities; like them this capital has its public gardens, its boulevards, its theaters, its concert cafes, its carriages, its coaches", noted one approving visitor (Vaujany 1883, quoted in Behrens-Abouseif 1985, p. 93). But tourists did not come all this way to see Europe reproduced. Some bemoaned the creeping loss of the "real" city:

> Outwardly … Cairo is in fair way to lose much of her Oriental coloring. Every day, little by little, European-Cairo is encroaching upon the Arab city, stamping it with the impress of the Occident. Block after block of fantastically picturesque houses are being torn down to make way for unsightly modern buildings. (Hall 1928, pp. 34–35)

The "old has given place to the new", commented another foreign visitor:

> Where once waved the branches of the stately sycamores planted by Mehemet Ali, are now to be seen only solid blocks of stone houses, with arcades in imitation of those of the Rue de Rivoli at Paris … All is now decorous, dull and European. (De Leon 1877, quoted in Landen 1970, p. 73)

"All is gone", echoed yet another: "The fairy lights are extinguished; the Arabian houses have been replaced by European hotels, and the *mashrabiya* … have fallen into dust" (Charmes 1883, quoted in Behrens-Abouseif 1985, p. 98).

Khaled Fahmy (2002, p. 166) suggests that had such romantics paid more attention to olfactory stimuli, they might well have recognized, as did urban planners and municipal authorities, that the entire city stood in dire need of major public work efforts to improve air circulation from the straight boulevards and open squares to the "dankest and remotest street and cul-de-sac". One of the Europeans cited above did admit that the "vanished pleasure ground" of the old Azbakiya lagoon, "picturesque as it was, must be confessed to have been a public nuisance in many respects, however 'sentimental travelers' may bewail the substitution of cleanliness and order for dirt and disorder, savoury for unsavoury smells" (De Leon 1877, quoted in Landen 1970, p. 74). Yet Fahmy (2002) argues that while the achievements of public health officials

always appeared striking in the more open, modern city, they also achieved much in terms of cleaning up the alleyways of the "real" Cairo.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cairo's population boomed. In 1847, less than 300,000 people lived in the medieval quarters plus two port "suburbs", Bulaq and Misr al-Qadima (Old Cairo). Fifty years later, the population of the two "symbiotic communities" approached 590,000. By 1947, that number had tripled (while Egypt's population doubled) to reach two million; it then doubled again between 1947 and 1966 (Raymond 2000, p. 339). Cairo alone, which had "exploded from a compact rectangle, only five square miles in extent … to an immense metropolitan conurbation", now "contained within her boundaries at least as many persons as had inhabited all of Egypt when the French Expedition made its population estimate little more than a century and a half earlier" (Abu-Lughod 1971, p. 118). By 1960, the city comprised 13% of the national population (Abu-Lughod 1971, p. 121). Just under half of that boom, 45%, came from the natural growth of the existing urban population. The greater numbers, however, were the product of what André Raymond (2002, p. 342) and others have termed a rural "invasion" —— the migration of all the Kinawis to the city. As Madbouli, the film's narrator, informs us, many "leave home seeking fortune and happiness". For many, although we may never know their numbers, their port of entry —— their only "address in the capital city" (Abd al-Malik 1984, p. 59) —— was Bab al-Hadid.

Whose city was it? Within days of their July 1952 coup, the Free Officers abolished all aristocratic titles and stripped government ministers of key privileges. The *tarbush* ("fez"), once a modernist marker, had become by the mid 1950s the object of ridicule and vanished, almost overnight, from the heads of gentlemen, bureaucrats and students. There are only a few worn in *Bab al-Hadid*, sported by travelers, who contrast sharply and comically —— as do two religious shaykhs in distinctive cloaks and turbans —— with more modern passengers, especially the hipster youth who take over a train car and entice Hanouma to join them and dance to a lively rock-and-roll number. Afterwards, one older man in a *tarbush* reaches out to pinch her. The 1956 Suez War precipitated the exodus of foreigners and many minority populations (generally defined now as foreign) from Egypt, pushed out by the confiscation and sequestration of property, arrest and intimidation. Many, including Chahine, especially in his Alexandria films, have since bemoaned Egypt's lost multiculturalism. Yet, to some contemporary outside observers, such as Desmond Stewart, a British biographer of the city, the "Egyptianization" of Cairo entailed a certain justice:

> Now the city seems to belong to the people: there are differences between the rich and the poor: there are slums: but the spirit is new, and the spirit is powerful. This is the new Cairo of the twentieth century: a Cairo in which the Cairenes themselves are owners, and therefore hosts. (Stewart 1957, quoted in Gordon 2002, p. 255)

It is noteworthy that, despite the opening soliloquy, which speaks to the arrival and departure of "locals and foreigners", not one obvious foreigner, tourist or resident appears on-screen during the entire day in Chahine's film. One reason may be that with an upsurge in commercial air connections to Cairo, displacing the passenger steamship as the prime mode of travel to Egypt, Alexandria ceased to be the major port of entry for international travelers, who would arrive there and then travel to Cairo by rail. In addition, internal political upheaval followed by the Suez War and subsequent nationalizations resulted in a sharp downturn in foreign tourism. The reopening of the Shepheard Hotel in 1957 and the ground-breaking for a brand-new Nile Hilton pointed to entrepreneurial aspirations for a renewed market in Egyptomania, but for the time being few foreigners embarked from Cairo Station for the south (Reid 2007). Thus, Chahine's vision, if it is to be consistently multicultural, embraces a variety of Egyptian types —— shaykhs; hipsters; feminist activists, in one brief scene; porters; employees; smart, Western-dressed young men with little to do but ogle young women; and, above all, *gallabiya*-clad peasants.

But who are the Cairenes in the context of the rural invasion? Perhaps, as Janet Abu-Lughod (1971, p. 221) suggested, the influx of peasants, along with the decline of cosmopolitanism, had produced a situation in which the city, often viewed as "the center of alien dominance" and "a parasitic growth whose conspicuous consumption was achieved through conscienceless mulching of the fellahin", might produce a "more balanced view" of the metropolis. Chahine's railway station suggests that, at least in 1958, the country and the city have a long way to go. All of the Kinawis —— those from Upper Egypt and those from the Delta, whether stuck or trying to find their way to an outbound train —— appear lost in the maelstrom. To British officials ensconced comfortably in Cairo, a place like Qena might seem a purgatory, the place where recalcitrant bureaucrats (such as Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna in 1941) could be sent to "expiate their offences" (Lia 1998, p. 261). To those like Kinawi, trapped, faceless, in the city, it might seem like a nostalgic paradise.

In the Shadow of Ramses

Lording over the station in *Bab al-Hadid* is the colossal statue of Ramses II, which lent both the roundabout and the boulevard its new "revolutionary" name, *Midan Ramsis* (*Ramses Square*). The colossus had been unveiled to great fanfare on 23 July 1955, the third anniversary of the Free Officers coup (Raafat 1997). It replaced Muhammad Mukhtar's iconic nationalist monument, *Nahdat Misr* (*Egypt Awakening*), which had stood in the square since 1928. Mukhtar's sculpture, which was moved to a roundabout fronting Cairo University, featured two figures —— a sphinx preparing to rear onto its hind legs and, standing to its left, a peasant woman lifting her veil away from her face and gazing outward. Despite its dramatic combining of pharaonic, rural and gendered national symbols, the statue had by the late 1940s lost much of its emotional

luster; the harshest critics even suggested it might be scrapped (Gershoni & Jankowski 2004, pp. 117—119). Utilizing Ramses as a symbol of national power, and caught up in the excitement of a flurry of major archaeological finds during the first years of their rule, the Free Officers determined to replace Mukhtar's neo-pharaonic monument with the real thing.

Fronted by a reflecting pool, with jets of water spouting forth from its massive base, Ramses dominated the square in ways the smaller *Nahdat Misr* never did. Schoolboys joked that from certain angles it looked like the colossus was engaged in permanent urination —— "doing as the people do", in colloquial parlance. Yet the pharaoh remained a symbol of power, a recognizable feature of the new urban landscape in postcards, photo spreads and films. In the 1961 romantic musical *Yawm min Umri* (*A Day in My Life*), the singing star Abd al-Halim Hafiz, having just left his sweetheart at the station, croons a mournful number walking around the floodlit pool, with Ramses towering over him in the background. The colossus was evoked three decades later in Khayri Bishara's 1993 film *Amrika Shika Bika* (*America Abracadabra*) about the misadventures of a group of Egyptians stranded in Romania. As the film opens, the travelers sit outside the main rail terminus in Bucharest. "Just like Cairo Station", notes one, "except there's no statue".[6]

A key scene in *Bab al-Hadid*, coming near the middle of the film, in which Kinawi proposes marriage —— and escape —— to Hanouma, is played out in the shadow of Ramses. The four-minute scene, which has become iconic, is shot alongside the reflecting pool in front of the colossus, where Hanouma has taken brief respite to fill her bucket with cold water.[7] Still irritated from an earlier encounter in which Kinawi espied her undressing, then made unwelcome advances, she nonetheless allows him to sit beside her. The backdrop throughout will be the pool and streams of water emanating from the statue's base. The scene takes place in a setting even more public than the interior of the rail station, but Chahine shot it with remarkable intimacy. Across the pool, the movement of pedestrians is scarcely visible —— nowhere near the thousands who, Chahine recalled, crowded around while shooting occurred (Chahine 2006).

Kinawi startles Hanouma by proffering a gold necklace, which, proclaiming his love, he urges her to accept as an engagement gift. Toying with him, Hanouma admits the necklace is beautiful, if a bit "country-like", but tells him to find another girl. Kinawi now produces a pin-up —— the same pin-up he had been carefully tacking to the wall of his hutch in an earlier scene —— and playfully tells Hanouma she is cuter than the scantily clad blonde model. Seizing the opportunity to deflate the sexual tension, Hanouma retorts that he is cuter.

6. In August 2006, 51 years after his triumphal installation, and after a decade of deliberation and postponement, Ramses was finally removed from the square and transported to Giza, where he will sit in a new museum.

7. For example, the scene is depicted on the poster created by the popular artist Salah Enani to celebrate '100 Years of Cinema'.

Figure 2   In the shadow of Ramses —— Kinawi and Hanouma take a moment to dream (courtesy of Arab Film Distribution/Typecast Films).

Both erupt in laughter, and Kinawi rubs his nose affectionately against the side of her head, an act of innocent intimacy that is momentarily acceptable. The camera captures close-ups of each, then pulls back to view them both. It took seven takes, Chahine (2006) recalled, to get it just right (see Figure 2).

Kinawi now launches into his fantasy, the pipe dream of the recently arrived rural migrant to the great metropolis. They will get married and return to the village. She will be the loveliest woman in town; he will build a place on the water, far from the commotion of the trains. Hanouma replies with a trace of resignation that they have become used to the hubbub. They will live far from people, Kinawi insists: "Crowds confuse me". Pulled momentarily into the dream, even if envisioning a different suitor, Hanouma stares outward and plays along, joking about children and grandchildren, then abruptly tells him to quit dreaming and offers him a Pepsi, to cool him down physically as well as emotionally. Kinawi rises slowly and turns away from her. For a brief but telltale moment he stands frozen, framed in the background by the colossus. Roy Armes and Lizbeth Malkmus (1991, p. 109) have noted Kinawi's positioning relative to the statue: "In pathetic contrast to the mammoth statue of Ramses II behind him, this little orphan figure tries to seduce the vendor with images of rural quiet, children and cows". The scene ends with Kinawi, spurned and verbally insulted, demanding that she return the necklace.

Like most others in the station, Hanouma treats Kinawi with a mixture of derision and sympathy. Given social norms and censorship, it is arguable that the relationship between Hanouma and Kinawi was possible only because of his physical and mental limitations (Berrah & Bosséno 1985, p. 138). On the other hand, this is a classic "beauty and the beast" tale, even if it takes a tragic

turn. Hanouma reminds him that, economically, their situations are similar —— they have nothing —— but also reminds him that she will marry Abou Saria. Kinawi lamely protests that he is twice the man. But how can he compare to the porter, let alone the pharaoh? What place is there in the new Egypt for a crippled orphan?

Abou Saria is a real Nasser-era icon, a working-class hero who dreams of deposing the porters' corrupt chief and replacing him with a state-sanctioned union representative. In another casting coup, the role is played by Farid Shawqi, a new kind of action hero for a new age —— a "tough and physically active" menial laborer, who stands for the rights of the common people, but whose "brand of masculinity resonated easily with conventional stereotypes of Middle Eastern 'honour and shame' in which manly men defend collective honour in the public realm, while women remain in the protected domestic space" (Armbrust 2006, p. 199). Abou Saria treats Kinawi kindly, protecting him from physical and verbal abuse at the hands of other porters. It is a mark of his innate sense of justice and is an extension of his struggle on behalf of his fellow menials. Abou Saria rejects the corrupt paternalism of the old boss and has assimilated the language of trade unionism. When it comes to his woman, however, he is less unconventional. In a subsequent scene, Hanouma is cajoled to dance to a rock-and-roll beat by a group of young urbanites who have boarded an outbound train car. She starts hesitantly with traditional oriental movements, but begins to catch the new rhythm and follows the movements of a woman who is dancing on a coach seat. Liberated from constraints and caught up in the moment, she winks flirtatiously at Kinawi, who observes her through a window, and hands him another soda bottle. He gulps it down, then lifts his *gallabiya* and breaks into an impromptu jig, twirling the empty bottle over his head. Abou Saria, however, reacts with jealousy and drags her out of the public eye into a railroad shed. The two quarrel, before falling into each other's arms, prompted by Hanouma shaking up soda bottles and spraying her lover with the fizz. Outside the shed, Kinawi listens, framed now not by Ramses but the movie poster of Marilyn Monroe plastered on the outer wall.

Two Civic Realities

In the melodramatic imagination —— in many national cinematic landscapes —— the railroad has provided a dramatic link between city and country, the train itself a stand-in for modernity, a mode of escape to an uncertain destination (Aguiar 2008). In Chahine's earlier *Ibn al-Nil*, the arrival and departure of the passenger train served as a constant enticement to a restless peasant who dreams of escaping the dullness of rural life to seek his fortune in the city. Chahine has admitted that this reflected his own childhood longings, staring outward from the Alexandria coastline (Chahine 1985). For the hero, the city leads only to ruination, but he is able to escape at the end, in true melodra-

Figure 3 The pause that refreshes —— Kinawi, Hanouma, rock and roll, and a Coke (courtesy of Arab Film Distribution/Typecast Films).

matic fashion, arriving back in his village in time to save his family from ravaging floodwaters. There is no such easy redemption in *Bab al-Hadid*.

Chahine's central characters remain trapped in the juggernaut of a city of broken dreams:

> Amidst tens of thousands of people arriving and departing, hundreds of train cars rushing off and drawing near, [they] know nothing of life other than the world of Bab al-Hadid. They are common folk, who sell food, drinks, sweets, carry baggage and compete for tips, exhausting their muscles and their nerves, their brows sweating from their exertions. (Al-Barudi 1984, p. 59)

A changing world passes in front of them, one symbolized by foreign movie posters and pin-up girls, and foreign carbonated drinks. In fact, Pepsi and Coke bottles figure in a number of scenes and are incorporated as both instruments of social and sexual engagement (see Figure 3). Here, a cold drink is offered to an overwrought or aroused friend (Hanouma to Kinawi), or used to titillate an irate lover (Hanouma to Abou Saria). Foreign "youth culture" also has a strong presence in the film. It is noteworthy that the male musical hipsters on the train car are played by members of Egypt's first recognized indigenous rock band, Mike and the Skyrockets (Kelada 2006).[8]

The revolutionary state remains in the background, producing an ambivalence that critics have been quick to note. The police "should have better

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8. Mike Beshara was a student of rocket physics, which provided impetus for a local turn on Bill Haley and the Comets.

things to do" than harass the soda girls, treating them like criminals when the real social offenders are the concessions boss and his hapless flunky (Fawal 2001, p. 59). Their obsession with Hanouma's soda bucket as "proof" of her transgression "is more than meaningless when people are looking for a real killer", the Rosetta murderer, and, later, Kinawi (even though he did not kill his first victim) (Armes & Malkmus 1991, p. 109).

A very different civic image appeared in Kamal al-Shaykh's *Haya aw Mawt* (*Life or Death*, 1954), released four years earlier. Al-Shaykh is not usually considered a realist director. He was Egypt's master of suspense, the "Egyptian Hitchcock", although he never took kindly to the appellation (Al-Shaykh 1996). But *Haya aw Mawt* was advertised as "Provocative … Tough … Real", a film in which "the camera plays the lead role" in a story "in which, without even realizing it, you might well be one of the heroes" (*Ruz al-Yusuf* 1954).

The story, rooted in a foreign news item the director had come upon, revolves around a citywide search for a young girl who is carrying to her ailing father a mistaken, lethal prescription prepared by a careless pharmacist. The film presages certain devices utilized by Chahine four years later. Shaykh's film starts with a ticking clock (although not one rooted to a specific location) and a narrated prologue (although not by a character in the film):

> In a crowded city like this —— Cairo —— inhabited by two and a half million souls, from all walks of life, yet intertwined, the struggle between life and humanity is ever intense. This overwhelming life, just like this immortal river, and the people who cross the bridge between it and the unknown —— the procession of life in widespread Cairo is ceaseless. Within it struggle the souls of millions of people, each proceeding toward an unknown fate.

All similarities end here. During the narration in *Haya aw Mawt*, the camera hovers over a city on the move, then zooms down to a busy downtown street. Whereas *Bab al-Hadid* is a claustrophobic film played out in a solitary location, *Haya aw Mawt* constitutes an urban panorama.

The bulk of the film concerns the girl's journey to and from the only open pharmacy she can find. As she moves beyond her neighborhood into the wider metropolis, she encounters colorful characters, but never the tortured souls that feature in *Bab al-Hadid*. There is, to be sure, an underside to the city. Yet, the metropolis is full of people who, whatever their station in life, mobilize to help strangers in an imagined community that is characterized by civic responsibility. In the end, the efforts of a conscientious pharmacist who enlists the assistance of the police succeed in saving the life of a common man. In a twist on the later critiques of the authorities in Chahine's film, the police chief postpones a manhunt for a dangerous criminal in order to help prevent the accidental poisoning. The film ends with a melodramatic crescendo —— father saved and family reunited. *Haya aw Mawt* heralds a new post-monarchical social contract between citizens and the state —— and it is

Figure 4 Damsel in distress —— another train leaves Cairo Station (courtesy of Arab Film Distribution/Typecast Films).

recalled this way, years later, by those who saw it at the time (Gordon 2002, pp. 255—259).

Chahine's unconventional ending to *Bab al-Hadid* underscores his own ambivalence about life in the city. The closing scene again pairs Kinawi and Hanouma, reprising the complexity of their relationship and the tensions —— and dangers —— that underlay their at once affectionate and at once sexually charged encounters. Kinawi surprises her in a train car and the two flirt in a manner that, for Hanouma, appears to be normative, before Kinawi turns aggressive and drags her off the train and onto the tracks. As a crowd gathers and the lights of approaching engines are turned on him, Kinawi holds her hostage, his knife held aloft. Abou Saria, crawling, sneaks up from behind. But it is the fatherly Madbouli, tears welling in his eyes, who persuades Kinawi to allow himself to be disarmed, then to don his "wedding suit", the straitjacket carried by the psychiatric nurses who have been summoned when his prior crime is ascertained. Initially pacified, but now aware of his predicament, Kinawi cries out as he is carried away: "Don't leave me!"

According to studio convention, Egyptian films ended happily. Chahine's finale can be construed as such only if we consider that no one has died, and if we can remain hopeful that the madman will be treated humanely and not simply locked away. However, Kinawi's cries for help —— for his community to stay stationary and not "leave" him —— along with the dazed, confused looks of the other primary characters are not designed to leave viewers relieved,

and certainly not uplifted. The union's triumph, with its promise of better working conditions for the porters, is long forgotten.

Chahine's final shot lingers for all of a brief moment on the nameless sweet-heart of another unnamed character who had been scripted as "Lover Boy" (Kelada 2006). He is a young man who arrives earlier in the day with his family before departing on an outbound train. She has been awaiting him, alone, forced to endure the constant stares of strange men quick to spot —— and judge —— a young woman in a sleeveless, flower-patterned dress without a chaperone. Kinawi more than others has played the voyeur, although with far more compassion. It is through his eyes that we come to understand their "story" without need for spoken words. The two meet briefly for a hasty embrace when "Lover Boy" manages to evade his family, but she is not allowed to bid him adieu when his train departs around midday. Now, hours later, propped against a lamp post in tortured solitude —— a damsel in distress in a harlot's pose —— her startling reappearance accentuates the lack of clear resolution to every storyline that has emerged (see Figure 4). There is no concluding narration from Madbouli to bookend the tale and no rousing cre-scendo. Ramses, the protector pharaoh, symbol of the state and the nation's deep-rooted culture, is far from view. We are left only with an abrupt closing shot of the lovelorn young woman as another train exits the station, leaving Cairo and its stranded denizens far behind.

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